

Prayer of Faith

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[0 : 00] Great. Okay. So we're in James chapter five versus 13 to 18. There's only two other verses in this chapter, but I think that those last two verses form kind of a conclusion to the book and this section goes together. So I'm going to focus on verses 13 to 18 and this will finish out our James series. So without further ado, let me read starting in verse 13. Is anyone among you suffering? Let him pray. Is anyone cheerful? Let him sing praise.

Is anyone among you sick? Well, 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. 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. 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 you prayed again and heaven gave rain and the earth bore its fruit. This is the word of the Lord. So I want to start by just acknowledging that when we come to a difficult passage or a passage with confusing bits like this one has, it's a mistake to start by trying to answer all of our biggest, hardest questions or trying to get right at the confusing bits.

We need to start by getting our head around the main idea, around the context, around the big picture of what the author is saying. And then we bring our questions to that. So we start with the big picture and with what's clear and we work our way into what's less clear. Now, we're not going to have time to get to the really fuzzy stuff, to the difficult stuff in this. So I just want to warn you now, I'm going to leave you with a lot of questions. And that's okay, because you all have Bibles and the Holy Spirit and each other and we can continue to kind of interrogate this chapter in the weeks to come in our personal studies and in our city groups. You can always ask me or Derek or Thomas questions or any of your elders or anyone that you respect. So that's my big caveat. So with that being said, I'm just trying to get at the main idea of what James was saying in this section. So to do that, I have, I'm breaking my three point sermon rule and there's six. So there's two principles, two promises and two applications. So two principles, two promises, two applications. Let's go to principle number one. The first principle is this God works his power through the prayers of ordinary Christians in extraordinary situations. Now this principle comes from the section on Elijah at the end of our passage versus 16 B, the second half of through 18.

[3 : 20] So that's on your screen now. And in this section, the reason I'm starting here is it's actually the logical grounds for the section that comes before it. Now, so it doesn't come, you know, in order, it doesn't come first, but logically it comes first. He's arguing from this illustration. So it's when, you know, when a sermon starts with a great illustration, which might never do, but when they start with a good illustration and kind of say, now you can see how my point makes sense. That's what he's doing. The grounds is this section and what comes after before it is actually its inference. So the prayer of a righteous person has great power as it is working. Elijah was a man with a nature like ours. And he prayed fervently that it might not rain, etc. Now reading the ending of James, this whole section, this whole last bit of chapter five, it's actually quite easy to think, you know, that kind of powerful prayer, the rain stopping prayer, the sick bed healing kind of prayer.

That the prayer that ushers the miraculous into our experience, that's only for special people. And James says that's not the case. Elijah was a man with a nature just like ours.

He was ordinary. So it's the prayers of ordinary people like us that the Lord wants to use. That he wants to show his power through. And even though earlier James told us to call for the elders of the church when we're really sick, it's not that the elders are super Christians who have more powerful prayers or kind of a special direct line to God. And he doesn't say when you're sick, summon the church healer, right, because that's not a position that exists in the New Testament. And it's not a

position that really exists now. Though some are convinced that it does. It doesn't seem that the Lord gives to his church special people with kind of this constant power to heal. He uses ordinary people like us. And he does give us special gifts sometimes. But it's through the ordinary. And that's the point I want to draw. So it's ordinary people. But verse 16 does add a caveat. The prayer of a righteous person has great power as it is working. So we have to infer that Elijah is both ordinary, right? He has a nature like ours, and he's righteous. Therefore, his prayer, God used him in his prayers.

