

James 5:13-16 - The Prayer of Faith that Heals - Part 1

Sign Title: The Prayer of Faith that Heals

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Good morning Faith family. When was the last time you were in the hospital? If you were there as a patient, you know how humiliating the hospital can be. It begins with the gowns they make you wear, which were apparently designed by someone who never wore one. Next, nurses and doctors begin examining portions of your body you thought were to be kept to yourself --- or at least between you and your spouse. It is no fun to be a patient in the hospital.

Even less fun is the reason we find ourselves in the hospital: sickness, disease or a life threatening injury. When you wake up in a hospital bed you realize how fleeting life is.

While spending time in the hospital has many negatives, it has at least one positive. We are forced to reflect upon the one to whom we entrust our life. When we are sick, we think about the one who can heal us. Throughout this series, we have seen that James is incredibly practical. Today is no different. He is teaching us what to do when we face those moments of pain and weakness and we are desperate to be healed.

James 5:13-16

Last week, we looked at the way we naturally respond in a trial, we swear. Today, James gives us an alternative to swearing, we should pray. When should we pray?

Pray and sing when life is good.

...Is anyone cheerful? Let him sing praise. James 5:13 (ESV)

This whole section from verse 13-18 is about prayer. We tend to think of prayer as just talking to God when things aren't right. James has a much broader picture of prayer. It is simply talking with God in the form of an ongoing conversation. A big part of this conversation takes place when things in life are good. We should celebrate that goodness in prayer, not celebrate God's goodness apart from him.

James tells us one way to celebrate God's goodness is with singing. When things are good in my daughter's life, everybody in the house knows it because she skips around the house singing songs to Jesus. Her favorite songs are the ones we sing on Sunday morning. She loves to sing praises to God for his goodness. This is what James tells us to do. The Greek word used here is *Psalmos*. It is the same name for the book of Psalms we have in our Bible. The Psalms are a collection of songs to God.

Most of us are far too cerebral. We learn Bible stories and study Scripture but James tells us a big part of our spiritual life involves singing praises to God, especially in the good times.

Paul tells us the same thing.

Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, teaching and admonishing one another in all wisdom, singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, with thankfulness in your hearts to God. Colossians 3:16 (ESV)

When life is good, is singing songs of worship part of your devotional life? For some of you, the point of application today is to simply go online and buy a

Christian music CD or begin listening to KJIA radio. Make singing a part of your devotional life when times are good. I will admit I can have a little ADD at times, especially when I have too much caffeine. My prayer time suffers accordingly. First I am praying for people in church and soon my mind wanders off. Five minutes later, I am thinking about the score of a sporting event or the latest in world news. A great way to stay focused in prayers of thankfulness is to sing songs of praise and let the words of the songs express the feelings of thankfulness in your heart. It is praying and singing put together.

Now a word to the wise. All Christian music is not created equal. When I was a youth pastor, I remember teens using Scripture like this as a green light to listen to the hardest core, barely God-honoring music they could find. Let me be really straightforward on this. It is not the style of music I am talking about, though I admit, I find some styles hard to swallow. What matters is the centrality of Christ and Scripture to the music.

There are some great God-honoring, Christ-centered hymns. There are some hymns that are really cheesy. I am a product of '80s Christian rock. Those are the CDs I bought in high school and filled my shelves with in college in the pre-iPod days. As I look back over 20 plus years, the music of certain bands stuck with me and was used by God to help me praise him; other music fell by the wayside. What fell by the wayside were the songs that were empty of Christ and biblically sparse. The songs God used then, and still uses today in my heart today, are the ones that are Scripture put to music. For example, in the '80s a Scripture-based band was Petra. I still sing its music in my heart when I am

praising God. Most of the other bands I listened to had great musical content but little spiritual value. I hardly remember them because there was no Scripture in their music for God to bring back to mind.

Brothers and sisters, sing praise songs as your prayers of thankfulness throughout the day. When you do, find Christian music that fits your style but make sure it is biblically rich. That is a great way to celebrate God's goodness as we pray and sing to him.

But life isn't always happy, is it? In a broken world dominated by sin, we are guaranteed to have a good portion of our life that it isn't easy. What are we to do in the tough times?

When I am in trouble, pray.

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

The Greek word for suffering is the same word used to describe the suffering the prophets went through a few verses earlier. It is a very broad word that means enduring any kind of hardship. It could be big or small problems. It could be serious, simple or even just annoying issues of life. Life is filled with this kind of stuff. Is there anybody here who is completely free from all trouble? Put your hand up. You won't be free of trouble after the service because the rest of us will pummel you out of jealousy. Life is full of trials.

James is realistic about this. He has said much about trials. In chapter one, he told us trials are for our spiritual good. They are the instrument God uses to bring us to spiritual maturity. Two weeks ago, he told us to exercise patience and perseverance in our trials to get through them. Today, he adds

another tool to make it through life's difficulties: pray. He doesn't give a qualification or explanation, just a simple statement --- we should pray. The Greek could also be translated simply: keep on praying.

