

“The Prayer of Faith”

Texts: James 5:12-20; Psalm 38:1-22

The Eleventh in a Series of Sermons on the Book of James

What is the most important thing that a persecuted and suffering church can do? The answer is so obvious that we easily overlook it. Pray! In the final verses of his epistle, James wraps up with an exhortation to the suffering Christians of the Dispersion to seek the power of God through prayer. James reminds them that prayer is the means through which God sustains his people, especially during times of great trial. Sadly, many in our day have turned James’ exhortation to pray for healing into a mantra through which God will supposedly heal all of our diseases—if only we dare claim what is rightfully ours. Instead of seeing James’ exhortation to pray as the means through which God sustains us in the midst of our trials, faith-healers have turned James’ words into the magical “abracadabra” enabling us to “claim our miracle.” It always amazes me that persecuted Jewish Christians to whom James is writing never understood James in this way, yet prosperous Americans, who have never known a moment of persecution in their lives, take James to be promising them health and wealth. What James is doing is reminding persecuted Christians that God has heard their cries, and he stands ever ready to help in time of need. All they need do is ask.

We now come to the conclusion of our series on the Book of James, as we make our way through the final verses of chapter five. I hope this series has been as helpful and interesting to you as it has been to me. There is much here for us and I hope you now feel as at home in the Book of James as you do in the letters of Paul.

While some have thought that the Book of James is nothing more than warmed over Jewish legalism, we have seen how that sentiment could not be further from the truth. James does not contradict Paul when it comes to justification, and when interpreted correctly, James reminds us of the importance of good works, as well as the need for us to be more than mere “hearers” of the word. In fact, James has taught us that it is God who brings us forth (from death to life) through the preached word, then implants that word within us, thereby ensuring that we hold the faith in our Lord Jesus Christ. James exhorts struggling Christians to draw near to God, because James knows God’s promise that God will draw near to us whenever we seek his face. James reminds that when we humble ourselves, God responds by exalting us. James tells us that whenever we seek God’s grace, God is willing to give us even more grace. James is very clear that from beginning to end, the Christian life is grounded in the grace of God, who has promised to see us through all of the trials of life. And the way in which God sees us through the trials of life is through prayer, the subject of this sermon.

As we turn to the final section of James 5, we pick up with verse 12, which we briefly considered last time. Then we’ll take up James’ discussion of prayer, beginning in verse 13.

One of the difficulties in interpreting the Book of James can be seen with verses like this one that seem disconnected from what has gone before or comes after. It is hard to tell whether verse 12 goes with the preceding—James’ warning to those rich landowners who were exploiting Jewish Christians who were forced to leave Jerusalem to seek safety in areas to the north and east of the city—or does it go with what follows, “above all” being James’ directive that not swearing an oath is the most important exhortation in this letter. As displaced refugees, many of James’ readers were now forced to eke out a living, finding themselves at the mercy of those landowners who were, apparently, withholding wages from these

refugees. After reminding his readers that Jesus' return was imminent—hence, God's judgment was soon to come upon those who persecuted God's people—James tells them that they should wait patiently for the Lord, because in the meantime believers can surely count upon the Lord's compassion and mercy to sustain them in the midst of their trials. Since James' readers are largely Jewish converts to Christianity, they knew the story of Job, as well as the history of Israel's prophets who had suffered greatly at the hands of their own people. Those who know the Old Testament know that God is always faithful to his suffering people, just as he will be faithful to those to whom James is writing.

It is in this context that James can say, *“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.”* Most translations tie verse 12 to the preceding. I tend to agree, because if you tie this verse to what follows, you have James wrapping up his epistle in saying, “above all else,” don't swear an oath. But that is hardly the most important things James has to say. I take James 1:22 to be the thesis statement for the entire letter. *“But be doers of the word, and not hearers only.”* So, it seems much better to see James 5:12 as the conclusion of the previous section dealing the need to be patient until the Lord returns.¹

James' words echo the words of Jesus in Matthew 5:34-37. *“But I say to you, Do not take an oath at all, either by heaven, for it is the throne of God, 35 or by the earth, for it is his footstool, or by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the great King. And do not take an oath by your head, for you cannot make one hair white or black. Let what you say be simply ‘Yes’ or ‘No’; anything more than this comes from evil.”* But are James and Jesus actually forbidding us from taking any sort of an oath, under any circumstances? Not likely. James' point is that in light of the exhortation for Christians to be patient while waiting for the Lord's return, Christians should not rashly make oaths, as this would be a manifestation of impatience—the opposite of waiting patiently for the Lord's return. Nor should Christians “swear” in connection to such oaths. This is not a reference to crude speech (“swearing”), but to invoking God's name as some sort of character reference when taking an oath—“in the name of God I swear that I am telling the truth.”

