

Sam Storms
Bridgeway Church
James # 18
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Suffering, Healing, and the Prayer of Faith
James 5:13-18

So, let's be honest with each other this morning about *why we don't pray* as much as we know we should. When I talk with Christians of all ages and both genders, I hear comments like these:

"Come on, Sam, we live in a digital world where religious rituals from medieval times, like prayer, simply don't fit in. Enlightened and educated people might grudgingly concede that there is a supernatural world, but it plays no meaningful or practical role in daily living. Children pray, and it's cute. But to think that God actually involves himself in our lives in response to our requests is far-fetched, to say the least. Honestly, I would pray if I thought it might do some good. But nowadays it's a lot easier to just do it yourself without depending on God and whether he's in the mood to help."

I assume most of you read Huckleberry Finn when you were younger. Today, it is on the politically incorrect list of banned books in many sectors of our society. But Huck Finn's experience with prayer rings all too true among Christians in the local church. Listen to him:

"Miss Watson she took me in the closet and prayed, but nothing come of it. She told me to pray every day, and whatever I asked for I would get it. But it warn't so. I tried it. Once I got a fish-line, but no hooks. It warn't any good to me without hooks. I tried for the hooks three or four times, but somehow I couldn't make it work. By and by, one day, I asked Miss Watson to try for me, but she said I was a fool. She never told me why, and I couldn't make it out no way. I set down one time back in the woods, and had a long think about it. I says to myself, if a body can get anything they pray for, why don't Deacon Winn get back the money he lost on pork? Why can't the widow get back her silver snuff-box that was stole? Why can't Miss Watson fat up? No, says I to myself, there ain't nothing in it."

"There ain't nothing in it." Sadly, that sums up how many Christians feel about prayer, although they are meticulously careful never to let another Christian know that's how they think. There are all sorts of reasons why Christians don't pray any more than they do: ignorance of what Scripture says about it, a life that is already too busy and exhausting to have any room or time left for prayer, or a failure to understand the character of God himself. But beneath and behind them all is the lingering bogeyman of why we don't pray: "There ain't nothing in it." Or to put it in simpler terms: "It doesn't work. I tried praying, but heaven was silent. If God really cared about me and my problems, I would have heard or seen something from him by now. No, Huck was right: ***There ain't nothing in it.***"

I suspect that many of you agree with Huck Finn. I don't. And that isn't because I have the job of preaching to you about prayer. It's because I've seen God do amazing and miraculous things in response to prayer. It's because I really do believe that what he says in his Word about prayer is true. You don't have to go any further than the book of James to get a sense for the importance and urgency and power of prayer. We saw it in the opening chapter:

"If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask God, who gives generously to all without reproach, and it will be given him" (James 1:5).

"You do not have, because you do not ask. You ask and do not receive, because you ask wrongly, to spend it on your passions" (James 4:2b-3).

And then we have this remarkable closing paragraph to the letter, where James is consumed with the power of prayer:

"Is anyone among you suffering? Let him pray" (James 5:13a).

Let the elders "pray" over the sick (James 5:14a).

"And the prayer of faith will save the one who is sick" (James 5:15a).

"Therefore, confess your sins to one another, and pray for one another" (James 5:16a).

"The prayer of a righteous person has great power as it is working" (James 5:16b).

"Elijah . . . prayed fervently that it might not rain, and for three years and six months it did not rain on the earth" (James 5:17).

"Then he prayed again, and heaven gave rain, and the earth bore its fruit" (James 5:18).

James couldn't be more precise or passionate about the power of prayer. Or perhaps we should say, the power of God, for it is not in our praying but in the one to whom we pray that power is found. So, if you really want to embrace Huck Finn's conclusion that prayer is useless because "there ain't nothing in it," you must take the next step and declare, ***"there ain't nothing in it, because there ain't no one there."*** But if there is someone there, if God exists and is who he claims to be, then nothing makes more sense than prayer, even when we don't always get what we want.

