

*The Prayer of Faith: James 5:13-15*  
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What is the role of prayer in your life? Is prayer confined to certain times when you're with other believers and maybe some short utterances before meals? Or do you communicate with the Lord throughout the day, in the privacy of your own heart and thoughts? Do you spend extended time talking to God, confessing your sin, pleading for grace, praising Him for His goodness, thanking Him for His many blessings, admitting your weakness and your desperate need for help? What role does prayer play in your daily life? The passage that I just read, which we'll be studying this morning and next week, is all about prayer. Prayer is mentioned in every verse from verse 13-18. Another theme is healing, which is mentioned in verses 15-16, and this will give us something to wrestle with in terms of what exactly James is saying about prayer and healing. This is one of those passages that is very humbling to study as you try to figure out what exactly is being said. And I'll be the first one to admit that I'm not absolutely confident of my understanding of the prayer of faith. I'm open to learning more and studying more and understanding more of what this means. So in humility I will share with you this morning what I've learned, and I encourage you to be good Bereans and examine the Scriptures for yourselves on these matters.

Whatever our understanding of the prayer of faith is, though, we should not lose the forest for the trees. This passage is about prayer, and therefore my hope is that we will all leave today feeling convicted and encouraged and inspired to be men and women of fervent prayer. When we're suffering, when we're cheerful, when we're sick—to be constantly and consciously depending on the Lord. We need to be spending time alone in prayer. We need to be spending time with others in prayer. And we need to trust that God is powerful to work through our prayers to accomplish His will. Prayer is such an awesome privilege and responsibility. We are fools to neglect it. We are also disobedient when we neglect it.

So let's walk through these three verses, and here are the headings I'll use. Prayer and Praise in verse 13, Praying Elders in verse 14, and the Prayer of Faith in verse 15.

### **I. Prayer and Praise (verse 13)**

In verses 7 and following, the theme was patience and steadfastness in the midst of suffering. Remember what we saw last week in that passage? James wants to encourage the saints who are being oppressed in various ways, and he encourages them

with the promise of Christ's coming—"the coming of the Lord is at hand." So be patient, and press on. Now James offers additional comfort and encouragement by turning to the subject of prayer. I mentioned last week that steadfastness in trial is something that James wrote about at the beginning of this letter, and then returns to toward the end of the letter. This is also true of prayer. In James 1:5-6, James told us, "If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask God, who gives generously to all without reproach, and it will be given him. But let him ask in faith, with no doubting . . ." And now in chapter 5 James again addresses the subject of prayer.

He says, first of all, in verse 13, "Is anyone among you suffering?" This could be any kind of suffering. Are you facing a financial hardship? Are you out of work? Are you suffering with some kind of illness, which James will speak to more directly in the next verse? Is a loved one suffering? Does your marriage seem to be falling apart and you don't know how to hold it together? Are there relationships at work or with family that are wreaking havoc in your life? Is anyone among you suffering? And in one way or another, we could probably all raise our hands and say, Yes, I'm suffering. What should I do?

James says, "Let him pray." We are commanded to pray. We might feel like prayer is unimportant, ineffective. We might feel like we just don't have time to pray; our time would be better spent trying to fix the problem. But prayer demonstrates our dependence on God. We need to stop what we're doing to humble ourselves before God's power and God's plans. We need to acknowledge that we cannot fix the problem, and it might not even be God's will to fix the problem in the way we have in mind. We need to acknowledge these things before God in prayer.

This verse commands us to pray. But we're not told *what* to pray. I think it is certainly appropriate to ask God to remove the suffering. The next verses involve prayer that will heal the sick person. So the immediate context indicates that prayer will often include a request for the removal of hardship. But as we remember the broader context of James and the connections between chapter 1 and chapter 5, we see that prayer will also include the request for wisdom and perseverance. In the midst of suffering we need to ask God, not only to remove the suffering, but also that we might "consider it all joy" as we face these "trials of various kinds." We should pray that God will use the trial to sanctify us and mature us and to produce in us steadfastness. These are the things we should pray about when we're suffering.

In the second half of verse 13 James addresses another situation, which may or may not be separate from the first. "Is anyone cheerful? Let him sing praise." The word he uses here

refers more to a person's emotional state than to the outward circumstances. In fact, the two other places it's used in the New Testament are in Acts 27 where Paul was on a boat in the middle of the raging sea, and he told the others on the boat "*to take heart* (be cheerful), for there will be no loss of life among you, but only of the ship" (verse 22, and again in verse 25). Cheerfulness is not at odds with trials. It's not as though a person is *either* suffering *or* cheerful. Therefore whatever your circumstances, take your needs to the Lord in prayer, and take your cheerfulness to the Lord in songs of praise. The Greek word for "songs of praise" is *psallō*, from which we get the word "psalm." The term originally meant to pluck a stringed instrument, but then it came to refer to singing in general. In the New Testament it is used of singing to the Lord, as in Ephesians 5:19, "addressing one another in *psalms* and hymns and spiritual songs, *singing* and making melody to the Lord with your heart." This is the kind of rejoicing and gladness that should flow from our hearts because of God's goodness to us. He is faithful. He always keeps His promises. He is working all things together for our good. And therefore we have much to be cheerful about. We have much to sing about.

