

WHICH ROAD WILL YOU TAKE?

A STUDY IN JAMES

The Prayer of Faith

In the spirit of keeping these lessons personal, I confess that I don't always pray as diligently as I should. I go to sleep sometimes before I finish a prayer. I may wake up with a prayer on my lips and become distracted from my conversation with God by something as simple as a cat jumping on my bed. My mind wanders off and I start thinking about eating before the blessing is over. Although I know that my prayer life is not as "disciplined" as it should be, I do possess something wonderful – it's not mystical – it's not magical – it is miraculously spiritual – I know beyond a shadow of a doubt that I am constantly connected to the Almighty God of heaven through the power of the Holy Spirit who dwells within me! He's always here. I sense His presence and I know because of God's Son Jesus that I can go directly to the throne of God. (*Hebrews 4:16*) And this is a blessing worthy of praise!

As James, the pastor, concludes his collection of wisdom instructions for practical living, he calls his readers then and now to pray specifically. The Apostle Paul said that God's children should *pray without ceasing*. (*1 Thes. 5:17*). James originally wrote his letter to the Israelites and his call to prayer is one of the last, if not the last message to Israel, before the complete separation of Christianity from Judaism.

1. Pray for the Suffering

Read James 5:13 (ESV) ¹³ *Is anyone among you suffering? Let him pray. Is anyone cheerful? Let him sing praise.*

What did James mean when he mentioned the *suffering*? The KJV uses the word *afflicted* in place of suffering while the NIV asks *is anyone in trouble?* The phrase '*in trouble*' in this modern translation gives us a clear picture of who James was referencing. Paul used this word to describe the circumstances he was in as he suffered for the Gospel's sake. **2 Timothy 2:9 (ESV)** ⁹ *for which I am suffering, bound with chains as a criminal. But the word of God is not bound!* Wiersbe says, "As God's people go through life, we often endure difficulties that are not the result of sin or the chastening of God." Life happens! When we are IN TROUBLE, it is time to pray!

Some who do not have conversations with God on a regular basis may feel a little guilty coming to God in times of trouble. However, God's Word tells us that we should. In reality, when we are in trouble there is no better place to be. **Psalms 36:7 (ESV)** ⁷ *How precious is your steadfast love, O God! The children of mankind take refuge in the shadow of your wings.*

Not everyone goes through trouble at the same time. In the same breath as suffering, James mentions: *Is anyone cheerful? Let him sing praise:* As we travel through life, we experience both good times and bad – times of suffering and times of singing. The mature Christian learns how to sing while suffering – singing praises to God that is. Paul and Silas are examples of people who sang praises to God while suffering.

Remember that night as they were bound in prison. *Acts 16:25 (ESV)* ²⁵ *About midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the prisoners were listening to them.*

2. Pray for the Sick

Read James 5:14-16 (ESV) 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.*

Common sense tells us, James is not writing a blank check for physical healing. That scenario would mean we would never die. *Hebrews 9:27 (ESV)* ²⁷ *And just as it is appointed for man to die once, and after that comes judgment,*

When we are sick our first thought is often to call the doctor. I believe in situations of serious illness, this scripture compels us to have our pastors and church family to pray for us. No matter how strong a prayer life we normally have, when we become ill it becomes more difficult to pray. It is a healing blessing to know we are being covered by the prayers of other believers. I have personally experienced that covering of prayer and I know it is real.

Some churches today still anoint with oil while praying for the sick. Oil was a symbol of the Spirit of God when anointing kings and priests. Consider it – followers of Christ are the priesthood. *1 Peter 2:9 (ESV)* ⁹ *But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light. And praise God, we have been anointed with the oil of the Holy Spirit!*

Oil was also used in ancient times for medicinal purposes. In most cases, the oil was olive oil, which was used for everything from body massages to the prevention of dry skin. The Good Samaritan used oil and wine on the wounds of the man found beside the highway. The oil mentioned by James is representative of both the physical and spiritual sides of life. Christians should not separate the physical from the spiritual.

And the prayer of faith will save the one who is sick, and the Lord will raise him up Bibleref.org, explains, “It’s a delicate question, but the promise of the verse requires us to look at the language closely. When the elders of the church pray on behalf of this person with sincere faith, while anointing him or her with oil, the Lord will raise this person up. The promise doesn’t seem to suggest when or how God will raise him up. Perhaps it will be immediate. Perhaps it will be in eternity, which is certainly a less satisfying answer. In any case, the believer in Christ will always be raised eventually and forever, we can be assured.”

