

ABOVE ALL, PRAY!
The Amazing Power of Fervent Praying
“A Journey through James”
Sermon 21

Texts: James 5:12-18

James 5:12–18: But above all, my brothers, do not swear, either by heaven or by earth or by any other oath, but let your “yes” be yes and your “no” be no, so that you may not fall under condemnation.¹³ Is anyone among you suffering? Let him pray. Is anyone cheerful? Let him sing praise.¹⁴ Is anyone among you sick? Let him call for the elders of the church, and let them pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord.¹⁵ And the prayer of faith will save the one who is sick, and the Lord will raise him up. And if he has committed sins, he will be forgiven.¹⁶ Therefore, confess your sins to one another and pray for one another, that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous person has great power as it is working.¹⁷ Elijah was a man with a nature like ours, and he prayed fervently that it might not rain, and for three years and six months it did not rain on the earth.¹⁸ Then he prayed again, and heaven gave rain, and the earth bore its fruit.

Introduction:

This morning we are coming to the concluding paragraphs of this amazing pastoral letter written by James to believers called to live by the wisdom of God that they might display the power and beauty of a living faith to people living in the bondage of spiritual darkness throughout all the little kingdoms of the world.

The kind of faith James has in mind that will silence the Accuser and point people to Christ is whole-hearted, single-focused, and fully trusting in God and in His Word.

And James has been very clear with his readers (and with us) that believers who live this way with all their heart and strength will experience relentless opposition, ruthless persecution, and unexplained suffering in this life.

James and the NT writers make several important points about suffering that we can't afford to miss if we hope to accomplish the mission God has given us to accomplish with our lives.

1. Suffering is the **defining experience** of Christian life

1 Peter 4:12-14 Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery trial when it comes upon you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you. ¹³ But rejoice insofar as you share Christ's sufferings, that you may also rejoice and be glad when his glory is revealed. ¹⁴ If you are insulted for the name of Christ, you are blessed, because the Spirit of glory and of God rests upon you.

2. Suffering is the **common experience** of every **obedient** Christian

2 Timothy 3:12 Indeed, all who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted.

3. Suffering is the **essential means** by which God grows, strengthens, and completes a living faith in us

James 1:2-4 Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds, ³ for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness. ⁴ And let steadfastness have its full effect, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing.

4. Suffering is the **undeniable manifestation** of the authenticity and value of our faith in Jesus

1 Peter 1:6-7 In this you rejoice, though now for a little while, if necessary, you have been grieved by various trials, ⁷ so that the tested genuineness of your faith—more precious than gold that perishes though it is tested by fire—may be found to result in praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ.

5. Suffering is the most **compelling means** by which God advances His gospel in hard places and dark spaces

1 Peter 2:12 Keep your conduct among the Gentiles honorable, so that when they speak against you as evildoers, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day of visitation.

So, how we respond to suffering is of utmost importance to our own spiritual health as well as to the success of our personal part in the amazing mission God is accomplishing in us and through us for His glory.

Thus far, James has pointed out several important responses God wants of us when we encounter a season of severe suffering that threatens to tear us down or wear us out.

- We are to ask God for wisdom from above to guide us (1:5).
- We are to strengthen our hearts by remembering the promise of His soon and sure return (5:8).
- We are to graciously forbear those who persecute us unjustly (5:10).
- We are to patiently endure unexplained suffering (5:11).

Now, in the closing verses of his letter, James exhorts us to one final response which is so important, that if we fail to consistently render this response, we

won't have the strength or the courage to maintain firm in our faith. Which is why James introduces this response with the words "Above All" (5:12).

When we encounter unjust persecution, unexplained suffering, or unrelieved sickness – James exhorts us to pray fervently out of faith-filled, undivided hearts for God to sustain us.

We are to pray fervently out of faith-filled hearts for God to sustain us whenever we encounter a season of suffering!

So, let's follow James' train of thought so that we don't miss anything that the Holy Spirit wants to say to us this morning individually and we don't ignore anything He wants to say to us corporately as a church family.

I. An Exhortation to Heed (5:12a)

Above all ... do not swear But let your yes be yes and your no be no, so that you may not fall under condemnation. Is any among you suffering? Let him pray.