One of the things I love about our church is how we sing. And it's not just because some of you have beautiful voices. I'm happy for that. But what really moves me is how this congregation sings praises to the Lord from the heart. We're not here to put on a show for anyone. We come together in song in order to joyfully express our delight in God. And then as we go out of here we should take those songs with us. Songs of praise should be in our hearts and on our lips not just when we're gathered in these services, but also in our personal times with the Lord, and during family devotions, and in our minds as we wake up and fall asleep. Is there a song in your heart today? I remember a guy in college who would always walk around singing or humming or whistling some hymn or praise chorus. And we all thought he was a little strange, but none of us doubted that he had the joy of the Lord in his heart. Are you cheerful this morning? Then sing praises to the Lord.

## II. Praying Elders (verse 14)

Moving on to verse 14 we'll look at praying elders. James asks the next question, "Is anyone among you sick?" He began with the broad category of suffering, then he mentioned cheerfulness, and now he turns his attention specifically to the person who is physically ill. And the instruction for this person is that he or she should call for the elders of the church. Before we talk about what the elders should do in this situation, let's first talk about who they are. In the New Testament we find two distinct

offices within the church. There are two roles in the structure of each local church to which certain individuals are assigned. There is the office of elder (also referred to as pastor, or overseer, or bishop), and then there is the office of deacon. Each congregation is to have elders and deacons, and we see here the assumption that there is a plurality of elders in each local congregation. The sick person is to call for the elders (plural) of the church. So who are these individuals?

Let's look at the qualifications for elders in 1 Timothy 3:1-7. "The saying is trustworthy: If anyone aspires to the office of overseer, he desires a noble task. Therefore an overseer must be above reproach, the husband of one wife, sober-minded, self-controlled, respectable, hospitable, able to teach, not a drunkard, not violent but gentle, not quarrelsome, not a lover of money. He must manage his own household well, with all dignity keeping his children submissive, for if someone does not know how to manage his own household, how will he care for God's church? He must not be a recent convert, or he may become puffed up with conceit and fall into the condemnation of the devil. Moreover, he must be well thought of by outsiders, so that he may not fall into disgrace, into a snare of the devil." A similar list is found in Titus 1:6-9, "This is why I left you in Crete, so that you might put what remained into order, and appoint elders in every town as I directed you—if anyone is above reproach, the husband of one wife, and his children are believers and not open to the charge of debauchery or insubordination. For an overseer, as God's steward, must be above reproach. He must not be arrogant or quick-tempered or a drunkard or violent or greedy for gain, but hospitable, a lover of good, self-controlled, upright, holy, and disciplined. He must hold firm to the trustworthy word as taught, so that he may be able to give instruction in sound doctrine and also to rebuke those who contradict it."

Elders, then, are to be men who are above reproach, who are morally upright, who are able to teach, who are spiritual leaders, spiritual role models. And this involves giving special attention to prayer and to the Word of God. In Acts 6, when the first deacons were selected, it was so that the twelve could devote themselves "to prayer and to the ministry of the word." And that's a great model for us of what ministry in the local church should look like. There must be pastors / elders who devote themselves to prayer and the ministry of the word.

It's these spiritually mature men who are to be called when a person is gravely ill. This certainly doesn't exclude others from praying for the sick. Rather, I think part of the point in calling the elders of the church is that they represent the church as a whole. The sick person calls the elders, as the spiritual leaders of the

congregation, and also as the representatives of the entire congregation. This person cannot come to church, so the church comes to them.

What are the elders to do when they get there? They are to “pray over him.” Notice the predicament of the sick person. Apparently he is bedridden, for he cannot get up to go to where the church gathers. And when the elders come to pray, they are to pray “over” him. This word for pray is used over 80 times, but only here is it used with the preposition *epi* like this. The elders are to pray “over” the sick person. Also, in verse 15 we see that “the Lord will *raise him up*.” So the clear picture is that this person is in such a grave physical condition that he or she cannot even get out of bed. In such a situation the sick person is to take the initiative to summon the elders to come and pray.