When trouble comes, no matter its shape, color or size, prayer should be our response. Why should we pray? Prayer takes my troubles to God. God hears my cry for help and, in many places of Scripture, we learn that he promises to help us in response to our prayers.

Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need. Hebrews 4:16 (ESV)

One of the misunderstandings we have about prayer is we think we should only come to God with the big problems of life. We think we shouldn't dial the 911 prayer line unless we are in desperate need. This is not the picture James gives us. He tells us to talk with God in prayer about all our troubles, even if they seem trivial. One of our biggest mistakes is that we are afraid to talk to God about things that seem trivial.

How often do you try to handle troubles on your own? Guys, I am especially talking to you. We like to think we can figure everything out ourselves. We won't stop and ask for directions when we are lost. Guys, when you are in a spat with your wife, stop and close your eyes and ask for guidance from God. When your kids aren't performing well in sports, don't just tell them it is fine, pray with them about it. Kids, you are studying for a test, ask God to help you concentrate. You walk into a test, ask God to help you recall all you studied. Pray in every form of trouble whether it is big or small. Pray all day long.

Why should we turn to God in every form of trouble? Another reason is that God is glorified when we depend on him. Our prayer of dependence upon God brings glory to him.

God's response to our prayer can take different forms. Sometimes he changes the trouble we are experiencing. Most often, he doesn't take the trouble away. He gives us the spiritual resources to persevere through the trial and allow the trial to bear its fruit in our lives. He uses the trial to build our faith, making us steadfast, mature and complete. He uses the trial to teach us to pray to him.

When facing serious troubles, call the elders to pray with you.

At the beginning of this message, we talked about one of the giant troubles in our life, that is sickness. Everyone faces those times. Some of us have experienced near death experiences. Barring the return of Christ, all of us will go through sickness that leads to an actual death experience. What should we do when facing those kinds of serious troubles?

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. James 5:14 (ESV)

Let's get right to the heart of this verse. Who is it that causes physical healing? The answer our culture tells us is that it is doctors and medicine that bring healing. If you are sick, you call a doctor. If you are really sick, make sure you go to Mayo Clinic. It isn't wrong to call a doctor. This passage doesn't say we shouldn't seek medical help. However, if our trust is just in the doctor or medicine to bring the healing, then we are living out a naturalistic secular world view. James insists that we see our faith applied to every aspect of our life, including *who brings the healing when we are sick*.

If we are sick, this verse tells us to call the elders and ask for prayer. Why should we do this? First, because the Bible tells us to and, second, because all healing comes from God. Let me be candid. I think many of us treat our illnesses like we are atheists. We pray because we know we should but we really don't expect anything will come of it. We think praying for the sick is a nice gesture but the doctor is the one who heals.

We misunderstand this because we fail to see the way God works. God's normal way of exercising his power is through secondary causes. Israel walked on dry land through the Red Sea because a wind blew the waters back. Elijah survived in the wilderness because ravens brought him food. Who dried the Red Sea? Who fed Elijah? God did. He worked through secondary causes. God often works through secondary causes to bring healing. A broken bone heals because God brings us to the right physician who can set it properly. Chemotherapy is effective because God brings us to the right specialists at the right time and he empowers the chemo to do its work. These are all secondary causes of healing, but God brings them into our life at the right time, and God is behind the skills of the physicians to provide the healing.

Most people are healed through the body's God-given ability to heal itself, but we must remember that God stands behind even that. He is the ultimate physician and healer. Sometimes, God chooses to extend his grace through healing without secondary causes and he miraculously brings healing without any other explanation. Jesus healed this way. He didn't use medicine and the reason Jesus healed through these extraordinary means, rather than ordinary

secondary causes, is because miraculous healings proved Jesus to be who he claimed to be, the son of God.

Even though God usually heals through secondary causes, I don't see in Scripture any convincing argument that says God will no longer heal directly or that, today, he will *only* use secondary causes. I believe miraculous healing is still possible and we should ask for it, although expect that this is not *usually* the way God works.

One of the ways this passage should challenge us is our belief in the power of prayer, especially when it comes to healing. A pastor friend of mine shared this story. He was on a flight from Midway to Atlanta after speaking at a Christian camp. The plane started taxiing down the runway when commotion began about halfway back in the plane. Everyone was straining to see what was going on. There was a woman weeping and in obvious distress. She was weeping over a man in the window seat with his eyes rolled back. He was in convulsions and dripping with sweat.

The flight attendant ran to the front and said, "Is there a doctor on the plane?" No one raised their hand. She said, "Is there any trained medical personnel? Nurse? EMT?" No one raised their hand. The plane was now turned around and racing its engines to return to the gate as fast as it could.