The Anabaptists take James to be forbidding all oaths, hence their refusal to swear oaths in civil courts or serve in the military. But the context seems to indicate that both James and Jesus are not dealing with “official oaths” (i.e., those oaths tied to civic duties). Instead, it appears that this is a reference to personal oaths which people were taking under duress, invoking the name of God to give that personal oath much more credibility. This would explain why James exhorts his readers to simply let their “yes” be “yes,” and their “no,” “no.” Why should a Christian who is committed to truth-telling need to supplement their “yes” or “no” with an oath invoking the name of God? James and Jesus are exhorting Christians to be truth-tellers, which shouldn't require some sort of personal oath to give the truth some extra weight. Christians shouldn't need to invoke the Lord's name, if their own word is truthful.

If James 5:12 is an exhortation which caps off his discussion of the blessing which awaits God's people when the Judge (Jesus) return, along with the warning of curse to those wealthy landowners who were persecuting the people of God, then verse 13 opens the final section of James' Epistle, which is an exhortation for Christians to seek the power of God during difficult times through prayer, especially in regards to matters related to personal health and physical healing. Considering the circumstances under which James is writing this would be expected since many in James' audience were destitute, and

¹ Contra Moo, *The Epistle of James*, 231-234.

struggling to get by. The daily troubles faced by persecuted Christian refugees would take a great toll on both body and soul. Those to whom James' is writing need to be reminded of God's great power in accomplishing his will for his people, no matter what their current circumstances. And the way in which people seek God's aid during trial is through prayer.

In verse 13, James asks the critical question which frames the concluding verses. "*Is anyone among you suffering?*" The word translated "suffering" means something like "enduring hardship." The focus is not so much upon physical suffering—although physical suffering is certainly included—as it is the kind of suffering that the righteous must endure which comes from the hand of the wicked. These hardships include economic troubles, along with the related maladies of a persecuted people including physical illness and emotional distress.

The obvious answer to James' rhetorical question (is anyone suffering?) is "yes." The solution, James says is, "*Let him pray.*" In Ephesians 6:16, Paul makes a similar point—"pray at all times in the Spirit, with all prayer and supplication." From other comments made by James—i.e., in 1:2-4; 12, 5:7-11—James is not instructing people to petition God to remove their various trials. Rather, James is instructing us to ask that God would grant us what is necessary so as see our trials in the right way. Our prayer is that God will help us gain the right attitude so that we trust in his purposes, knowing that God will somehow turn these difficult trials to good.² James is exhorting believers to ask God to give them strength to endure whatever God sends their way. James is not teaching us how to claim our miracle, or to bind the demon of whatever it is that is troubling us.

While many of James' readers are enduring very difficult hardships, many of them have peace of mind in the midst of these difficult times. And so James asks, "*is anyone cheerful?*" Those who have a sense that God has allowed these trials for a reason, and that God has given them the spiritual strength to endure them, are to likewise make the appropriate response of faith. "*Let him sing praise.*" Christians should not only be in the habit of praying for God's grace and help whenever they encounter difficult times, but Christians should also be in the habit of giving praise to God whenever they consider that God is working all things—including their trials—for good. This is the prayer-praise cycle which should characterize the Christian life. Christians are to pray constantly, offering petitions unto the Lord requesting his grace and mercy to help them through their trials. Also Christians are to offer words (songs) of praise unto the Lord, which is the response from someone who trusts that God will see them through every one of life's difficult circumstances. This what the *Heidelberg Catechism* is getting at when it speaks of the Christian life as one of gratitude—the offering up of both prayers and praises because of all that God has done for us in Christ.

In verses 14-15, James now turns to one of the most common occasions when Christians seek the power of God through prayer, and that is when illness strikes. James asks, "*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 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.*" Sadly, this is one of the most distorted verses in all the New Testament, as Word-Faith devotees have turned these verses into a mantra, which if spoken correctly, and without any doubting, supposedly guarantees physical healing. There is nothing more destructive than to tell a sick and suffering person that it is God's will for them to be healed, provided they have sufficient faith. When the healing doesn't come, the sick person is blamed for not having enough faith, or for

² Moo, *The Epistle of James*, 234-235.

having some hidden sin in their lives which prevents God from healing them.

Not only is this not what James is saying, but the Word-Faith notion of healing is nothing more than a sinful tantrum. “God heal me right now—you promised!” First off, the word translated “sick” is used throughout the New Testament in reference to all kinds of conditions—including mental ability (Romans 6:19), someone’s spiritual condition (Romans 5:6), someone’s physical appearance (2 Corinthians 10:10), as well as to someone’s physical condition. The word has the sense of “being weak,” and is not limited to a physical illness, although it includes sickness.³ So, when James asks, “is anyone among weak?” he’s speaking of the effects of persecution and difficult times upon the body—this includes sickness, as well as emotional distress.

