

**Victory of the Lamb – Faith Works – Faith Prays for Blessings – James 5 –
Pastor Ben Sadler – November 27, 2022**

¹³ Is anyone among you suffering? He should pray. Is anyone cheerful? He should sing praises. ¹⁴ Is anyone among you sick? He should call for the elders of the church, and they are to pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord. ¹⁵ The prayer of faith will save the sick person, and the Lord will raise him up; if he has committed sins, he will be forgiven. ¹⁶ Therefore, confess your sins to one another and pray for one another, so that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous person is very powerful in its effect. ¹⁷ Elijah was a human being as we are, and he prayed earnestly that it would not rain, and for three years and six months it did not rain on the land. ¹⁸ Then he prayed again, and the sky gave rain and the land produced its fruit.

¹⁹ My brothers and sisters, if any among you strays from the truth, and someone turns him back, ²⁰ let that person know that whoever turns a sinner from the error of his way will save his soul from death and cover a multitude of sins. (CSB)

In 2001, Mayo Clinic did a study on the power of intercessory prayer and its effect on patients with heart disease. There were 799 patients in the study. And this group was randomly split into two groups. One in the prayer group and one in the non-prayer group. Each week, for 26 weeks, the people in the prayer group were prayed for at least one time by five different people. And the people in the other group, were not prayed for. At end of the study, here was their conclusion to their scientific study:

As delivered in this study, intercessory prayer had no significant effect on medical outcomes after hospitalization in a coronary care unit.

We are probably not surprised by this conclusion for a few reasons. For one, it seems almost impossible to try to scientifically study the effects of prayer. How could a person possibly see what God is up to? Another reason that we might not be surprised by this study is that this is our experience. We, or someone we loved, was sick. And we prayed fervently for God to do something. And we believed in our heart that a good and loving God would do something. And he seemed to do nothing.

And that's probably why many of us struggle with prayer. We don't really see how it makes any difference. We can see when medicine or lifestyle or good psychology makes a difference in our lives. But we struggle to see how prayer could make any difference.

We are concluding our sermon series on the book of James called **Faith Works**. One of the themes of letter is that James believe faith without works is dead. And so he writes this letter encouraging God's people to put their faith into action. And so we looked at how faith perseveres under trial and how faith doesn't play favorites. We looked at how faith does good works like taking care of the poor and helpless. Also we look at how faith leads us to be wise in how we talk and use our mouth. Now James is concluding this letter. And he says one of the best ways we can put our faith into action is by praying. But as we have already mentioned, prayer doesn't seem to be that effective. It doesn't really seem to matter. And so here is the question I would like to answer today: **Why pray?**

And to answer that question, we are going to look at our reading from James 5. James says, ¹³ **Is anyone among you suffering? He should pray.** As you look at the whole letter, it seems like there was some external pressure from the community against the Jewish Christians. They seemed to be getting persecuted, especially financially. And James reminds them, if you are in a time of suffering and persecution and struggle, pray.

I believe James would want us to do something similar. If we are in a time of struggle, suffering, or persecution, then instead of living like a victim and feeling sorry for ourselves, James tells us to bring those trials to God in prayer.

But we aren't supposed to pray only in challenging times, when things aren't going our way. James says, **Is anyone cheerful? He should sing praises.** If you are having a good day, then sing songs of praise. Call out to God in worship and sing to him.

If you got a raise, praise God. If you are in good health, praise God. If things are going well with your relationships, praise God. Pray to God in the good times and the bad.

Then, James adds another reason to pray, ¹⁴ **Is anyone among you sick? He should call for the elders of the church, and they are to pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord.** If a person is severely ill, James says you should call the leaders of the church and they are to come and pray over this person. He says they should also anoint them with oil. This was an ancient Jewish practice of consecrating someone, setting them apart for God's healing. It wasn't that the oil had some magical powers, but that the oil would remind the person that they were being prayed for in this special way.