So the elders come to the person’s house, they pray over the person, and they also anoint the person with oil. The anointing with oil is taken in various ways. If you come from a Roman Catholic background, you’re familiar with the sacrament of extreme unction, which is part of what is called the “last rites.” Extreme Unction is the practice of anointing people with oil just before they die in order to remove sin and prepare them for death. And James 5:14 is given as a basis for this practice. But certainly we can see that James is not teaching this in any way. First of all, James has in mind the healing of the sick person, not death. This verse is not about preparing the person to die, but rather to raise the person up. And secondly, there’s nothing magical about this oil. It’s not consecrated by the elders or anybody else, and there’s certainly nothing about the oil that can forgive sins. It is a dangerous and superstitious and unbiblical idea to think of any outward action like this as a means of forgiving sin. Our sin is forgiven through faith in Jesus Christ, not through oil that has been consecrated by a priest.

Another interpretation of the anointing with oil in this verse is that it is medicinal. It’s possible to understand the oil in this verse as be used for medical purposes. For instance, in Luke 10:34 the Good Samaritan cares for the man who was beaten, and it says that he “bound up his wounds, pouring on oil and wine.” The wine was used to cleanse the wounds, the oil was used to sooth and heal them. And some interpret James 5:14 in this way, that the elders come not only to pray but also to offer some medical attention. The anointing with oil serves a medicinal purpose. The problem with this view, though, is that it’s the prayer that is the effective means by which the Lord raises the person up. It’s not the oil that the Lord uses to heal the person in this situation, but the prayer of faith. In addition to this it would seem odd for the elders to be the ones designated to apply medicine. Doctors and nurses can

provide better care in that way, and presumably would have already done so in a situation like this. The elders come to pray, and the anointing with oil goes along with the prayer in a spiritually symbolic way.

This is the other interpretation of this verse, and I think it seems most plausible—that the anointing with oil is symbolic. In the Old Testament anointing with oil was used as way of indicating that a person or thing was being set apart for God. In Exodus 40, for example, there are instructions to anoint with oil everything in the tabernacle and also to anoint with oil all of the priests. The purpose was to set them apart for God’s special use, and the anointing with oil was a vivid way of demonstrating that. This seems to be the general meaning in James 5, and also in Mark 6:13, which is the other place where anointing with oil is mentioned in connection with the sick. Jesus had sent out the twelve, and it says, “they cast out many demons and anointed with oil many who were sick and healed them.” The anointing signified that the person was being set apart for God’s special healing care, and in James 5 the elders anoint the sick person with the same kind of symbolism. They anoint with oil “in the name of the Lord,” setting the person apart unto the Lord.

That’s verse 14. The sick person calls for the elders. The elders come and pray for the person, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord.

### **III. The Prayer of Faith (verses 15)**

In verse 15 we come to the prayer of faith, and we have to wrestle with what this means exactly. This is a difficult verse. But it’s not difficult because the words are hard to understand, or the structure of the sentence is hard to follow. On the contrary, it’s difficult because it’s so clear. It’s difficult because James makes a categorical statement here. If he wrote, “the prayer of faith *may* save the one who is sick, and the Lord *may* raise him up,” then we wouldn’t have much of a problem. But it says, “And the prayer of faith *will* save the one who is sick, and the Lord *will* raise him up.” So we’re confronted with the question: what is this prayer, and what makes it effective?

There are many who derive a very harmful teaching from this verse. They say that an individual can be healed of any ailment as long as they have enough faith. If you only believe enough, you’ll be healed. And therefore if a person is not healed, it’s a result of a lack of faith. That is such a horrible teaching. This teaching entices people to put their hope in physical health rather than putting their hope in our sovereign and good God, who may choose to heal or may choose not to heal, but either way He is working for the good of His children. The biblical response to

sickness is not to think we are lacking the faith to be healed, but to discern the lessons God wants to teach us in the midst of sickness. As James wrote in chapter 1, “Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds, for you know that the testing of you faith produces steadfastness.” The prayer of faith does not mean that anyone who has enough faith will be healed. In this verse, it’s not even the sick person who is praying. It’s the elders.

Some avoid the problem of this verse by arguing that the sickness referred to here is not a physical sickness, but a spiritual sickness. And the healing is a spiritual healing. The word translated “sick” in verse 14 is from the Greek word *astheneō*, which literally means weak, and it could mean either spiritual weakness or physical sickness. Also the word translated “save” (*sōzō*) in verse 15 could refer to either spiritual healing or physical healing. But, as I already mentioned, the context seems to make it clear that the person James is speaking of is physically ill. The person is unable to go to where the church gathers, so he has to call for the elders. The elders pray *over* him. And the Lord *raises him up*.

The end of verse 15 might incline us toward the spiritual healing interpretation, because it speaks of the forgiveness of sins. “And if he has committed sins, he will be forgiven.” But even this statement confirms that James is talking about physical sickness. He says, “*if* he has committed sins” because not every sickness is connected with sin. Some sickness is connected with sin, and we should probe our hearts and confess our sin when we’re in midst of some affliction. But sickness does not necessarily mean that you have some unconfessed sin in your life. We remember the man who was born blind and the disciples asked Jesus, “who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind.” And Jesus answered, “It was not that this man sinned, or his parents, but that the works of God might be displayed in him” (John 9:2-3). Therefore James says, *if* the person with a physical illness has committed sins, then he will not only be healed of the physical ailment, but will also be forgiven of the sin. On the spiritual healing interpretation, though, the “if” wouldn’t make sense, because *every* spiritual sickness is connected with sin. If James was just thinking on a spiritual level here, then he couldn’t have said “if.” He just would have written, “and the sins he has committed will be forgiven.”

