

The Power of Prayer

James 5:13-20

Do you ever wonder if God really cares about your suffering or does God just look down from heaven and say “you brought it on yourself; deal with it? Is God really listening when we pray? As a congregation we maintain a prayer hotline because we believe that God hears and answers prayers. But when are we to pray?

James has words for us about prayer as he closes his short letter. He tells us to pray for the suffering; for the sick; for the nation; and for those who wander from the Truth.

First James says we are to pray for those suffering (James 5:13) “in difficult circumstances” or “in trouble.” As God’s people go through life, we often must endure difficulties just as part of life; not as the results of sin or the correction of God.

So, what should we do when we find ourselves in such trying circumstances? We must not grumble and criticize the saints who are having an easier time of it (James 5:9); nor should we blame the Lord. We should pray, asking God for the wisdom we need to understand the situation and use it to God’s glory (James 1:5).

Prayer can remove affliction, if that is God’s will. But prayer can also give us the grace we need to endure troubles and use them to accomplish God’s perfect will. God can transform troubles into triumphs. “He gives all the more grace” (James 4:6). Paul prayed that God might change his circumstances, but instead, God gave Paul the grace he needed to turn his weakness into strength (2 Cor. 12:7–10). Jesus prayed in Gethsemane that the cup might be removed, and it was not; but the Father gave Him the strength He needed to go to the cross and die for our sins.

James indicated that everybody does not go through troubles at the same time: “Is any merry? Let him sing psalms” (James 5:13). God allows us hours of suffering and days of singing. The mature Christian knows how to sing *while suffering*. Anybody can sing after the trouble has passed, but we are to sing during the suffering. God gave Job “songs in the night” (Job 35:10); and to Paul and Silas when they were suffering in that Philippian jail. Praying and singing were important elements in worship in the early church, and they should be important to us.

We are to pray for the sick (James 5:14–16). Some of us will say I prayed for the sick and God did not answer my prayer. But we know from experience that sometimes God has given healing. But other times, God does not see fit to heal a person. In the book Heaven is For Real the father tells how his son was miraculously healed. At other situation our prayers for healing are not answered and we thank God that our loved one is no longer in pain. But James calls us to pray regardless.

James says there may be various condition and reasons for illness and suffering. In some cases the person may be sick because of sin (vv. 15b-16). James described a church member who is sick because he or she is being disciplined by God. They are to call for the elders of the congregation because they cannot come to church to confess their sins, so they ask the spiritual leaders to come to them.

The person is to confess their sins (v. 16). The “confessing” that James wrote about is done within the fellowship of the church. We confess our sins first of all to God (1 John 1:9), but we must also confess them to those who have been affected by them. We must never confess sin beyond the circle of that sin’s influence. Private sin requires private confession; public sin requires public confession. It is wrong for Christians to “hang dirty wash in public,” for such “confessing” might

do more harm than the original sin. No, we are to “Confess your sins therefore to one another, and pray for one another, that you may be healed.”

The person is healed by “the prayer of faith” (v. 15). James suggests using available means for healing, like massaging with oil, which was an ancient medical procedure, along with asking God for His divine touch. But it is God who does the healing. Our responsibility is to pray “the prayer of faith” that heals the sick. In 1 John 5:14–15 the writer pinned: “And this is the boldness we have in Him, that if we ask anything according to His will, He hears us: and if we know that He hears us, whatever we ask, we know that we have obtained the requests made to Him.” The “prayer of faith” is a prayer offered when you know the will of God. Keep in mind that it is elders; not a faith healer; who are to seek God’s will and pray.

As we visit the sick among this congregation, we do not always know how to pray for them. (Paul had the same problem in Rom. 8:26.) Is it God’s will to heal? Is God planning to call His child home? We do not know; therefore, we must pray, “If it is your will, heal your child.” Those who claim that God heals every case, and that it is not His will for His children to be sick, are denying both Scripture and experience. But where we have the inner conviction from the Word and the Spirit that it is God’s will to heal, then we can pray “the prayer of faith” and expect God to work.