James says when you do this something will happen. He says, ¹⁵ **The prayer of faith will save the sick person, and the Lord will raise him up; if he has committed sins, he will be forgiven.** It seems as if James is promising us that if we go through all these steps, God will always miraculously heal the person who is sick.

The problem is that is not always our experience. We can all think of times that we prayed hard for a sick person, and they didn't get well. In fact, I have been part of churches that did all of these steps. In one of my congregations, we had a woman who was sick. After the normal worship service, the leaders of the congregation and the rest of the congregation, got around this woman. We were all believers who offered up a prayer of faith. We anointed her with oil, and we prayed passionately for her healing.

She went into surgery to repair a brain aneurysm. She made it successfully out of surgery. And we all believed that she was healed. But then about a week later, she ended up dying in her sleep.

Well, what did we do wrong? Did we miss a step in James prayer protocol?

Let's look at the verse again. ¹⁵ **The prayer of faith will save the sick person, and the Lord will raise him up; if he has committed sins, he will be forgiven.** James doesn't say that the person will be physically healed. He says the person will be "saved" and "raised up". Then he says that this person will be forgiven.

When you look at this verse more closely, it seems like James is not as concerned about the immediate healing that God might perform. Instead, James is concerned about the ultimate healing of the individual. He wants the sick person to be saved from sin and resurrected on the Last Day.

And I have found this to be quite true. Very often when a person gets sick, they are not only concerned about themselves physically, but also spiritually. Severe sickness has a way of making us face our mortality. We come to see, that although not all sickness is a consequence of a specific sin, all sickness is the result of living in a sinful world.

I don't know how many of you have heard of Matthew Perry's new Memoir *Friends, Lovers, and the Big Terrible Thing: A Memoir*. Matthew Perry was that actor from the sitcom *Friends*. Well, Matthew Perry has had his share of sickness. 14 trips to rehab, 60 some detoxes and 15 stomach surgeries. He talks about when he hit rock bottom again. He thought he was dying and he called out, "God, please help me. Show me that you are here. God, please help me." And in that moment he saw some kind of light, that he says, filled his whole room. And he had this feeling that God was there and that God loved him and accepted him.

He says, **Decades of struggling with God, and wrestling with life, and sadness, all was being washed away, like a river of pain gone into oblivion...I had been in the presence of God. I was certain of it. And this time I had prayed for the right thing: help...I stayed sober for two years based solely on that moment. God had shown me a sliver of what life could be. He had saved me that day, and for all days, no matter what. He had turned me into a seeker, not only of sobriety, and truth, but also of him...**

And so, when a person gets sick, we ought to pray that God heals them from their disease, but even if God does heal a person of their disease that person will still face death again. Even Lazarus, whom Jesus raised from the dead, died again. And so even if God were to heal the person we are praying for, we would want God to do a much deeper healing in their hearts. We would want God to save them from their sins and raise them up on the Last Day. That is what James is most concerned about. And that's what God is most concerned about for us and the people we love. All the ailments that we might be experiencing is sending us a message of our mortality. We are all sick at some level. And we are all aging and dying. It's my prayer that God would use these realities to heal and save our hearts. That right now you would see that you need a Savior from sin. And in Jesus you have that Savior. He loves you and forgives you. And he promises to raise you up on the Last Day.

That's why James goes on to say, ¹⁶ **Therefore, confess your sins to one another and pray for one another, so that you may be healed.** James says, "Therefore", to sum up all that I'm talking about, when you face sickness, face your mortality and need for grace, then confess your sins to one another and pray for one another so that you could be healed. Not just physically, but more importantly, healed eternally.

Then James explains: **The prayer of a righteous person is very powerful in its effect.** In other words, your prayers could powerfully change someone's life. Yes, maybe God will heal them immediately, but more importantly, God could use your prayer to heal them eternally.

And this helps us answer our opening question: **Why pray?**

The prayer of a righteous person is powerful. That prayer could change someone's eternal life. It could heal them in the most fundamental way possible through the resurrection of the dead. You could pray and that person might come to faith in Jesus and when Jesus returns to resurrect the dead, that person could be resurrected because of your prayer.

