

**FAITH THAT WORKS, PART 12: “PRAY IN ALL CIRCUMSTANCES”  
JAMES 5:13-18**

**Personal Introduction**

Hi everyone! If you don't know me, my name is Eric and I'm a pastor at HMCC of Jakarta, and it's my privilege to preach the Word of God to us today.

**Sermon Series Introduction**

We're currently in Part 12 of our sermon series called “Faith That Works,” where we're going through the Books of James together.

And today's sermon is titled: “Pray in All Circumstances.”

So let's get right into it.

**Sermon Introduction**

When I was a university student and I had just become a Christian, I remember trying to pray everything I could think of praying about—and only a couple minutes had passed by. I couldn't understand how people could pray so long. I mean, what were they saying? What else could they be praying about?

So my friend and I decided that, in order to learn how to pray, we needed to commit to praying. So we went to morning prayer every weekday morning together from 6-7am and I would stop by a chapel that was open during the day to pray as well.

And at some point, I wondered to myself, “Is this all a waste of time? What am I doing spending all this time praying? I should be studying right now.”

<pause>

I don't know if you can relate with any of that.

- Perhaps you're here and you think prayer is waste or time.
- Perhaps you know that you ought to pray more, but it just feels like there's more important things you can be doing with your time instead.
- Perhaps you just don't feel like you have much to say in prayer, and you can't imagine what people could be praying about for so long.

Wherever you may be coming from, as one who has struggled with and has been skeptical of prayer, I can tell you that you're not alone.

But now, as one who is thoroughly convinced that prayer is not a waste of time and is one of the most glorious privileges we can ever know in this life, I can tell you that God's Word has much to say to encourage you to pray.

And that's what we're going to look more at today.

**The One Thing**

Pray in all circumstances with your church for God's purposes.

**Scripture Introduction**

Turn your Bibles to James 5:13-18.

Just want to give a bit of context before jumping into today's passage.

James, the brother of Jesus, is writing this letter in the first century to his fellow brothers and sisters in Christ, who are scattered and enduring trials of various kinds throughout the Roman empire.

We're in the middle of the last chapter, James chapter 5.

And last week, we saw how James calls those who are suffering to be *patient* in suffering by establishing their hearts in the Lord.

And today, we'll see him call those who are suffering not only to be patient, but to actively *pray*. And this call to pray is not just in times of suffering but in *all* circumstances.

And that's where we are as we begin today's passage.

### Scripture Reading

Let's read James 5:13-18.

<sup>13</sup> Is anyone among you suffering? Let him pray. Is anyone cheerful? Let him sing praise. <sup>14</sup> 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. <sup>15</sup> 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. <sup>16</sup> 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. <sup>17</sup> 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. <sup>18</sup> Then he prayed again, and heaven gave rain, and the earth bore its fruit.

This is God's Word.

### Overview

We'll look at this passage in four parts.

- I. Personal prayers (v. 13)
- II. Elders' prayers (vv. 14-15)
- III. Members' prayers (v. 16)
- IV. Elijah's prayers (vv. 17-18)

### I. Personal prayers (v. 13)

Look at verse 13.

[<sup>13</sup> Is anyone among you suffering? Let him pray. Is anyone cheerful? Let him sing praise.]

James asks these two questions here because he knows that, in any given church, you'll find members (or those "among you") who are *suffering* and members who are *cheerful*.

Both praying and singing praise are directed to *God*. So in that sense, you could say that singing praise is a kind of *prayer*.

So whether we are suffering or cheerful, James says that we are to *pray*. But he doesn't mean to say that we are to pray *only* in those times of suffering and cheerfulness, but he's giving bookends of the entire spectrum of the Christian life.

In low times and in high times and in everything in between, we are to pray.

That's his main exhortation in this entire passage. In all circumstances, *pray* (cf. Eph. 6:18; 1 Thess. 5:17).

<pause>

Why does James give this exhortation? Because he knows that we all have tendencies to *not* pray in all circumstances.