So we should ask, when James says a righteous person, what does he mean? Well, let's look at James chapter two briefly, verses 21 to 24. It's on your screen to help us understand that point. Starting in verse 21, was not Abraham our father justified by works when he offered up his son, Isaac on the altar? You see that faith was active along with his works and faith was completed by his works. And the scripture was fulfilled that says, Abraham believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness. And he was called a friend of God. You see that a person is justified by works and not by faith alone. Now we've covered this before, but the question is, who is a righteous person? And the answer is someone who believes God and lives like it. In other words, someone who has both a saving faith in Jesus and whose faith is worked out into their life. And that's what a does. Faith works, a living faith works. And James says that person is justified. Now here's why that matters in our text, because the prayer of someone who believes God and lives like it is powerful. The prayer of a sinner saved by grace is powerful. Now why is the prayer of that person powerful? Because when Jesus justified us on the cross, taking on him our sins and giving to us his righteousness, he bought with his blood, the sacred privilege of standing before God, not as sinners begging for mercy, but as children asking their Heavenly Father to dispense his good gifts to us. That's what it means to pray as a Christian. That's why we pray in Jesus's name. So God works his power through the prayers of ordinary Christians in extraordinary situations. Elijah was in an extraordinary situation. He needed the Lord to shut up the heavens and keep rain from falling for three and a half years. And James is saying we have that same kind of access to the throne of God to ask him to do the extraordinary. And that privilege comes by living faith in Jesus. That's how we get there, not by being special people, but by being ordinary people who belong to these special person. God works his power through the prayers of ordinary Christians in extraordinary situations. That's principle one. Principle number two, I'm sorry if I'm flying through this. It's exciting. Principle two, God invites us to pray in all our ordinary situations.

[9 : 02] Now, I told you that the section we just looked at about Elijah was the grounds for what precedes it. So verses 13 and following are the outworking or the inference from those grounds, right?

So with that in mind, let's read verses 13 to 14. So this is the inference now. Is anyone among you suffering? Let him pray. Is anyone cheerful? Let him sing. Sing praise. 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. So suffering, is anyone suffering? Suffering is a very generic word. The Greek word behind this is very generic. It's not specific to persecution. It's not specific to, you know, deadly sickness or to abuse. It's just suffering.

Everything that might ever trouble you fits into that word suffering. Similarly, the word cheerful means just what it sounds like. It's when your heart is lifted up when you feel good. When you catch your first bluegill in the United States, you're cheerful, right?

And in those cases, you're to sing praise to the Lord when you feel good. In other words, between suffering and cheerful, James is actually covering the whole gamut of human experience and emotion. Is there anything troubling you? Pray for yourself. Are you feeling good?

Singing praise and singing praise is just prayer set to a tune. Are you really sick? Call the elders. It's only natural that a sick sheep would desire its shepherds to be nearby to minister care to them.

Now, by the way, as just kind of a sidebar, I've heard some people say that it's very selfish to pray for yourself. And it can sound very high. I only pray for other people. I don't pray for myself because I don't want to be presumptuous with the Lord. They say that praying for yourself seems proud or deceitful.

[11 : 20] I said deceitful. I'm not conceited. But crying out to God and saying, Lord, I'm hurting. I'm helpless. This is awful. I can't bear this. This is hard. Will you please help me?

That's not pride. That's humility. The Lord loves those prayers. When you're suffering, he wants you to talk to him. He wants you to go to him. John Calvin summed up this whole section well. He said that James means that there is no time in which God does not invite us to himself. I love that language. When James says, let him pray, God, the Holy Spirit is saying through him, I want you to pray. You're invited. That's wonderful. So here are our two principles that we've covered. God works his power through the prayers of ordinary Christians and extraordinary situations. And God invites us to pray in all our ordinary situations. Do you see how that second principle flows out of the first? If God loves to work through the prayers of ordinary people like us in the most extreme of circumstances, how much more should we expect him to work in all of those ordinary circumstances of life, too?

Now, James is leading us to two big application points coming up. And it's like he's trying to light a fire. He wants that fire to spring up in the church with intensity and with heat.

And those two principles are the tinder, just the kindling that he's laid for the fire. And now he's going to lay two promises as the fire would before he sets it alight. So let's talk about the two promises. Promise number one, God works through the prayer of faith. This is from verse 15, the first half. And the prayer of faith will save the one who is sick and the Lord will raise him up. Now, if you've read this passage thoughtfully, briefly, you might have asked yourself, you know, okay, but what about when we pray for healing and we really think God wants to heal this person and he just doesn't do it? What then? Let me tell you two brief stories. Just to connect this to human, modern human experience.