Many televangelists preach a gospel that proclaims if a person has enough faith they will be physically healed. This type of preaching is false and often causes people to think if they are not healed they lack faith. We all know people who have died regardless of the fervent prayers that were spoken to God on their behalf. I saw this early in life when a Christian aunt died after a long battle from cancer. She had many prayers

spoken for her and I did not understand why she was not healed. My mother explained that God did heal her since going to be with the Lord is the ultimate healing experience for the believer.

In the last half of verse 15, we read, *and if he has committed sins*, Wiersbe comments “the Greek text says, ‘If he has been constantly sinning.’” James described a church member who is sick because he is being disciplined by God. We really don’t like to think it but disobedience to God can lead to sickness or affliction or both. David writes concerning his sin in **Psalm 32:3 (ESV)** ³ *For when I kept silent, my bones wasted away through my groaning all day long.*

Suffering and sickness do not necessarily result from sin. Job, for instance, was afflicted though he didn’t sin (**Job 1**). Jesus made it clear that a person can be stricken with an illness or condition that has no connection to wrongdoing (**John 9:1-3**). On the other hand, a sinful lifestyle *can* result in weakness and suffering.

Physical and spiritual healing comes when sin is dealt with. We confess our sins first of all to the Lord. **1 John 1:9 (ESV)** ⁹ *If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.* However, we must also confess them to those who have been affected by them. Wiersbe says and I agree with him, “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.”

3. Pray for the Nation

Read James 5:17-18 (ESV) 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.*

James cited Elijah as *a man with a nature like ours*, whose prayers released power. I will not focus on Elijah’s story today. You can read about it in **1 Kings 17-18**. The point today is James’ words that Elijah was a man with a nature like ours – meaning he was human – filled with faith along with fear at times but he had a heart for his nation – his nation that was traveling quickly away from Almighty God – not much different from the national, state and local problems we are facing today. The thought that keeps coming to my mind is **2 Chronicles 7:14 (ESV)** ¹⁴ *if my people who are called by my name humble themselves, and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven and will forgive their sin and heal their land.* Pray for our nation. We turn on the TV and think “I wish there was something I could do about this chaos.” We can! We can pray!

Prayer power is the greatest power in the world today. *The effectual fervent prayer of a righteous man availeth much.*

History shows how mankind has progressed from manpower to horsepower, then to dynamite and on to atomic power. But greater than atomic power is the power of prayer to the One True Living God. Elijah prayed for his nation, and God answered his prayer. One of the first responsibilities of the local church is to

pray for government leaders. *1 Timothy 2:1-2 (ESV)* ¹ *First of all, then, I urge that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings be made for all people, ² for kings and all who are in high positions...*

4. Pray for the Straying

Read James 5:19-20 (ESV) ¹⁹ *My brothers, if anyone among you wanders from the truth and someone brings him back, ²⁰ let him know that whoever brings back a sinner from his wandering will save his soul from death and will cover a multitude of sins.*

As he closes, James reminds us that the church should be a spiritual hospital where believers are involved in each other's lives. One who strays from the truth from among the brothers and sisters is a wanderer or backslider.

It's always an anxious moment, especially for families and friends, when someone is reported missing in the wilderness. Search and rescue teams spring into action. We wait expectantly for any word of locating the missing person. It's a moment of great joy when the person is found alive and well, but a time of great sorrow when they are too late. Christians are God's search and rescue team. But even though every believer is on the team, many never respond to the call to go out into the darkness and look for the lost.

While James did not specifically call for prayer in these verses, the implication is there. If we pray for the afflicted and the sick, surely we must pray for the ones who wander from the truth. Wandering suggest a gradual moving away from the truth.

These verses are not so much about the backslider as they are about those around him. Some believers aid the spiritual decline of fellow Christians by thinking it is not their business to get involved. But if you saw someone about to step into the street in front of a car, would you say it's none of my business? Though many believers fail to accept their responsibility to the family of faith, Christianity is real when we see a brother or sister in Christ backsliding and act in love. We are not called be a passive Christians.

In verse 20, James is referring to a believer, so he's not talking about losing salvation. "Death" can have two meanings. First, it may mean untimely physical death. The New Testament describes instances in which Christians died early. Sometimes God takes a straying and unrepentant believer home (see *1 Cor 11:30*). It can also refer metaphorically to the deterioration in circumstances because the intimate presence of God is no longer operating in a person's life.

Although James is referring to the wandering of a saved person, the application can be made to the lost sinner as well. After all, if a straying brother needs to be restored, how much more does a lost sinner need to be brought to the Savior. If the wandering believer loses his life, he at least goes to heaven; but the lost sinner is condemned to an eternal hell.

This brings us to the end of our study of James. In closing our study let us emphasize again the importance of a faith that works—a faith that is evidenced by a life of devotion to the Lord and of concern for the welfare of others. This is the right road to take.