In times of suffering and cheerfulness, it's easy to look to *ourselves*.

- When suffering, we do whatever it takes to try to get out of it.

- When cheerful, we pat ourselves on the back in a self-satisfied way as all seems to be going according to our plans.

For some of us, we don't think to pray in *either* circumstance because we functionally live as if everything is up to *us*—as if we rise and fall by our *own* efforts.

Or perhaps some of us *do* pray on those *extreme* ends of suffering and cheerfulness, but it's *only* on those extreme ends.

- When we've tried everything else and we've finally hit rock bottom in our suffering, *then* we pray as a last resort.
- Or when we're going through *really* high times, like getting into that university, getting that dream job, getting that big investment, getting married, having a child, or whatever else you might consider to be your most cheerful moments, *then* we thank God in prayer.

So we pray in those *extreme* ends, but in the middle of the everyday mundane moments of life, which is the *majority* of our lives, prayer doesn't seem to cross our minds much; we don't pray in *all* circumstances.

<pause>

But inherently, I think we *all* know that we *ought* to pray.

Nowadays, there's been increasing encouragement for people to start "thankfulness" or "gratitude" journals, where you write down things that you're thankful or grateful for in your life.

And I don't know anyone who would ever disagree with such a practice. We all inherently think that it's good and right to be thankful.

But thankful to *who*?

Recently, a friend of mine shared with me that she instinctively started praying to God—the God she did *not* believe in—when she started having kids. She never prayed before, but when her kids were born and as she laid beside her sleeping children, she would feel the need and the urge to lay her hands on her kids and say, "Dear God, thank you for my perfect children."

<pause>

*What* is that? *Why* do we have that urge to thank *someone* for the good in our lives?

Whether you identify yourself as a Christian or not, *all* of us made in the image of God have this innate sense or awareness of God and our need to thank or pray to him—to commune with him.

And even though this innate awareness is corrupted by sin, and sin leads us to suppress this truth, as those made in the image of God, we can never eradicate this sense in all of us that instinctively *knows* that we ought to be thanking or praying to *someone*.

<pause>

Now, if we know that we *ought* to pray but find it *hard* to pray in all circumstances, here are two ways of thinking about prayer that might help us.

First, prayer is like *breathing* for us, reflecting our need for God in every moment.

When we don't pray in all circumstances, it reinforces the false idea that we don't *really* need God—that there's plenty of things that we can handle on our own without God.

But if prayer is like breathing, then there really isn't *anything* we can do without God's help.

And just like you don't need to be an "expert" at breathing, you don't need to be an "expert" at praying. Your prayers don't need to be super long or super eloquent. It doesn't matter if our prayers are short

or long, eloquent or scatter-brained. If we're *breathing*, it's a sign that we're *physically* alive; and if we're *praying*, it's a sign that we're *spiritually* alive.

So prayer is like breathing—and we breath in *all* circumstances, if we're really alive.<sup>1</sup>

<pause>

Second, prayer is talking to God in the context of a loving relationship.

If we truly understand that, then I don't think we would be tempted to think or say to ourselves that our prayers aren't "working."

When we speak to those we love, we would never say that our conversations aren't "working"—that's simply not the paradigm we would carry into a loving relationship—yet how we're often tempted to think of *prayer* that way.

We, at times, if we're honest, approach God with this paradigm of "my conversation with God needs to get him to do what I want; otherwise, my conversation with him isn't working."

If I evaluated my conversations with my wife on the basis of whether she gave me what I wanted, you would immediately know that something is very defective in how I understand my relationship with her.

Rather, I converse with my wife because I love my wife. I enjoy sharing my thoughts and feelings with her, having her near me, and simply delighting in her.

Conversations with her are not about getting her to do what I want, but they're about *communing* with her as part of my loving relationship with her.

If we understand prayer to be talking to God in the context of a loving relationship, then it "works" *not* because I get him to do what I want but because I grow in my intimacy with him—that I delight in him more, even through all the ups and downs that I might face in my relationship with him.