- The phrase "*above all*" isn't just James' way of wrapping up his letter. Rather, it is his way of signaling that what comes next is of utmost importance – it is the climax of his letter and is essential to the success of our mission in the kingdoms of the world.
- James is writing to people whose living faith has been tested to the extreme by unjust persecution, unexplained suffering, and later in this paragraph, unrelieved sickness.
- How are people like this going to be able to ***respond graciously like the prophets*** did when they were persecuted? How will they ***endure faithfully like Job*** under prolonged, unexplained suffering?
- Not by making false promises to our persecutors hoping to escape or by making foolish vows to God hoping to persuade Him to deliver us or to relieve our suffering (rash vows in 5:12).
- But by fervent, faith-filled praying that truly....
 - desires to embrace the wisdom of God
 - desires to be content with the will of God
 - desires to be conformed to the Word of God
 - desires to be consecrated to the Work of God

II. An Admonition to Practice (5:13-16a)

Is anyone among you suffering? Let him pray. Is anyone cheerful? Let him sing praise.

¹⁴ *Is anyone among you sick? Let him call for the elders of the church, and let them pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord.* ¹⁵ *And the prayer of faith will save the one who is sick, and the Lord will raise him up. And if he has committed sins, he will be forgiven.* ¹⁶ *Therefore, confess your sins to one another and pray for one another, that you may be healed.*

- James has prayer on his mind, and he wants us to have it on our mind as well – praying shows up in every verse in this section.
- The kind of praying that James has in mind is not the one-off, occasional, or even panic praying that we do from time to time – but the repeated, habitual pattern of ongoing conversation with God about His will and our painful situation.
- So, what does this kind of praying look like in action?

A. *Prayer when our hearts are overwhelmed by trouble*

Is anyone among you suffering? Let him pray

- The word for suffering is a strong word – it is the same word for the persecution and affliction heaped upon the OT prophets in 5:10.
- It speaks to the horrific difficulties and agonizing realities that come often and repeatedly upon God’s children in the very middle of their faithful service to Him.
- Like the brutal treatment of Jeremiah for speaking truth.
- Like the devastating loss of Ezekiel’s wife in the midst of his difficult ministry.
- Like the repeated marital infidelity Hosea endured as part of his ministry for God.
- Like the horrific murder and martyrdom of Isaiah at the end of his long and faithful service to Christ.
- And these are the kinds of things that often happen to us as we strive to live obediently and serve God faithfully.
- What are we to do when life and ministry blows up? Pray with a faith-filled, fully-trusting faith in God and His Word!

B. Praise when our hearts are strengthened by truth

Is anyone cheerful? Let him sing praise.

- The term “cheerful” is not talking about emotional happiness when life is good, and all is going well.
- This term is used by one other in the NT to describe the ***strengthening of the hearts*** of people who were in the middle of a horrific crisis – a terrible sea storm.
- Acts 27:20-25 – Paul is sailing to Rome. The ship had been battered by a terrific storm for many days and after doing all they knew to do, the sailors had ***abandoned all hope of being saved alive***. Then Paul stood up among them and exhorted the terrified sailors to “***take heart***” (v.22, 25) because he had faith in God that though the ship would be lost, there would be no loss of life because the outcome would be exactly as God had told him!
- This is exactly what James told his readers to do in 5:8 when he said “***establish your heart***” – put iron in your soul by believing the promises God has made you!
- And people whose hearts have been strengthened by God have Spirit generated courage that causes them to render praise to God in the very heart of the crisis!
- They sing praise to God (psalms)!
- ***Illustration:*** Two humble, obedient, Gospel-risk takers did this in Acts 16:19-34 when the Holy Spirit led Paul and Silas to preach the gospel to the people in Philippi. And by the end of their ministry, they had been arrested, dragged before an angry mob who tore their clothes from their bodies, brutally beat them with many blows, and threw them into the city jail where they were confined, and their feet put in stocks.
- BUT at midnight, these bruised, bleeding, battered servants of God began praising God and singing hymns!
- The rest of the prisoners were hearing them. God heard them. And by the time it was over, the Philippian jailer heard them and became a follower of Christ along with his house!
- Here is his testimony – *And he rejoiced along with his entire household that he had believed in God!* (Acts 16:34b)

- All because God strengthened the heart of two gospel-risk takers so they could sing and praise God in the midst of immense suffering! And God can and will do the same for us!

C. Consecration when our hearts are weak and our bodies are sick

Is anyone among you sick? Let him call for the elders of the church, and let them pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord

- But what about when we are overwhelmed by the pressure of the crisis and worn down by the pain of the suffering and our hearts are not strong but are weak and faltering?
- The term James uses for “sick” is a term that can mean spiritual weakness as well as physical weakness.
- Sometimes when we have been in a hard space or a dark place for a long time – our hearts grow weary, our spirit grows weak, and the temptation of our flesh grows strong – what do we do then?
- We engage the prayers of others – we call the elders of our church to come and pray for us and over us.
- The weakness may be spiritual – we sense we are about to be overcome by the temptation and crushed by the pressure.
- The weakness may be physical – a devastating, debilitating, long-lasting, life-threatening or life-altering illness.
- At such times we may well find ourselves too weak to pray and frankly, too weak even to stand much longer.
- And James says – when you get there, you need your church! You need your elders to come and fervently pray faith-filled prayers (“*the prayer of faith*”) over you (5:14-15).