I'm in no rush to finish our series in James. We are going to spend several weeks exploring this final paragraph and focusing almost exclusively on the subject of prayer, specifically, prayer for physical healing. So let's get started.

Private, Personal Prayer (v. 13)

James first describes in v. 13 private, personal prayer. This is your and my responsibility to be in constant and continual prayer for our own needs, whether or not anyone else ever knows of them or joins to intercede on our behalf. He asks, "Is anyone among you *suffering*?" The word translated "suffering" (NIV, "trouble") refers to any kind of harm that burdens you. He does not specify either the cause or character of the suffering. This is a general reference to any form of

oppression, persecution, emotional turmoil, depression, marital strife, spiritual anguish, financial strain, or physical affliction. Any discomfort of soul, spirit, or body is in view. When you suffer for whatever reason, **pray!**

This kind of praying can take place anywhere at any time. You can pray for relief from your troubles and difficulties while you're driving to work or walking in the neighborhood or playing golf or singing in a church service such as this. This sort of prayer is open-ended and always appropriate.

Of course, if you happen to be in a season of life when there are innumerable reasons to be "cheerful" you should pepper your prayers with praise. And I see no reason why all of us can't do both simultaneously. Even when you are stressed and hurting, for whatever reason, due to whatever cause, you also have much in which you can rejoice and for which you can be thankful. So pray and praise at the same time!

The Physically Suffering and the Prayer of the Elders (vv. 14-15)

This is an extremely rich and densely packed passage and I'm in no hurry to rush through it. So what I propose to do today is to introduce you to several elements that call for our attention. I hope in the next Sunday or two to slow down and go deeper into a couple of the main ideas found here.

(1) "Is anyone among you sick?" (v. 14a). The fact that James singles out the "sick" here in v. 14 assumes that he has something in mind different from the "suffering" he just mentioned in v. 13. This person is **extremely ill, most likely bed-ridden**. We see this in three things. **First**, he/she must "call for the elders" to come to him/her. This person is evidently unable to go to the elders himself.

Before I go any further I want to make sure you understand something. This doesn't mean that this passage doesn't apply to you if you are physically able to come to us, the Elders of Bridgeway. Many of you have come and asked us to pray for you, and we are always happy to do so. It is never inappropriate for you to ask for us to pray that you be healed, regardless of how serious your illness may be.

That being said, the fact that James tells this person to "**call**" for the elders does suggest that he/she is in extremely bad shape. There is a **second** reason we are right in thinking so. It's found in the phrase, "let them pray over him" (v. 14b). This is unusual. We don't typically read in the NT about praying "over" someone. The preposition translated "over" is a separate word in the original text. It isn't included in the verb to pray. In fact, this is the only place in the entire NT where the preposition "over" is used in conjunction with praying for someone. You can pray "for" someone and not necessarily pray "over" them. The word "over" suggests that this person is bed-ridden, lying on their back, unable to initiate any movement toward other people or the elders of the church.

The **third** reason I think James is talking about an extraordinarily serious affliction is because of what he says in v. 15, namely, that ***“the Lord will raise him up.”*** This suggests that the person was laid low, as it were, or is stretched out on a bed. If they are healed it involves raising them up from where they were lying prostrate.

One more word of qualification. There is *no* reason to think that Elders are *not responsible* to pray for people *unless* they are called upon to do so. James is simply addressing the most serious and extreme case. The Elders of Bridgeway meet on the first Sunday morning of every month to pray for the sick and others who are struggling. We also pray for you on the third Monday night of every month at our regular Elders’ meeting. And we communicate often with each other via email and by phone to keep everyone up to date on specific cases where prayer is needed most. ***Don’t ever fail to ask for prayer from us.*** We are here every Sunday before, during, and after every service to pray for you.