Like any loving relationship, we ought to converse with him not so much for what we can get *from* him but simply to get *him*.

And God is *not* like your spouse or parent or sibling or friend; the more you get to know everyone else, the more you become aware of how sinful and inconsistent they are—and how, at times, you *don't* want to spend time with them—but *not* so with God.

The more you get to know God through his Word and the longer you see his unchanging faithfulness and steadfast love towards you, especially in the midst of all your constant failings, the more you will be amazed by how great and undeserved is his love for you—and the more you will want to come to him in prayer in all circumstances.

<pause>

So first, personal prayers; and second...

## II. Elders' prayers (vv. 14-15)

Look at verses 14-15.

[<sup>14</sup> 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. <sup>15</sup> 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.]

After James exhorts believers to pray in all circumstances—whether they're suffering or cheerful or anything in between—he now gives a specific circumstance of suffering: *sickness*.

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<sup>1</sup> John Onwuchekwa, *Prayer: How Praying Together Shapes the Church* (Wheaton, Illinois: Crossway, 2018), 17-25.

If “anyone among you”—if any member of the church—is sick, then “let him call for the elders [or the pastors] of the church, and let them pray over him.”

It’s interesting that James highlights the *elders* here.

Why is that?

It’s because the elders in the church are to be especially devoted to the ministry of prayer.

In Acts 6, when there was a potentially divisive issue in the church in Jerusalem, and where we see the beginnings of the office of deacon created, the apostles (who were the forerunners of elders in the church) said that it wasn’t right for them to be distracted from being devoted “to *prayer* and to the ministry of the word” (Acts 6:4).

[JKT only: So, as elders in *our* church, Jeff and I are devoted to the ministry of prayer.

- We each pray every day through a page of our Members Directory.
- We pray for members together at our weekly elders’ meetings.
- We reach out to members to ask what we can be praying for them about.
- We pray for members in the pastoral prayer during our Sunday Celebration.
- And we’re always available in the front and back after any Sunday Celebration to pray for anyone who wants to talk with us.]

[TGR only: I know your elders here—John, Farid, and Daniel—are praying for you as they’re devoted to this ministry of prayer together. They’ve probably asked you for prayer needs, and I know that each time they meet together, they spend a good amount of their time praying for the members of this church.]

I’m not saying this to say that we’re doing anything special—we’re not. This is just part of what it means to be an elder—we *ought* to take seriously the ministry of prayer that God calls us to.

<pause>

Now, I’m sure there are lots of questions that we’re asking about verses 15 and 16, so let’s begin to unpack what James is saying here a bit more.

First of all, given the context, James has *physical* healing in view.<sup>2</sup>

- In verse 14, the member is so physically sick that he cannot go to the elders, but the elders must come to him. And the elders pray “over” him, implying that the sick person is bedridden.<sup>3</sup>
- And in verse 15, “the Lord will raise him up” implies that he will be raised up from his *bed*, like Jesus raised up Peter’s sick mother-in-law (Mark 1:30-31), a paralytic (Matt. 9:2, 6-7), and a dead little girl (Mark 5:39-42) from the beds they were lying on.

So here, James is referring to physical healing from physical sickness.

<pause>

Having said that, we should note that this is *not* a public healing service, where the sick come to be healed in public, but this is a private prayer time, where the sick don’t go anywhere but they call for their elders to come pray for them in private.

<pause>

Now, the next question to address is: what exactly raises this sick person from his bed? Many agents seem to be mentioned, so which is to be credited for the healing that takes place?

<sup>2</sup> In verse 15, the word “save” (*sōzō*) can either refer to physical healing or spiritual salvation (Study note on James 5:15, in *ESV Study Bible* [Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2008]). In verse 14, although the word for “sick” (*astheneō*) can refer to spiritual weakness (Rom. 14:1), it usually refers to physical sickness when used without qualifiers, as it is here (Study note on James 5:13-14, in *ESV Study Bible* [Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2008]).