When no one responded to the cry for help, a robust African-American woman began stepping over people and shouting for the entire plane to hear, "Then we are gonna pray! We are gonna pray in Jesus' name!" She marched to the man and as the flight attendants gave the man oxygen and wiped him down,

this woman prayed over the man in Jesus' name! IN JESUS' NAME! After a minute or two of her prayer, the man appeared to improve. The woman started saying, "Praise Jesus!" The plane made it to the gate and medical personnel came on board. They wheeled the man off, who was apparently doing much better. Everybody exhaled.

My friend said that even though he is a pastor, the thought of jumping up and praying for the man didn't cross his mind. He felt quite guilty because his first thought was, "Is there a doctor on board?" Yet, this woman saw that prayer was what the moment needed, and she willingly identified herself as a Christian in front of the entire plane when she prayed for him. He said, "I wasn't thinking like a Christian. I was thinking like an atheist." As Christians, should we not call on God to help in every difficulty, including physical illness?

Let's put our finger back in the text to answer a few more questions. What kind of illness is James talking about that we should call the elders? While we should pray about everything, James says we should call the elders for prayer when the illness is serious. We know it is a serious illness because the elders come to him, he can't go to them. We also know it is serious because the elders pray over him which indicates the person is bedridden.

Also, notice that the sick person is the one who calls the elders and asks for prayer. As an elder, in my 20 years of ministry, 95% of the time it is the elders calling the sick person and offering to pray for them rather than the sick person calling the elders and requesting prayer. That is backward. I think one of the reasons it tells the sick to call the elders for prayer is because it takes humility to

ask for prayer. It deflates our pride to say we are in desperate need. We can't handle it ourselves and we need the prayers of our spiritual leaders to support us.

Too many of us isolate ourselves when we are in trouble. We don't let anyone know what is going on. That is the opposite of what we should do when we are sick and hurting. We all need to be part of a group that prays for us and cares for others. This is why being a part of a small group is so important. That is where this kind of stuff happens on a regular basis. If you are not part of a small group, this church will fail you when you need it most, because you aren't connected like you should be.

Why do the elders anoint with oil? There is a lot of debate on this? Was the oil rubbed on a person for medical reasons? We know oil was used in that day to sooth wounds and wine was used as an antiseptic. We see that happening in the parable of the good Samaritan in Luke 10:34.

Some people think the oil is sacramental, meaning that the oil has special spiritual power and it imparts the healing. In the third century, this verse became the basis for special consecration of the oil used to anoint the sick. By the twelfth century, that morphed into the practice of extreme unction, which is the anointing of those whose death appeared immanent. By 1545, at the Council of Trent, it was said that the sacrament of extreme unction conferred grace and removed sin just prior to a person's death. At the risk of being offensive, I don't think oil having special spiritual power to remove sin prior to death is even close to what this verse is talking about!

What is the oil used for? I doubt it is medicinal because anointing with oil for a bedridden illness is doubtful. Remember that oil was used for a wound, not a bedridden illness, in the ancient world. The oil having special sacramental power is also doubtful because it is going way beyond what little this verse tells us. If the oil isn't medicinal and it is not sacramental, why is it used? I believe the oil is symbolic. We see oil used symbolically many times in Scripture. For example, the kings of Israel were anointed with oil. It was symbolic that they were now set apart for leadership.

The picture is the elders praying over the bedridden Christian. He is hearing prayers for grace offered up on his behalf. As he hears the prayers, he feels the oil gently applied and running down. He feels physically what he is experiencing spiritually. He is covered with prayer. He is set apart as a special focus where the elders are asking for God's grace upon his life.

Where did James get this practice? Like almost everything James teaches, it comes directly from the practice of Jesus. There is a little verse in the Gospel of Mark that tells us when Jesus sent out the apostles, when they healed people, they anointed them with oil.

And they cast out many demons and anointed with oil many who were sick and healed them. Mark 6:13 (ESV)

I believe this is where the practice comes from. By the way, if you want to be technical about it, the Greek word for oil in this verse is olive oil, not motor oil, although I think in a pinch any will do.

If you have never been a part of a prayer time and an anointing in oil like this, you need to know, it is not weird. It is just New Testament Christianity being lived out. It is the spiritual leaders of the church holding a brother or sister up in prayer, the way a healthy church body should.

Now the text says, “and the prayer offered in faith will make the sick person well; the Lord will raise him up.” What does that mean? I know many who prayed for people that didn’t get well. It seems like this verse cannot be true. This is probably the most difficult verse in the entire book. Why are people prayed for and yet they are not healed? If you want to find out, come back next week for the rest of the story.



Dr. Kurt Trucksess is ordained in the EFCA. He enjoys reading, writing, time with his family and wrestling with his sons. His favorite topics of study are ancient rhetoric and preaching. Feel free to contact him at ktruck@gmail.com or visit his web at www.christ2Rculture.com

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