D. Confession when we have been “doers of sins” rather than “doers of the word”.

*And if he has committed sins, he will be forgiven.¹⁶ Therefore, confess your sins to one another and pray for one another, **that you may be healed.***

- There is a possibility this illness has come as a consequence of willful, repeated sins.
- James has rebuked these people for sinful speech, open hostility and relational conflict in the body, and spiritual adultery.

- The NT has clear examples of God judging His people with serious illness – the Corinthians from abusing the Lord’s table (1 Cor 11:27-32); Christians at Thyatira who were committing immorality and engaging in idolatry (Rev 2:20-23).
- The elders would be well aware of the kind of sinning that James had in mind and would know whether the sick person they are praying over was guilty of their practice.
- If so, and the sick person truly confesses, and God **will** heal!

III. A Perspective to Consider (5:14)

Is anyone among you sick? Let him call for the elders of the church, and let them pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord

- And when the elders come, they should pray strong prayers (**euch**) and they should anoint you with oil in the name of the Lord (5:14).
- The strong praying is like the **strong desire** Paul expressed in Acts 26:29 for Agrippa and Romans 9:1-3 for his Jewish kinsmen.
- There are several opinions as to what the nature of this anointing means – some think it refers to the use of available medicinal options while others think it has more of a spiritual significance intended to set this person apart for specific prayer.
- I personally think that James may have something else in mind – he may be pointing to the OT practice of anointing someone with oil to consecrate them to a particular ministry for God. (Ex 28:41 – Aaron and his sons). Jesus was anointed with the Holy Spirit who would empower him for his ministry (Lk 4:18).
- I think this is what is going on here in James 5 – the anointing was for **consecration** and **enablement/empowerment** for the gospel ministry God had appointed this suffering saint to do for Him through their suffering or illness.
- Illust: This is exactly what Paul experienced when he prayed three times to be delivered from his affliction (2 Cor 12:8-9).

IV. A Promise to Embrace (5:15-16b)

And the prayer of faith will save the one who is sick, and the Lord will raise him up. And if he has committed sins, he will be forgiven. . . .The prayer of a righteous person has great power as it is working.

- God will Strengthen the weak and discouraged (save).
- God will Forgive the one who has sinned.
- God will Raise Up the one who is sick (heal/resurrect).

- And this is so because of something God wants us to know about this kind of praying – it has great power as it works!
- When a righteous person prays this way, their prayers accomplish great things because they have great power.
- So ... who are these righteous people? They are the kind of people that James talked about earlier – they are people who are “doers of the word” and not hearers only (1:22-25). They are whole-hearted, single-focused, fully trusting people who are not double minded (1:6-7)!

Conclusion:

So what will God do for his faithful servants who pray these kinds of faith-filled, Spirit energized prayers when they suffer?

- He will ***strengthen and sustain*** them (Acts 27: Paul and the Sailors)
- He will ***forgive and deliver*** them (Mk. 2:1-12: paralytic)
- He will use their suffering to ***convict and save sinners*** (Acts 16: Paul and Silas)
- He will ***resurrect and raise*** them up (Mk: 5:25-43: Jairus Daughter)
- ***AND ... He will help us in this life and honor us in the life to come!***

This promise sustained Paul as he held on for dear life in the midst of a storm. It was what strengthened him in a Philippian jail cell in the middle of the night. It is what comforted him during the last days of his life right up to his execution for preaching Christ. And he wrote it down so that ***we would not lose heart*** when God answers our desperate prayers for deliverance by

allowing the thorn to remain, or leaving us confined, or even permitting the loss of our physical life.

2 Corinthians 4:16–18 ***So we do not lose heart.*** *Though our outer self is wasting away, our inner self is being renewed day by day.* ¹⁷ ***For this light momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison,*** ¹⁸ *as we look not to the things that are seen but to the things that are unseen.* ***For the things that are seen are transient, but the things that are unseen are eternal.***

So here is the question we must ask and answer for ourselves:

As a Gospel-risk taker, do I have the kind of strong desire for the salvation of others that would make me willing to suffer affliction, illness, emotional and mental oppression, and even my own life if God would use my suffering to save others?

How do I get this kind of desire and the strength it requires? From the living faith James has been describing!