<sup>3</sup> Robert L. Plummer, “James,” in *Hebrews-Revelation*, ESVEC (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2018).

Is it the *elders*? Do the elders have more powerful prayers than the members?

No, because, in verse 16, James will tell *members* to pray for one another “that you may be healed.” So the prayers of *members* seem to be just as effective as the prayers of elders.

Elders *model* what members should *imitate* (Heb. 13:7).

So it's *not* the elders who raise the sick.

<pause>

So is it the *oil*? Do elders need to start carrying vials of special oil to anoint the sick in order for them to be healed?

No. There is only *one* other mention in the New Testament of physical healing taking place in connection with anointing oil (Mark 6:13), but there are *countless* instances of healing throughout the NT where there is no mention of anointing oil at all.

Oil had some medicinal usage in the first century (Luke 10:34), but oil obviously doesn't apply to every sickness.<sup>4</sup>

Oil was also associated with happiness and well-being (Matt. 6:16-18), with honoring a person (Matt. 26:6-7; John 12:3), and with setting someone apart (e.g., kings and priests in the OT). It was kind of this all-in-one, visible symbol.

And this is how James is referring to the oil here. It was a culturally normal way at the time of setting someone apart to receive prayer.

Oil wasn't the *only* way to do this; in another instance, instead of anointing with oil, Jesus lays his hands on sick people to heal them (Mark 6:5).

Both are just visible *symbols* to show that we're praying for *this* person.

So though we *can* use oil as a symbol of praying for someone, we can just as easily lay our hands on their shoulder.<sup>5</sup> It's just a *symbol*; it's not the *substance* of the prayer.

And so, oil is *not* what raises the sick.

<pause>

So, if it's not the elders and it's not the oil, then is it the amount of *faith* of the person praying? Does “the prayer of faith” in verse 15 refer to “the prayer that really, really thinks that it will get what is asked for,”<sup>6</sup> and *that's* what will raise the sick person from their bed?

No, if that were the case, then there should be some Christians of great faith who should never be getting sick and never dying. But of course, whether someone has *great* faith or *no* faith, everyone still ends up getting sick and everyone still ends up dying.<sup>7</sup>

And think of the apostle Paul who undoubtedly had *immense* faith. He left his friend Trophimus, who was ill, in Miletus (2 Tim. 4:20), and he was anxious for his friend Epaphroditus who was ill and almost

<sup>4</sup> Douglas J. Moo, *James: An Introduction and Commentary*, TNTC (Nottingham, England: IVP, 2009).

<sup>5</sup> Robert L. Plummer, “James,” in *Hebrews-Revelation*, ESVEC (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2018); see also Douglas J. Moo, *James: An Introduction and Commentary*, TNTC (Nottingham, England: IVP, 2009).

<sup>6</sup> Dan G. McCartney, *James*, BECNT (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2009).

<sup>7</sup> Sean DeMars and Mike McKinley, *Health, Wealth, and the (Real) Gospel* (Fearn, Ross-shire, Scotland: Christian Focus, 2022), 53.

died coming to him in Philippi (Phil. 2:25-29). Did even the apostle Paul *not* have enough faith to pray and heal his beloved friends?<sup>8</sup>

So it's also not the amount of faith a person has that raises the sick.

<pause>

Then *what* is it? The answer is right there in plain sight in verse 15: “the *Lord* will raise him up.”

The Lord is the active agent here. He exhorts his people to pray, and he sovereignly answers his people's prayers. Apart from the Lord who answers prayers, they would have no effect.

And we cannot forget what James mentioned earlier in James 4:15: “If the Lord *wills*, we will live and do this or that.” That's exactly what's being dealt with here—“if the Lord *wills*, we will live... or not live; we will be healed, or not be healed.” James has *not* forgotten what he just said.

When we pray, we always do so *surrendered* to the sovereignty of the Lord.