(2) The nature of the sickness in view here is physical or bodily. You might think that goes without saying, but such is not the case. You won’t find many defending the view that this is “sickness” of a non-physical nature. Most who argue for it are cessationists who are uncomfortable with the reality of healing and how this applies to the church in our day.

One author suggests that James has in view "emotional distress and spiritual exhaustion experienced by God's people in their deep struggle with temptation and their relentless battle with besetting sin" (Daniel R. Hayden). It is true that the word "sick" in v. 14 (*astheneo*) can mean "weak" in faith or spiritually fatigued (cf. Rom. 14:1-2; 1 Cor. 8:11-12; 2 Cor. 13:3), as is also the case with the other Greek word translated "sick" in v. 15 (*kamno*; cf. Heb. 12:3). It is also true that the Greek words in vv. 15-16 translated "restore" (*sozo*), "raise up" (*egeiro*), and "heal" (*iaomai*) may legitimately refer to the restoration or renewal of spiritual and emotional vitality. However, when *astheneo* means spiritual weakness usually the context or a qualifier such as "weak ***in faith***" (Rom. 14:2) or "weak ***in conscience***" (1 Cor. 8:7) makes that clear. Moreover, in the material most relevant to James (the four Gospels), *astheneo* almost always refers to physical illness. The same is true for *kamno*. And *iaomai*, when not used in an OT quotation, always refers to physical healing. As far as *sozo* and *egeiro* are concerned, both are appropriate descriptions of physical healing (*sozo* in Mt. 9:21-22; Mk. 5:34; 6:56; 10:52; Lk. 7:50; 17:19; and *egeiro* in Mk. 1:31; 2:9-12; Acts 3:7).

That being said, James would not want you to think that if your affliction is emotional or spiritual in nature that you should not ask for others to pray for you. We already saw in v. 13 that regardless of the nature or cause of one’s affliction, prayer is appropriate.

(3) Why are the “Elders” singled out? Most likely it is because they are representatives of the entire church. When a sheep is wounded or in danger it most naturally seeks out the aid of its shepherd, which is how Elders are described in 1 Peter 5:1-2. It is also assumed that the Elders of a church are men of maturity, spiritual insight, prayerfulness, compassion, etc. As such they

would be likely candidates (but not the only ones, of course) to receive from God the necessary gifting to minister healing to the sick.

There is another qualification to put on this statement. ***Don't*** ever conclude from this passage that ***only Elders*** are to pray for the sick. Don't ever think that other believers, both male and female, of all ages can't or shouldn't pray for one another. Notice down in v. 16 that James exhorts all believers to "pray for one another." Some of the most powerful and effective intercessors and prayer warriors that I have known were never Elders or Pastors in a local church.

So remember this: if an Elder or the board as a whole isn't available, you aren't falling short or missing a thing if you ask other Christians to pray that you might be healed. That is why we have trained prayer ministers who are here after every service. All of us, regardless of whether or not we hold office or are or are not on staff at this church are responsible to pray for others.

(4) Why are the Elders called on to pray for the sick rather than the "Healers" or those with the spiritual gift of healing? People we refer to as cessationists, who don't believe that miraculous gifts like healing and prophecy still exist today, make much of this. Their argument goes something like this:

"The fact that James calls for the *Elders* to pray rather than the *Healers* or those with the spiritual gift of healing proves that this particular supernatural power was already on its way out from the life of the church. It proves that God only intended for divine healers to operate in the life of the *early* church. Or if healing does continue today, it happens only rarely and never through a person with the spiritual gift of healing."