Other interpreters, recognizing the physical nature of this healing, avoid the difficulty of this verse by confining these spiritual gifts to the apostolic age. In other words, Jesus and the apostles and others during that time were able to effectively pray for healing. But when the last of the apostles died, those miraculous gifts disappeared. In ways this is an appealing

interpretation because it seems to protect us from the unbiblical emphasis on miraculous gifts. It seems to protect us from the idea that if you just have enough faith, you'll be healed. We certainly want to avoid that kind of mentality. However, I don't think we can go so far as to say that the miraculous gifts have ceased. Yes, they are certainly abused. But I haven't been convinced from Scripture (at least not yet) that these gifts have ceased. In this passage I certainly don't see any indication that this is to be applied only in during the time of the apostles. In fact, the mention of the elders points in the opposite direction. If it said, "call for the apostles," then it would make a lot of sense to interpret this as something that no longer applied in our day. But it says, "call for the elders."

Well, I've said a lot about what this verse does not mean. Let me try to say what it does mean. I'll tell you that I am still wrestling with this passage, and my hope is that further study and further ministry experience will shed more light on it. But here is what I can say. I do know that not all prayers for healing result in healing. We know that from experience. We also know that from God's Word. Here are a few examples from Paul's letters. In Galatians 4:13 he says that he had "a bodily ailment." In 1 Timothy 5:23 he instructs Timothy to "use a little wine for the sake of your stomach and your frequent ailments." In 2 Timothy 4:20 he says that he "left Trophimus, who was ill, at Miletus." We can assume that in each of those cases there were prayers for healing, but God did not remove the ailments. And then there's Paul's thorn in the flesh in 2 Corinthians 12. It's hard to know exactly what he's referring to, but it's likely that it was some kind of physical affliction, and it was for the purpose of keeping him from becoming conceited. And Paul writes, "Three times I pleaded with the Lord about this, that it should leave me. But he said to me, 'My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness'" (verses 7-9).

God does not always heal when we pray. It is not always His will to remove the affliction. It may not be in His good plan to heal us. He may have something better in store for us that will have to involve some kind of severe sickness. The point of James 5 is that even though God is never obligated to heal, He does respond to prayers of faith with healing. It does happen. There are times when the grace is given for this prayer of faith to be prayed, and the result is miraculous healing. It's nothing we can manufacture. But it is something that God can and will do, according to His sovereign plans.

In 1 Corinthians 12 there is a list of various spiritual gifts, and one that is listed there is the gift of faith (verse 9), which has to be something different than the faith by which we are saved.

Because every Christian has faith, but not every Christian has this gift of faith. And the best interpretation of James 5 that I've come across is that in unique situations God grants a gift of faith so that the elders are able to pray with such assurance and confidence that the person will be healed, and in such situations the person *is* healed. Again, this is not something that is in our control. It's not something that can be manufactured. But we are to pray, and we are to pray boldly, knowing that He is able to heal. We are to pray according to God's will, submitting to His sovereign plans, trusting that He knows best and He will do what is best. And in certain situations He will heal.

I already referred to the last statement in verse 15, but I want to close by looking at it again. "And if he has committed sins, he will be forgiven." This is a great place to conclude because our focus is drawn to the Person through whom we are forgiven. It's certainly not the elders or any other church leader or minister who can forgive sins. There's nothing in the oil that can forgive sins. But it's Jesus Christ, the God-Man, the sinless Lamb of God, who died on the cross in the place of sinners. It's through Him, and through Him alone, that we can be forgiven. The person who confesses their sin and turns from it, and puts their hope in Jesus Christ, will be forgiven. And that is the best news you will ever hear! The sins that you have committed, and continue to commit, against God, can be forgiven through the blood of Jesus Christ.

What I hope you take away from this passage is a desire to pray with more diligence and fervor. Prayer is powerful. God chooses to work in powerful ways through our prayers. God may choose to heal people through our prayers. And He may be pleased to do much greater things as well. As exciting as physical healing may be, there are even more exciting things to pray about. These bodies and this world will pass away, but we will all live forever either in heaven or hell. So let us pray for the salvation of unbelieving friends and family members, and for the unreached people groups around the world. May we be a people of prayer, boldly coming before the Almighty God to ask for His will to be done, to ask for His glory to be seen, to ask for His mission to be accomplished in our city and around the world.