But maybe you are thinking, but I'm not a "righteous person". Why would God listen to my prayers? Well, if you feel like you are not worthy enough for God to listen to your prayers, James goes on to say:

¹⁷ Elijah was a human being as we are, and he prayed earnestly that it would not rain, and for three years and six months it did not rain on the land. ¹⁸ Then he prayed again, and the sky gave rain and the land produced its fruit.

James' Jewish audience would have been steeped in Old Testament stories. And one of the greatest prophets in the Old Testament was Elijah. He did incredible miracles, fought against the prophets of Baal, healed the sick, fed the hungry.

But James reminds his readers, Elijah was actually a man just like us. He was a human. He suffered times of sadness and depression. He had weaknesses and sins. Elijah needed a Savior just like we all do. And yet, when he prayed earnestly for it not to rain, God listened to that prayer. And when he prayed that it would rain, God listened to that prayer. In other words, there was nothing special about Elijah. He was no more righteous than any one of us. But he prayed to God. And God listened.

And so James wants us to pray, especially for the lost. He wants us to use those times when people are sick and suffering to pray that God would heal them and bring them back to a relationship with God.

And that's why James concludes this letter with these words: **¹⁹ My brothers and sisters, if any among you strays from the truth, and someone turns him back, ²⁰ let that person know that whoever turns a sinner from the error of his way will save his soul from death and cover a multitude of sins.** If we pray for someone who is sick and caught in sin, God might use that prayer to save their soul from death, and cover over a multitude of their sins. Ultimately, the greatest answer to prayer is eternal healing through Jesus Christ.

James is teaching on the importance and power of prayer for the eternal destiny of God's people. But when we learn more about James, we find that he didn't just teach this message, he lived it. Eusebius, an early Christian historian who lived in the 4th century, cites a man named Hegesippus, who lived just after the time of James. Hegesippus says this about James, **"He used to enter the temple alone and was often found kneeling and imploring forgiveness for the people, so that his knees became hard like camel's from his continual kneeling in worship of God and in prayer for his people."**

So according to very early historians, James got the reputation of having huge calluses on his knees because he was always praying for the people, asking God to forgive them. And it seems like God answered his prayer. Because Hegesippus records how many Jewish leaders from different Jewish sects became followers of Jesus. And so the Pharisees and the Scribes were concerned that because of James' prayers the whole populace was going to believe that Jesus was the Christ. And so that had James martyred because his prayers were changing so many of the Jews and leading them to faith.

James' daily kneeling in prayer for the people had a huge impact. And the same could happen among us today. If we want to put our faith to work, if we want to put our faith to action, James would tell us:

Give prayer the priority it deserves. James would want us to pray continually, in all situations. In times of struggle, we pray. In times of blessing, we pray. When someone is sick, we pray for their immediate healing, but more important for their everlasting and eternal healing.

How could we do this practically? Maybe it is time we set a time and place and maybe even a posture and atmosphere for prayer. If James was known for going to the temple so often and kneeling in prayer that his knees became like camels, maybe we want to have a place to pray. And maybe even we want to kneel. If the early Christians would anoint someone with oil, maybe we want to find a way to set apart our time in prayer. Maybe light a candle or dim the lights.

Instead of just mouthing a prayer before a meal, maybe we stop and really take time to meditate on all the ways God orchestrated all the seasons, crops, people, and places to bring us a meal.

None of these things make prayer more powerful. But maybe if we take some time and have a specific place and have a habit or ritual, we will prioritize prayer and see how powerful it can really be.

Prayer might continue to be challenging for us all. We might not see the immediate results we are hoping for. We want God to heal us and the people we love from all their ailments immediately. But maybe we need to have a bigger prayer than just immediate results. But maybe it is time that we don't just pray for immediate results and instantaneous healing. Maybe it's time we add to our prayers the desire for eternal and everlasting health for us and all those that we love. Maybe we start praying, not just for immediate happiness, but a real encounter with the God of love and forgiveness, Jesus Christ. Therefore, confess your sins to one another and pray for one another, so that you may be healed.