My response to that is something I've said many times before. But if you are new to Bridgeway you need to hear it for the first time. ***There is no such thing as "the gift of healing." There never has been.***

I say this both because of the way Paul describes this spiritual phenomenon and the misconceptions surrounding it. The significant thing about 1 Corinthians 12:9,28 is that both the word "gift" and the word "healing" are plural and lack the definite article, hence the translation: ***"gifts of healings"*** (unfortunately the ESV renders it in both instances as "gifts of healing"). Evidently Paul did not envision that a person would be endowed with one healing gift operative at all times for all diseases. His language suggests either many different gifts or powers of healing, each appropriate to and effective for its related illness, or each occurrence of healing constituting a distinct or separate gift in its own right. I like the way John Piper explains the significance of this double plural, "gifts of healings." He says that Paul most likely means that

"at different times for different sicknesses God gives to different people different 'gifts of healings.' In other words, you might find yourself drawn to pray for one person with

remarkable, expectant faith and see that person healed, but then pray for others and not experience that same gift.”

I’ve had the opportunity on numerous occasions to meet people who have what appears to be a healing anointing for one particular affliction. Some are able to pray more effectively for those with back problems while others see more success when praying for migraine headaches. This may be what Paul had in mind when he spoke of “gifts” of “healings”.

One of the principal obstacles to a proper understanding of healing is *the erroneous assumption that if anyone could ever heal, they could always heal*. But in view of the lingering illness of Epaphroditus (Phil. 2:25-30), Timothy (1 Timothy 5:23), Trophimus (2 Tim. 4:20), and perhaps Paul himself (2 Cor. 12:7-10; Gal. 4:13), it is better to view this gift as subject to the will of God, not the will of people. Therefore, a person may be gifted to heal many people, but not all. Another may be gifted to heal only one person at one particular time of one particular disease.

When asked to pray for the sick, people are often heard to respond: “I can’t. I don’t have the gift of healing.” But if my reading of Paul and James is correct, there is no such thing as *the* gift of healing, if by that one means the God-given ability to heal everyone of every disease on every occasion. Rather, the Spirit sovereignly distributes “a” *charisma* or “gift” of healing for a particular occasion, even though previous prayers for physical restoration under similar circumstances may not have been answered, and even though subsequent prayers for the same affliction may not be answered. In sum: *“gifts of healings” are occasional and subject to the sovereign purposes of God.*

Few doubt that Paul had a “gift” for healing. But his prayers for Epaphroditus weren’t answered, at least not at first (see Phil. 2:25-30). Clearly, Paul could not heal at will. Aside from Jesus, no one else could either! And there is doubt if even Jesus could (read John 5:19; Mark 6:5-6). Some would conclude from Paul’s failure to heal his friend that “the gift of healing” was “dying out” at this juncture in the life of the church (in spite of the fact that late in his ministry, in Acts 28:9, Paul apparently healed everyone on the island of Malta who came to him). It seems better to conclude that healing, whenever and wherever it occurred, was subject, not to the will of man, but to the will of God. No one, not even Paul, could always heal all diseases. If Paul was distressed that Epaphroditus was ill, almost unto death, and that initially his prayers for him were ineffective, I doubt seriously if the apostle would have drawn the same conclusions that modern cessationists do. Paul understood the occasional nature of gifts of healings.

The fact that healing is an expression of divine *“mercy”* (Phil. 2:27) means that it should never be viewed as a “right”. Healing is not the payment of a debt. God does not *owe* us healing. We don’t deserve healing. I believe we should have faith for healing. But there is a vast difference

between faith in divine mercy, on the one hand, and presumption based on an alleged right, on the other.

The word “mercy” is the same one used in the gospels to describe why Jesus healed people when he was on the earth. God’s motive for healing hasn’t changed! ***The primary reason God healed through Jesus prior to Pentecost and why he continues to heal after Pentecost is because he is a merciful, compassionate God.*** God is no less merciful or compassionate when it comes to the physical condition of his people after Pentecost than he was before Pentecost.

(5) The Elders are described as “anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord” (v. 14c). Aside from Mark 6:13, this is the only passage in the NT that recommends the use of oil for the sick. Why “oil”?