So I don't know if any of you have noticed, we've been on zoom a lot close proximity to my face. Sometimes when I look at my face on zoom, I scare myself because my right eye is really big. And it kind of gets this intense stare at the camera. And it's because my left eye, there's nerve and muscle damage. And my left eye is weak. And so my eyelid doesn't open all the way. I also can't focus very well. I find in that eye and my and he called the elders of the church and insisted they pray for me, even though it wasn't normal for them.

[14:44] And they did. And the next day they took me back to the doctor. I had a surgery scheduled and the doctor said his eyes fine. He doesn't need the surgery and I can't explain it. Isn't that cool? So I love James five because I can see out of my left eye mostly. And that's great. Now on the other hand, some years back I was an elder at a church in Washington, Washington state. And there was a fairly young man who was suffering from absolute debilitating chronic pain and had been for years and years and years. And he read James five and believing the Bible and wanting to obey the Lord. He called the elders among whom I was one. And we went out and anointed him with oil and prayed over him. Nothing happened. And as far as I know, that was many years ago. And to this day, he still suffers from pain. So what's the deal? Why does it sometimes work? And sometimes it doesn't. Well, we know that the Bible isn't lying to us. So when the Holy Spirit says through James that the prayer of faith will save the one who's sick, we believe him. We also know that not all of our faith filled prayers seem to work to put it crudely. So how do we reconcile that? All right, let me lay a little groundwork first. There seems to be two kinds of faith in the New Testament.

Faith generally is just belief. It's to believe in something. But the New Testament usually is talking about saving faith, right? That the faith that every single Christian has that is it is it that comes to them by gift of God that helps them believe in Jesus, they hear the gospel and they believe it. And they're Christians. You know, it's by faith you're saved, right? Saving faith. The other kind is I don't know, there's not a word for it, a special faith or something like that. It's the same word used in different contexts. And it's by which God may choose to give as a gift to people already saved by faith, a certain measure of increased faith. For instance, briefly in 1 Corinthians 12 verse nine, Paul's speaking to Christians saved by faith Christians, but he teaches them that to some of those faith saved Christians, the Holy Spirit gives the gift of faith. So there's two different kinds of gifts of faith as it were the saving kind and then this increased measure of faith kind. And if I sound confused, it's because I don't have my head fully around this. I'm honest. I don't know that many people that I know have wrestled through this very thoroughly.

So maybe you've known people like that. I've known a few people that you say, you know, we're both Christians, but that man, that woman filled with faith, unbelievable faith in the Lord. Oh, sorry, didn't mean to do that. So there's another category of prayer in the New Testament as well. And it's the one that James seems to be referring to as the prayer of faith. Right. And Jesus taught about this in Mark chapter 11 verses 23 to 24. And I am aware that I am opening a can of worms that I

won't be able to close. But it's, it's, I believe this is what the Bible teaches. So we're going to follow it by faith.

Mark 11 23 to 24, Jesus said to his disciples, truly, I say to you, whoever says to this mountain, be taken up and thrown into the sea and does not doubt in his heart, but believes that what he says will come to pass. It will be done for him. Therefore, I tell you, whatever you ask in prayer, believe that you have received it and it will be yours. Sometimes the Lord gives us in our fervent prayers a deep certainty of what the Lord wants to do in a given situation.

Not all the time, but sometimes. And I think that's what it looks like to, as Jesus says, not doubt in your heart. In this context, it doesn't mean Jesus doesn't mean to squeeze your eyes real tightly shut and believe really, really, really hard. It's a gift of certainty from God. So someone may be praying that a mountain be thrown into the ocean or the heavens be shut up for three and a half years or that someone may be healed. And the Lord may give to that person in prayer such a clear certainty that it's exactly what God wants to do. And that prayer of faith is answered. We need to remember that in prayer as a Christian, there are two wills at work, always two wills. When we're praying for something, our will is at work as we want something. That's our will, right? We want something to happen.

