

The Book of James

Lesson 12: The Prayer of Faith -- James 5:13-18

James has spent five chapters pressing faith into every corner of life, into our trials, our speech, our wealth, our relationships, our waiting. Now, near the end, he gathers it all up into one great practice: prayer. Whatever season you are in, he says, there is a way of prayer for it. Is anyone suffering? Let him pray. Is anyone cheerful? Let him sing praise. The whole range of human experience, the hard and the happy, is to be lived in conversation with God. Prayer is not a last resort for emergencies; it is the native air of the believing life.

Then James gets specific about one of the hardest seasons, sickness. 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. Notice what he describes. The sick believer does not suffer alone. He calls for the spiritual shepherds of the congregation, the elders, who come, pray over him, and anoint him in the Lord's name. This is the church being the church, gathering around the weak, lifting them to God in the name of Jesus.

And James makes a striking promise: 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. We have to hold this promise the way Scripture holds it, with both confidence and submission. God is powerful to heal, and He invites us to ask boldly. Yet all genuine prayer is offered to a wise and good Father whose will is best, and James himself has just taught us to say, if the Lord wills. This is not a formula that guarantees healing on demand, nor a ritual that works by itself. It is the church entrusting the sick to the God who heals according to His perfect will.

So James calls us to confess our sins to one another and to pray for one another, that we may be healed, reminding us that the prayer of a righteous person has great power as it is working. And he hands us an unexpected example: Elijah, a man with a nature just like ours, whose prayers held back the rain and called it down again. The point is glorious and humbling at once. Ordinary people, praying in faith, participate in the power of God. So we come to this passage to recover prayer as the rhythm of the whole Christian life, to let the church surround the suffering, and to marvel that God works through the prayers of plain people like us.

Group Discussion: How does your experience of prayer compare with the picture James paints, prayer woven through every season, the church gathering around the sick, believers confessing to and praying for one another? Where is the gap between this vision and our practice?

Personal Reflection: Where in your life right now are you carrying something, suffering, joy, sickness, or sin, that you have not truly brought to God in prayer or shared with fellow believers? What holds you back?

Read James 5:13-18

Study Questions

1. James writes, "Is anyone among you suffering? Let him pray. Is anyone cheerful? Let him sing praise" (v. 13). What does it teach that James prescribes prayer and praise for the full range of life's seasons, and what does this reveal about the place prayer is meant to have in the Christian life?
2. Honestly consider your own habits. In which seasons, suffering or cheerful, are you most likely to neglect prayer, and what would it look like to make prayer your reflex in that season?
3. James instructs, "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" (v. 14). What does this teach about the role of the elders, the place of the local church in caring for the suffering, and the meaning of praying in the name of the Lord?
4. When you are weak or sick, how willing are you to call on your fellow believers and the leaders of the church for prayer, rather than suffering alone? What makes it hard, and why does God call us to lean on the body of Christ?
5. James promises, "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" (v. 15). How should we understand this promise of healing in light of the rest of Scripture, which teaches us to pray according to God's will rather than to claim healing as guaranteed?
6. Where do you need to pray more boldly, trusting God's power to heal and restore, and at the same time more humbly, submitting to His wise and good will? How do you hold confidence and surrender together in your prayers?
7. James urges, "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" (v. 16). Why does James connect confession, prayer, and healing, and what does this teach about the role of honesty and the prayers of fellow believers in our spiritual and relational health?
8. Is there a sin you need to confess, or a burden you need to bring into the light with a trusted brother or sister in Christ? What might God do through that honesty that hiding can never accomplish?
9. James points to Elijah, "a man with a nature like ours," whose prayers stopped and started the rain (vv. 17-18). Why is it significant that James chooses an ordinary person rather than a unique hero as his example of powerful prayer, and what does this teach about the access and power that ordinary believers have in prayer?
10. Look back across the whole passage. James calls us to a life soaked in prayer, a church that surrounds the suffering, and an honesty that heals. Name one specific way Jesus is calling you to grow in prayer or in praying with others this week.

Now or Later

Reflect on these passages: 1 John 5:14–15, confidence in prayer when we ask according to God's will; Mark 14:32–36, Jesus prays, not what I will, but what you will; Philippians 4:6–7, in everything by prayer let your requests be made known to God; 1 Thessalonians 5:16–18, rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks; 1 Kings 17:1 and 18:41–45, Elijah's prayers and the rain; Psalm 32:3–5, the relief of confessing sin rather than concealing it.