Some believe he recommended it as a ***medicinal aid*** (see Luke 10:34). Oil was frequently used in the ancient world for medicinal purposes. This may account for James’ use of the verb *aleipho* (“to anoint”) which emphasizes the actual physical action of pouring. Another word that means “to anoint” (*chrío*) is usually employed when the purpose of the anointing is religious or symbolic. However, the distinction between these two verbs should not be pressed, for their meanings often overlap. But if the oil was strictly medicinal, why is it *alone* mentioned as a helpful remedy for the sick? Oil was certainly beneficial, but no one claims it was appropriate for *every* illness. Also, if the purpose of oil was strictly medicinal, why was it necessary for the *Elders* to do the anointing? Would not others, or perhaps the suffering individual himself, have already done this to alleviate his suffering?

More likely the oil has ***religious/spiritual*** significance in this passage. If so, it would probably represent the Holy Spirit and his ministry of consecration whereby an individual or some object is set aside to God’s service (cf. 1 Sam. 16:13; Isa. 61:1; Acts 4:27). In other words, the anointing here is a physical action with symbolic significance. We are probably to understand this as the consecrating or setting aside of this person for God’s special attention and a way of directing everyone’s faith to the power of the Holy Spirit.

(6) What is “the prayer of faith” (v. 15)? “The prayer of faith” isn’t one that we pray whenever *we* want to. It is a unique prayer, divinely energized only on those occasions when it is God’s sovereign purpose to impart a gift for healing. James was careful to place the definite article (“the”) before both “prayer” and “faith” (hence, “*the* prayer of *the* faith”).

One prays *this* prayer only when prompted by the Spirit-wrought conviction that God ***intends*** to heal the one for whom prayer is being offered. This is more than merely believing that God is

able to heal; this appears to be faith that he, in this particular case, is not only willing to heal, but plans to heal **right now**. Only when God wills does God sovereignly bestow the faith necessary for healing. When God chooses to heal, he produces in the heart(s) of those praying the faith or confidence that such is precisely his intent. The particular kind of faith to which James refers, in response to which God heals, is not the kind that we may exercise at our will. It is the kind of faith that we exercise only when God wills.

It may well be that the "faith" James describes is the **"gift of faith"** mentioned in 1 Corinthians 12. The "gift of faith" is a special faith that "enables a believer to trust God to bring about certain things for which he or she cannot claim some divine promise recorded in Scripture, or some state of affairs grounded in the very structure of the gospel" (D. A. Carson, *Showing the Spirit*, 39). In other words, it is the "God-given ability, without fakery or platitudinous exhortations, to believe what you do not really believe, to trust God for a certain blessing *not* promised in Scripture" (ibid.). Thus the "gift of faith" is that **mysterious surge of confidence** that rises within a person in a particular situation of need or challenge and that gives **an extraordinary certainty and assurance that God is about to act through a word or action**.

Consider these other texts that I believe are in the same way describing how the spiritual gift of faith operates:

"And Jesus answered saying to them, 'Have faith in God. Truly I say to you, whoever says to this mountain, "Be taken up and cast into the sea," and does not doubt in his heart, but believes that what he says is going to happen, it shall be granted him. Therefore I say to you, all things for which you pray and ask, believe that you have received them, and they shall be granted you" (Mark 11:22-24; cf. Mt. 17:20-21; 21:21-22).

"And if I have the gift of prophecy, and know all mysteries and all knowledge; and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing" (1 Cor. 13:2).

The spiritual gift of faith, like the other *charismata*, is not given to every member of the body of Christ. However, it would appear that **any member** of the body of Christ is a potential candidate for the experience of this manifestation of the Spirit. The gift of faith should probably be regarded, more so than most other gifts of the Spirit, as occasional or spontaneous, rather than permanent or residential.

When I was pastoring in Ardmore, quite a few years ago, a young couple came to me before the service and asked that the Elders of our church anoint their infant son and pray for his healing.

