

Prayerful Community

BACKGROUND SCRIPTURE: James 5:1-20

DEVOTIONAL READING: 1 Thessalonians 5:16-22

SCRIPTURE LESSON TEXT: James 5:13-18

¹³ Is anyone among you in trouble? Let them pray. Is anyone happy? Let them sing songs of praise. ¹⁴ Is anyone among you sick? Let them call the elders of the church to pray over them and anoint them with oil in the name of the Lord. ¹⁵ And the prayer offered in faith will make the sick person well; the Lord will raise them up. If they have sinned, they will be forgiven. ¹⁶ Therefore confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous person is powerful and effective.

¹⁷ Elijah was a human being, even as we are. He prayed earnestly that it would not rain, and it did not rain on the land for three and a half years. ¹⁸ Again he prayed, and the heavens gave rain, and the earth produced its crops.

LESSON AIMS

- **Facts:** to examine a passage from James that encourages us to pray.
- **Principle:** to teach that God helps His people and demonstrates His power through prayer.
- **Application:** to encourage Christians to seek God's face together in earnest, power-releasing prayer.

INTRODUCTION: Prayer is a popular topic among Christians. We listen to sermons on prayer, have Sunday school lessons on prayer, and sing about prayer. Prayer is offered to open Christian meetings and to close them. It is offered before meals at church and at home. Little children are taught little prayers to say before they go to sleep. With all the superficial and habitual praying that we do, how much of our praying is truly meaningful to us and touches the heart of God?

This week's lesson is about prayer. The Christian community that seeks God's face in prayer reflects the image of Christ. Hopefully, as we study James's powerful words on prayer, we will be stimulated to enter a new chapter in our relationship with God and in our lives together as members of God's family.

LESSON BACKGROUND: **Time:** about A.D. 45 **Place:** from Jerusalem

In the preceding lessons, James has painted portraits of Jesus that ought to be seen in the lives of His disciples. As He was obedient to His Father, so we should be doers of the Word He has implanted in us. Not content merely to know what it teaches, we should practice the true religion it portrays.

As Jesus received without distinction all who trusted Him, so we must avoid partiality. We are urged to see favoritism as sinful.

As Jesus always spoke words appropriate to the occasion, so we need to cultivate the wise use of the tongue. Left uncontrolled, our words can become destructive and deceitful and can produce division and chaos in the church.

As Jesus set the pattern for true godliness, so we should follow His example in personal and church behavior.

But there is one more image of Christ worthy of our imitation. As He thrived on communion with His Father, so we need the strength that comes from Him through prayer.

PRAYER OF FAITH (James 5:13–18)

A meaningful prayer life is one of the expected outcomes of a deep friendship with God. It is also a necessary component of facing life's difficulties. These final verses in James observe that the spiritual and physical health of the Christian community is the place for the power of prayer to be demonstrated.

James 5:13 begins by bringing up occasions on which prayer is needed. *"Is anyone among you in trouble?"* the apostle asked. *"Let them pray."* *"Trouble"* means, literally, "suffering what is bad." It can include all sorts of distress and hardship. We know it does not refer to sickness here because that is introduced as a separate item later. It seems, rather, to point to the readers' persecution and attendant hardships (a form of the same word used in verse 10).

If someone is in this condition, he is to pray. The present imperative supports the truth that he should make this his normal practice. Instead of lashing out at a fellow believer or using strong language, he needs to take his burden to the Lord. Earlier James counseled the suffering to pray for wisdom to know how to handle it (Jas.1:5). God may not remove the suffering, but He gives strength and courage to endure it.

1. Will God remove persecution from those who pray about it (James 5:13a)? Explain.

James 5:13 also cites a contrasting situation: *"Is anyone happy? Let them sing songs of praise."* *"Happy"* means cheerful or in good spirits. It may seem strange that this should be the occasion for prayer, but it is just as important to voice praise to Him as it is to beseech Him for help in trials (Eph. 5:19-20).

The word translated "sing songs of praise" in James 5:13 simply means "sing." The present imperative implies that the cheerful person should make it a practice whenever he is impressed with God's blessings on his life. This does not rule out also singing praises while suffering, as Paul and Silas did in prison (Acts 16:25). Praise anywhere can change our perspective.

2. What kind of prayer is appropriate when we are cheerful (v. 13b)?

"Is anyone among you sick?" asked James, *"Let them call the elders of the church to pray over them"*

Here is a glimpse of the workings of the earliest churches. The elders, so called because of age and spiritual maturity, were the spiritual leaders of local assemblies of believers (Acts 14:23; 20:17; 1 Tim. 5:17, 19). The sick man was to call them to his home, where he lay incapacitated (Jas. 5:14). There they were to *"pray over him,"* standing around his bed and possibly extending their hands over him.

As they were praying, they were also to anoint him with oil in the name of the Lord. Although the oil was used in anointing to symbolize the outpouring of God's Spirit, the phrase, in the name of the Lord, points to the real source of healing. Invoking *"the name of the Lord"* isn't intended to be a magical incantation. But requesting the Lord's involvement is absolutely vital to the success of the visit.