[20 : 13] So we're asking God to do something. And mysteriously, Paul teaches in Romans chapter eight that as we pray, God, the Holy Spirit is his will is at work through our prayers as well. So sometimes then you may have this remarkable grace from the Lord. I think I've had it once in my life, maybe twice. You may have this remarkable grace from the Lord that as you're praying, your will is at work. And you become clearly aware of his will at work with a special kind of clarity and certainty. Ultimately, though, prayer is a commitment to the will of God. Prayer is entrusting our will, subjecting our will, submitting our will to the will of God. So that's why Jesus prayed to the Father saying, not my will be done but yours. That's why he taught us to pray, your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Christian prayer says on some level, Lord, I think it would be good and pleasing for you to do this and that. But what I really want is your glory.

And your glory is our ultimate good. So please do whatever brings about your glory. That's the heart that lies beneath Christian prayer. Told you I'd open more questions than I'd answer. So underneath this first promise lies another sweet promise. So the promise was God works through the prayer of faith. And that sweet promise that lies below it is this.

God will always work through our prayers for his glory and for our ultimate good. Isn't that sweet? Sometimes we just ask for the wrong things. And if we knew what God knew, we'd ask for what he's going to do. But we don't know all the time. Most of the time.

We don't know. So we ask as best we can saying your will be done. God will always work through our prayers for his glory and our ultimate good. That's promise number one. Promise number two, God forgives sins. James 15 B, I mislabeled it. It's the second half of verse 15. So the prayer of faith will save the one who's sick. The Lord will raise him up. And if he has committed sins, he will be forgiven. So I'm going to have to go faster here for the sake of time. But let me just speak plainly and then briefly. Praying for a repentant brother or sister in Christ for the forgiveness of their sins is the prayer of faith or is a prayer of faith because we know that the will of God is to forgive the sins of his children.

Remember what we said about prayer. There's always these two wills at work. When our will is for our brother or sister in Christ to be forgiven. That's God's will too. Both wills are in accord in that prayer. Two quick caveats. First, this is speaking to the covenant community. This is speaking to the church. So James is not saying that all the prayers for the salvation of our unbelieving friends will always be answered no matter what. That's not what he's saying. Second caveat. I did say that repentant brothers and sisters in Christ because by this point in James' letter, that has to be assumed. He's made it clear all over the letter that living faith acts on that faith. Real heroes of the word also do the word. That's the life of repentance. That's the life of moving toward God and away from our sins. And so that's why I say when we pray for the forgiveness of sins for our repentant brothers and sisters in Christ, we can be certain that God is in that prayer.

[24 : 36] God loves that prayer and God's will is for that prayer to be answered. God wants to forgive his children. So there's that truth. God forgives sins. There's that promise. We know God forgives sins. It's the most basic thing about the gospel that we know. But the sweet truth that lies below that promise is that God loves forgiving the sins of his children.

He doesn't love that we've committed them. But when we do, God is eager to forgive us. He's not a holdout. Now, if you can swallow that pill, that God's eager to forgive your sins, it will cure the disease of thinking we need to hide our sins from God. So we have two principles and two promises. Yeah, they're there on your screen. I won't read them again for you. So we've laid the tender and we've laid the firewood. Now here's the spark James will use to light the fire application number one. We should confess our sins to each other.

Most of us immediately have all sorts of reasons why we shouldn't confess our sins to each other, pop up into our minds. James says we should do it. So James five, 16, therefore confess your sins to one another and pray for one another that you may be healed. That first word is crucial.

Therefore, that word is there to say, All right, we've got our principles, we've got our promises. Now, if those are true, here's what we ought to do.

That's what the therefore is saying. Confess your sins to each other. I wonder when the last time was you did that. It's not easy. Not at first. Now this is a mutual confession of sins. This is important. The grammar makes it clear James isn't saying merely that the church should be the kind of place where people can sometimes confess sins if they feel like they should. And he's also not saying it's just good to acknowledge that we're generally sinful. And he's not saying that we should institute a Roman Catholic kind of confessional, which isn't mutual and has all sorts of other problems. And he's not saying that we won't be forgiven unless someone else prays for us. But he is saying that we should confess, mutually confess our sins with some specificity and regularity. And that if God loves to forgive sins, if God works through the prayers of ordinary people like us, then we can glorify God and minister to each other by confessing our sins to each other. First John 1.7, which you've probably heard me talk about 20 times. First John 1.7 puts it another way. He talks about walking in the light. That is stepping out into openness and honesty about who we are and what we've done. First John 1.7, but if we walk in the light as he, God is in the light, we have fellowship with one another. And the blood of Jesus, his son cleanses us from all sin. When writing about this verse, John, the verse in James, James 5.16, John Calvin said, confession is required for no other end, but that those who know our evils may be more solicitous to bring us help. Let me read that again. Confession is required for no other end, but that those who know our evils may be more solicitous to bring us help. That's the point. I think this is wise. Is there a sin in your life that you just can't seem to get traction on? Do you need help with it? Have you confessed it to someone?