We are to pray for the Nation (James 5:17–18). James cited Elijah as an example of a “righteous man” whose prayers released power. “The prayer of the righteous is powerful and effective” (James 5:16). So who and what kind of person was this model for effective prayer? Elijah seems an unlikely choice for ordinary Christians. He was one of Israel’s greatest prophets. He took on the evil Ahab and Jezebel, brought a punishment of drought on the land, called down fire from heaven, and was translated to heaven in a whirlwind accompanied by fiery chariots

(1 Kings 17–18; 2 Kings 1-2). So how much do we have in common with such a person? How could our prayers possibly emulate his? But James insists that Elijah was a man with a nature like ours. Apparently he did not pray because he was a great man; maybe he became great because he prayed. James gives us some reasons for Elijah's prayer life that we can follow:

- He prayed; one cannot be effective in prayer unless one prays in the first place.
- He prayed fervently; he was aware of what he was praying, and kept praying with diligence and discipline.
- He prayed an "effective" prayer; that is, he expected results.
- He was a righteous person; he did not allow sin to cloud his conversation with God.
- He prayed specifically, first for a drought, then for rain, in accordance with God's word; he prayed according to Scripture.

James reminds us that Elijah was not perfect; in fact, right after his victory on Mt. Carmel, Elijah became afraid and discouraged and ran away. But he was obedient to God and trusting God. God's promises of answered prayer are for all His children, not just for ones we may call the spiritual elite.

Elijah "prayed earnestly." Many people just lazily say religious words, and their hearts are not in their prayers. We are to talk to God and ask for what we want. If the request is within God's will, the request will be given.

Prayer power is the greatest power in the world today. "Tremendous power is made available through a good man's earnest prayer." (James 5:16, PH). History shows how humankind has progressed from manpower to horsepower, and then to dynamite and TNT, and now to atomic power. But greater than atomic power is prayer power. Elijah prayed for his nation, and God answered prayer. We need to

pray for our nation today, that God will bring conviction and revival, and that “showers of blessing” will come to the land. One of the first responsibilities of the local church is to pray for government leaders (1 Tim. 2:1–3).

We are to pray for those that wander from the Truth (James 5:19–20). Whether the Christian brother or sister gradually moves away from the will of God or is “overtaken in a fault” (Gal. 6:1); such a condition is very dangerous to the Christian who may be disciplined by God (Heb. 12), but also to the church. A wandering Christian can influence others and lead them astray. This is why the spiritual members of the church must step in and help the one who has wandered away; and not only pray for them but also to help the erring brother or sister in an attitude of love, for “love shall cover the multitude of sins” (1 Peter 4:8).

This does not mean that love “sweeps the dirt under the carpet.” Where there is love, there must also be truth (“speaking the truth in love” says Paul in Eph. 4:15); and where there is truth, there is honest confession of sin and cleansing from God. Love not only helps the offender to face his sins and deal with them, but love also assures the offender that those sins, once forgiven, are remembered no more.

James’ emphasis has been spiritual maturity. This would be a good time for us to examine our own hearts to see how mature we really are by answering these questions:

1. Am I a peacemaker or a troublemaker?
2. Do people come to me for spiritual wisdom?
3. Do I make plans without considering the will of God?
4. Do I depend on prayer when I find myself or others in some kind of trouble?
5. Am I the kind of person others seek for prayer support?

6. Do I criticize, or do I seek to restore a wandering brother or sister?¹

James has given clear instructions about how to achieve practical holiness and spiritual maturity. His writings were designed to stir the consciences and souls of his beloved Jewish brothers and us. Stand with confidence, serve with compassion, speak with care, submit with humility, and share with concern. As Christians we should be what God wants us to be, do what God wants us to do, say what God wants us to say, sense what God wants us to sense, share what God wants us to share, and pray what God wants us to pray. Spiritual maturity involves every aspect of life.^{2 3}

¹Wiersbe, Warren W.: *The Bible Exposition Commentary*. Wheaton, Ill. : Victor Books, 1996, c1989, S. Jas 5:13

²Walvoord, John F. ; Zuck, Roy B. ; Dallas Theological Seminary: *The Bible Knowledge Commentary : An Exposition of the Scriptures*. Wheaton, IL : Victor Books, 1983-c1985, S. 2:834

³Barclay, William, lecturer in the University of Glasgow (Hrsg.): *The Letters of James and Peter*. Philadelphia : The Westminster Press, 2000, c1976 (The Daily Study Bible Series, Rev. Ed), S. 127