3. What procedure did James advocate when praying for the sick (v. 14)?

Continuing his teaching, James asserted that *"the prayer offered in faith will make the sick person well."* This, not the oil, was the instrument God used to heal. It is primarily to the prayer of the elders that James referred, though this does not preclude prayer by the sick man himself. "Well" here refers to physical healing, not spiritual salvation. The term can be used of any type of deliverance.

Through the instrument of prayer, the Lord shall raise the sick person back to health. He is the Healer who honors the faith of those who pray. There is no indication, however, of the time lapse between the prayer and the healing. The sovereign Lord determines the right time.

Should we then conclude that God will, without fail, heal those who have been prayed for in this way? And if a person is not healed after prayer, should we assume a lack of faith in the sick person or those who pray? No. Based on other Scripture, these would be wrong conclusions. We know, for example, that Paul did not heal Timothy of his stomach ailment, and Paul was not healed of his thorn in the flesh.

These were godly people; yet they were not healed. This shows that God sometimes uses natural means to heal and that sometimes it is not His will to heal at all. Devout Christians of every age have died of physical illnesses. It would be cruel to doubt their faith.

We should not overlook how the physical and the spiritual are related. Ministers or elders who visit the sick must make it a priority to give them opportunity to talk about things in their lives they regret, to confess nagging sins. They shall be forgiven assumes that the one who seeks help from the church also recognizes his personal shortcomings.

4. Is it always God's will to heal when we pray (v. 15)? Explain.

James 5:16 therefore exhorts, "*Therefore confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed.*" The two present imperatives imply that we should habitually confess and pray whenever a necessity arises. The word for "confess" implies a full and honest acknowledgment of guilt, and "sins" (faults) indicates that it is individual sins we are to confess.

The setting for such confession should fit the need. If the whole congregation has been wronged, a public confession may be in order. But a sin against a brother or sister should be confessed in private. Public airing of private matters raises unnecessary questions and, in the end, does more harm than good.

Confession should lead not to gossip or broken ties but to mutual prayer. The command to pray for one another implies that we have enough concern for those who sin to intercede for them. The repetition of the one another indicates that the confession and prayer should be reciprocal, for not one of us is exempt from sin or the need for prayer.

The purpose for confession and prayer is that those involved may be healed. Although physical healing may take place, sin affects the whole range of feelings, thoughts, decisions, and relationships. Confession and prayer allow God to set them right again.

5. What benefits come to those who confess sin to one another (v. 16a)?

Prayer is a powerful spiritual tool when offered by a person who is properly related to God and living to please Him.

The prayer of a righteous person is powerful and effective.

The word translated "effective," or "in its working," in James 5:16 can be taken in more than one way. It may mean "when it is energized"—that is, by the Holy Spirit. Or it may mean "when it is operating," emphasizing the continual energy the righteous man exerts in making his petition. Both emphases are true, of course. The productiveness of petition is due both to the leading of the Holy Spirit and to the perseverance of the one who prays.

6. How effective are the prayers of the righteous (v. 16b)?

James used Elijah as an example of someone who exhibited the power of prayer. Verse 17 underscores that he was not superhuman. Elijah was “a regular guy” whose strong relationship enabled God to do extraordinary things in his life of service to Him, including a miracle of nature.

The passage does not promise that we can all be miracle workers. It does promise, however, that God can and will show His power in our prayer lives if we dedicate ourselves to His service. This involves cultivating a trusting relationship with Him.

7. Why did James mention Elijah’s example of prayer (v. 17a)?

Elijah’s prayer success offers us three facts not specifically stated in the account of 1 Kings 17–18. First, Elijah prayed not only at the end but also at the beginning of the drought. Second, the drought lasted three and a half years. The third fact is that crops flourished after Elijah “prayed again” (v. 18).

God restored the normal cycle of nature in response to prayer. God honors the prayers of even those who are weak but righteous—walking with Him in such faith and obedience that their prayers, just like their actions, mirror His will.

8. On what occasions did God honor Elijah’s earnest prayer (vs. 17b, 18)?

PRACTICAL POINTS:

1. We should acknowledge God as both the source of our hope and the object of our praise (James 5:13).
2. We should always be available to our fellow Christians to pray for their needs (v. 14).
3. God works according to His will, but our prayers are one means He uses to accomplish His will (v. 15).
4. Confession not only unburdens our hearts but also secures the prayer support we need to resist future temptation (v. 16).
5. Prayer is the most powerful spiritual tool we have in our possession (vs. 17-18).

CONCLUSION: Our lesson has presented prayer as a powerful and necessary part of our experience together as Christians. It is our medium of communicating with God in times of need and in times of rejoicing. Those who are sick or weak should call on their elders to minister to them. We should pray in confidence, remembering the example of Elijah, a mere mortal like the rest of us, who released God’s power in prayer. Most Christians will admit that they believe in prayer. Some, if honest, will admit that their own experience leaves much to be desired. Our challenge is to use this tool that God has given us for His glory.

PRAYER: Heavenly Father, whether we are afflicted or cheerful, help us to always be able to talk to You in prayer. Forgive us of our sin and help us to be faithful in prayer. We praise You for the power of prayer and for the prayerful example left by our Savior. In Jesus’ name, amen.