[29 : 00] Have you asked them to pray with you, to pray for you? One more note about confession. If we are to be the sort of community that can confess, sends to each other. And that's what James is wanting us to do here is become that kind of community. If we're going to be a place where people can confess their sins to each other, we must be a safe place for that to happen. If someone tells you their sins, bear them to the Lord in prayer. Bear them to no one else. We need to be like a coffin for the sins of our brothers and sisters.

We hear them, they come to us, we shut over it like the grave and they die there. Never to see the light of day unless it's in prayer. So no one should think, I would confess this sin to John, but I'm afraid he's going to go tell so and so. No one should have to be worried about that. That kind of culture, that kind of safety takes time and it takes intentionality, submission to the Lord, faith, but it's possible. One caveat here. I'm not talking about crime, right? If someone's robbed a bank, please call the police. Do tell that sin, right? But I'm talking about if someone comes to you and says, brother or sister, I confess to you, I've been struggling with lust for some time, maybe many years, and I'd appreciate your prayer. We have no right then to go and say to someone else, hey, you know who struggles with lust? And also it doesn't make it better to couch it in a prayer request. You know, hey, I think we should be really praying for so and so because they're a lust problem. We need to be a place where people can confess sins. All right, confession.

Question number two, we should then pray for each other's forgiveness. James doesn't want us just to confess our sins to each other and say, ah, glad to get that off my chest. Now I feel better. That's not the point. He's saying that as the body of Christ, we have the extraordinary privilege of ministering the gospel to each other through prayer as we entrust our brothers and sisters to Jesus. So let me make this as practical as I can. What is the appropriate response if a brother or sister in Christ comes to you and confesses sin? Something like this. Thank you for trusting me with that. Let me pray for you right now. James is not saying confess our sins to each other and then give each other good advice. That's not the point. Quite frankly, a lot of people who struggle with the really deep dark sins that get their grips around you, they've heard all the advice before. And if

we're to start telling them, you know, the four things they need to do to get free from this sin, we're not going to feel like the sort of people they can come to with a serious God size problem.

You and I do not have in us the answer to our brother and sister's sins. We can't impart the power to them through good advice to wrench free of that death grip that sin has on our hearts. One person does and it's Jesus. So we entrust them in prayer to King Jesus. That's it. All right, it's quite late. I must end. Yeah. Here's our principles, our promises and our applications. If we treat the principles and promises like they're true, then we can begin to become the kind of people, the kind of community that confesses our sins to each other and prays for each other. It's not weird. It's glorious. It's God honoring. It's humble.

And that gospel doctrine of saying, I can't handle my sins and you can't handle my sins, but Jesus can. That's gospel doctrine. That gospel doctrine will work way down into our community, way down into our hearts and create a beautiful gospel culture. That's what it does. God wants us to so believe in his power, working through us in prayer, to so believe in his eagerness to forgive our sins and to heal us that we do the unthinkable by confessing our sins to each other and praying for each other. That's it. That's what I got. There's a lot of questions that come out of that. Aren't there? Like, how exactly does healing work and why are the elders called? There's so many things that we could say about this passage. I'm just skimming the surface, trying to get that kind of big thrust of what James is doing. But if this has, if what I have said has got under your skin a little bit, please pray about it because it got under my skin too. Take that to the Lord and talk with someone in the church about it. Talk to your friend, go to coffee with somebody and wrestle through these things together. God is honored in that.