After the service we gathered and I anointed him with oil. At two weeks of age he had a serious liver disorder that would require either immediate surgery or, more likely, a transplant. As we prayed, something very unusual happened. As we laid hands on this young child and prayed, ***I found myself suddenly filled with an overwhelming and inescapable confidence that he would be healed.*** It was totally unexpected. Not wanting to be presumptuous, I tried to doubt, but couldn't. I prayed confidently, filled with a faith unshakeable and undeniable. I said to myself, "Lord, you really are going to heal him."

I then did something that I had never done before nor have I done since, although I've prayed for hundreds if not several thousand people. I was absolutely ***certain*** God had healed him, and I told them so. They were shocked by my confidence. The next morning the doctors had no explanation for a liver that was functioning perfectly. He was totally healed and is a healthy young man today.

I asked his mother to describe what happened in more detail. She sent me the following letter in 2011. I've taken the liberty to change the names, but everything else is left precisely the way she wrote.

"When Ricky was born, we assumed he would have physiological jaundice. All but our firstborn had it, from what we assumed was a blood incompatibility between my husband's AB positive and my A- DU positive blood type. Ricky did have jaundice, and within 24 hours like we predicted. The doctors can do two types of blood work for jaundice: indirect bilirubin and direct bilirubin. I am not sure which one is the number we hear so often with jaundice. Once that particular number gets to a certain point, lights are used. The other number indicates how the liver is working to get rid of the bili. If that number is low, meaning that the liver is doing its job, then the higher number will soon go down and everything will be fine - sometimes without lights at all. Not all doctors even do the second number. Well, the doctors were doing the number on Ricky. He had the same blood type as me and should not have had any physiological jaundice at all. What I didn't know was that the number was slowly creeping up, meaning that Ricky's liver was not working!

We were in Norman, Oklahoma, and I got a call from the doctor's office. Ricky was just a few days shy of two weeks. He had been such a great baby! I would literally have to wake him up to feed him (actually - not that great of a thing, I found out). His count had reached a critical level and the office had already set up an appointment with a pediatric gastroenterologist for Monday. I asked the doctor what the concern was and his reply was that Ricky either had a liver that was not going to work and he would need a transplant, or he had a blockage that could be fixed through surgery. For the first time I looked at Ricky with objective eyes. He was a bluish color and he had not gained any weight since he was born. He was very lethargic (remember -- the

good baby - never cried!) and only ate when I made him eat! It hit me like a ton of bricks. I had a really sick baby and I hadn't even known!

We called you and asked if the elders would pray over Ricky. We went to church the next morning, and after church we went to your office with the elders. Ricky was born at 11:58 A.M. two weeks earlier -- so he was probably as near to exactly two weeks old when you did that. You told us as we left that Ricky would be just fine. I know you must have had a special word from God. **WHAT DID HAPPEN TO YOU FOR YOU TO BELIEVE THAT?** The next morning I got Ricky up and he was WHITE! He had been that awful blue color. He even had a fat roll under his chin! He looked great! I never had any special feeling come over me, but I knew I was looking at a baby that was very healthy! We took him in and the specialist did various blood tests on him. He had his chart and said that Ricky looked great to him - but his chart indicated that he was actually very sick. The doctor had records for over a week on Ricky's blood work. He also told us that he would call us the next day and let us know what the results were and what we needed to do. He called that evening! He was very excited that the news was good. He said that Ricky appeared to be totally normal at this point. I asked him how that could happen and he said that he had no answers for me because Ricky had been very sick. I told him that we had the entire state of Oklahoma praying for him and at that point he revealed that he was a Christian! He told us that prayer was the only way that this happened and now he understood why Ricky was okay. It was a miracle! In fact, Ricky weighed more that day that the day he was born -- so he had gained a lot overnight. He has never had any health issues since. Prayer is a mighty, wonderful thing!"

There is so much more for us in this passage, such as: what does the word "save" mean in v. 15 and what is the relationship between sin and sickness and why doesn't God always heal the sick and how do Elijah and his experience factor in to what we do when we pray today? But we'll stop here and pray!