Notice that the sick person is not commanded to pray for themselves, but to summon the elders, who are to pray over them. This tells us that the apostolic church (even as early as the mid-forties), was ruled by elders (“Presbyterian” church government). No question that the elders were men who were well grounded in the Christian faith who watched over a congregation’s life and doctrine. The frequent mention of elders throughout the churches of the New Testament (who were to shepherd their flocks—cf. Acts 20:28) tell us that pastors and elders were also assigned the task of comforting those in crisis. Whatever James will tell us about prayer and healing, the context in which these things should take place, is the local church and its officers, not a stadium filled with a gazillion people being whooped up into a frenzy by some celebrity-like evangelist who blows on people and makes them fall over.

While Paul speaks of a supernatural gift of healing, James seems to tie healing to the prayers of church officers. How do we reconcile these two different approaches? For one thing, when Paul speaks of gifts of miracles and healing in 1 Corinthians 12:9, 28, I take him to be referring to those extra-ordinary gifts of the Spirit which were closely associated to office of apostle. When the apostles planted new churches, they did not ordain new apostles. Rather, they ordained ministers, elders, and deacons. The ministers and elders were to rule in the name of Christ, while the deacons were to display God’s mercy to his people. It is also important to notice that James does not restrict prayer for healing only to the ministers and elders—in fact, in verse 16, James speaks of the role all believers play in praying for the sick. James’ exhortation to those who are sick, certainly seems to imply that the person who needs prayer for sickness or physical weakness, is sick/weak enough that the elders need to come to their home or sickbed. This implies the laying on of hands which likely accompanied the prayer for the sick. It has long been part of Reformed pastoral practice, that ministers and elders visit those who are sick, both to pray for them and with them, and to offer a word of God’s assurance in light of the doubt that often accompanies illness.

What are we to make of James’ exhortation that elders are to anoint the sick with oil at the time of prayer? The only other time this practice is even mentioned in the New Testament is in Mark 6:13, where we read that the apostles “*cast out many demons and anointed with oil many who were sick and healed them.*” Neither Mark nor James say anything about the practice, nor do they offer any explanation. There have been four main suggestions as to what this anointing with oil means. Some see a medicinal purpose—oil was often poured on wounds and other injuries. The idea is that Christian use medicine and prayer at the time of sickness. Others see the oil as an outward sign—just as Jesus used mud, spittle, and other tangible things when he healed. Some see a sacramental purpose in the use of oil. The Greek church has utilized this practice from ancient times, and the Roman church sees the use of oil as a sacrament used by a priest at the time of death (extreme unction)—the anointing of oil being the sign

³ Moo, The Epistle of James, 236-237.

of the removal of sins and the strengthening of the soul before death. Vatican II calls this the “anointing of the sick,” and is now part of Roman Catholic pastoral practice. Still others see the anointing with oil as symbolic of the consecration (setting apart) of a person or thing for God’s redemptive purposes. Luther, Calvin, and many Reformed theologians (Warfield) believe that this act of anointing with oil was tied to the apostolic power to heal, so the practice passed away with the close of the apostolic period.⁴

Now, without going into all the arguments for or against each of these positions, it seems to me that the evidence is far and away the strongest for seeing the practice of anointing with oil as a sign of consecration. That many others were healed throughout the New Testament without the use of oil seems to indicate that James is referring to some sort of symbolic act, which is not in any sense necessary for healing to actually take place. But let us not miss the forest through the trees. What is clear is James’ stress upon having both the elders (and pastors) and others in the church pray for the sick—with the expectation that *if* these prayers are offered in faith, God will “save” the one who is sick and then raise them up. No doubt, James’ words here reflect the various accounts throughout the gospels, where Jesus heals someone, and they were raised up from their sickbed as evidence of the fact that they were healed.

There are a couple of things here of interest. James does not use the normal word for prayer which appears throughout the New Testament (*proseuchomai*). Instead, James uses the rare word “*euche*,” which can mean either a vow, or a fervent wish. James is not setting forth some iron-clad principle of healing. He is telling us that when those who pray for the sick, do so, fervently desiring that the person for whom they are praying be healed, if it be his will, God will heal them (the word to save can also refer to physical healing) and then raise them up from their sick beds. The critical clause is that prayer “offered in faith,” which implies not a demand on our part that God make good on his promise to heal, but that those who pray are humbly asking that God’s will and purposes be accomplished in and through the person’s suffering. And if it be God’s will, that prayer, fervently offered, can and does bring about physical healing. A prayer offered in faith is not a mantra, nor a demand. It is simply and humbly asking God for what we need, with the knowledge that God is always faithful to us in the midst of our trials.

There is an echo in James’ words from the opening verses of Psalm 38 (our Old Testament lesson). “*O Lord, rebuke me not in your anger, nor discipline me in your wrath! For your arrows have sunk into me, and your hand has come down on me. There is no soundness in my flesh because of your indignation; there is no health in my bones because of my sin. For my iniquities have gone over my head; like a heavy burden, they are too heavy for me.*” When we are sick, our default setting is that God is punishing us for our sins. That is why James connects healing to the forgiveness of sins.

This fits with the final clause of the verse *and if he has committed sins, he will be forgiven*. No question that all sickness stems from human sin. That said, it is impossible to trace all illnesses to specific sins. There is no spiritual principle here of “stepping on a crack and breaking your mother’s back.” We get sick because we are sinful, not necessarily because we may have committed some specific sin which made God mad at us, so he caused us to get some particular illness. Whatever illnesses we suffer are tied to God’s mysterious providential purposes for our lives. The person in the sickbed needs to know that if they are in Christ, all their sins are forgiven. Such an absolution may indeed bring about physical healing, a point confirmed in verse 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.*”

⁴ See the helpful discussion in Moo, [The Epistle of James](#), 236-242.

When believers confess their sins, each to the other, and when believers pray for each other, God works in powerful ways. Too many times, we have seen people tie the power of God to some sort of weird religious experience—that James is supposedly referring to God’s power as something we experience directly. Rather, James is speaking of God’s power as his ability to heal us from our illnesses. It also must be said that any physical healing is tied to Christ’s priestly work for us on the cross, in taking away the guilt of our sins. God has promised all of us complete and total healing, if not in this life, then certainly on the day of resurrection.

Furthermore, when James speaks of a righteous man, he’s not speaking of someone who is more righteous than others, the kind of person who is so righteous that God *really* hears that person’s prayers and then answers them. No, all Christians are righteous through their faith in Christ. Any Christian who prays—James says—can witness God’s power in bringing about healing (if God wills it), because God works powerfully through a Christian’s prayer, especially when those prayers are for the sick and tied to our confidence in Christ’s redemptive purposes on Calvary. Healing is directly tied to the promises of the gospel and to the forgiveness of sins.

James gives us a very specific example of what he is talking about. In verses 17-18, he appeals to the ministry of Elijah. *“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. Then he prayed again, and heaven gave rain, and the earth bore its fruit.”* While Elijah has a reputation as a great prophet with a close relationship with God, James reminds us that we are just like Elijah. We too know the power of God, because we trust in Christ’s cross and resurrection. There is no reason for Christians to lack confidence when praying, because we know that through our prayers, God accomplishes his wonderful purposes. Therefore, we should all be as zealous and as fervent when we pray as was Elijah. We should pray believing that God can accomplish his purpose and, if it be his will, grant us our request.

As we come to the end of this epistle, James leaves us with one final call to be “doers” of the word and not mere “hearers.” There are no final benedictions or greetings, just one last exhortation to act. As we read in verses 19-20, *“My brothers, if anyone among you wanders from the truth and someone brings him back, 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.”* Speaking to his dear persecuted brothers throughout these churches, James now exhorts them to make every effort to restore those who wander from the truth. This is likely a reference to those who felt compelled to return to Judaism because the persecution they were facing was just too great. But those who are successful in bringing such a person back into the fold can be confident that their actions were instrumental in preventing someone from falling away from the faith. James leaves us with that wonderful reminder that no repentant sinner—no matter what they have done—is beyond the reach of a gracious God. Those who “do the word” will not just watch as their brothers and sisters wander away. They will make every effort to bring the wanderer back, knowing that they will save that wandering soul from death.

What then, do we say by way of application?

James has promised us that if we draw near to God, he will draw near to us. James has told us that if we need grace, God will give us more grace. James has told us that if we need wisdom from God, all we need do is ask. And so in the closing verses of this epistle James describes the way in which God draws near, gives us grace, and dispenses his wisdom—through the prayer of faith.

Is anyone undergoing hardship? Then pray! For this is how God draws near, gives more grace, and

dispenses heavenly wisdom.

Is anyone cheerful? Is your heart filled with gratitude? Then let your heart be filled with praises and songs unto the Lord!

Is anyone sick or weak? Summon the elders, let us pray for you. Ask for the prayers of the saints. Know that your sins are forgiven and that God will see you through all of your trials. If it be his will, he will heal you! If not he will give you the strength to endure.

Is anyone burdened with sin and guilt? Confess your sins each to the other and know that your sins are forgiven in Christ!

Is someone you know wandering from the truth? Then go and get them and save their soul from death!

God has promised that the prayer of faith accomplishes great things. For not only do we see God's power manifest in his ability to answer prayer, we know that prayer is one of the means through which God accomplishes his purposes. And when we pray as James has exhorted us, we are "doers of the word," whom James says, will be blessed in our doing!

Amen!