Now, we *can* pray and it is *right* to pray for healing, but if the Lord heals anyone, it's not because of the elders, it's not because of the oil, and it's not because of our amount of faith, but it's because the Lord sovereignly *wills* to raise this person from his bed.

That should not discourage us from praying, but we should know that we do not manipulate God.

We are encouraged to believe and expect that the Lord *can* heal but it's ultimately his divine prerogative—“if the Lord *wills*, we will *live* and do this or that.”

<pause>

James Montgomery Boice, a former pastor in the US, after being diagnosed with liver cancer, this is what he shared with his congregation regarding how they should pray for him:

A relevant question, I guess, when you pray is, pray for what? Should you pray for a miracle? Well, you're free to do that, of course. My general impression is that the God who is able to do miracles—and he certainly can—is also able to keep you from getting the problem in the first place. So although miracles do happen, they're rare by definition....

Above all, I would say pray for the glory of God. If you think of God glorifying himself in history and you say, where in all of history has God most glorified himself? He did it at the cross of Jesus Christ, and it wasn't by delivering Jesus from the cross, though he could have.<sup>9</sup>

As believers in Jesus Christ, what we desire most of all is not our good health or healing, but that God would be glorified. We pray for his good and perfect purposes—and that may be to glorify himself through our *healing*, or it may be to glorify himself through the way we *die*.

<pause>

Ultimately, even if the Lord sovereignly decides *not* to raise us up from our beds, we can trust that he *will* one day raise *all* believers from their graves in the resurrection.

As believers in Jesus Christ, we pray and live and die and resurrect with such living hope in our Lord and Savior—and no matter what happens to us in this temporary life, to *him* be glory forever and ever.

<sup>8</sup> Or think of Paul's “beloved son” in the faith, Timothy. Amidst Timothy's frequent stomach ailments, rather than telling him to just have more faith as he prays for healing, the apostle Paul tells him to “use a little wine” for its potential medicinal benefits (1 Tim. 5:23). Basically, “take some medicine.”

<sup>9</sup> James Montgomery Boice, quoted in “Should You Pray for a Miracle?” June 15, 2015, <https://thelogcollege.wordpress.com/2015/06/15/should-you-pray-for-a-miracle-by-james-montgomery-boice>.

[<sup>14</sup> 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. <sup>15</sup> 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.]

Now what of the last part of verse 15? “And if he has committed sins, he will be forgiven.”

We may find that very odd to hear in the context of physical sickness.

If the error in Jesus' day was for people to *overspiritualize* sickness (as if *every* sickness was a direct result of personal sin), the error in our day is to *despiritualize* sickness (as if *no* sickness is ever a direct result of personal sin).

In their day, if you were sick, it's because you must have sinned; in our day, if you're sick, it's because you didn't wash your hands.

But the NT seems to give us a more *nuanced* view of sickness.

*Some* sickness and death are directly caused by personal sin.

- Think of some of the Corinthians who were getting sick and even dying because of how they abused the Lord's Supper (1 Cor. 11:30).<sup>10</sup>

At the same time, not *every* sickness is directly caused by personal sin.

- Think of Job's great suffering, but over and over again, it's reiterated that it was *not* because he sinned (Job 9:13-21; 29:1-30:31, despite what his friends thought (Job 8:1ff.; 22:1ff.)).<sup>11</sup>

Here, James means to have us at least consider the *possibility* that the sickness is connected to personal sin. It may or may not be, but when we're sick, laying in our beds and unable to do much, I think it's good and right for us to use that time to examine our lives of any sin and repent of anything that God may convict us of.<sup>12</sup>

Those who are sick and dying often begin to ask ultimate questions. They come face to face with the reality of their weakness. Some begin to regret how they lived and are flooded with guilt. And all must confront the reality of life after death; they may *deny* it, but they must *face* it.

And in God's kindness, I wonder how many have repented of their sins and turned to Christ alone as their only Lord and Savior at the eleventh hour of their lives. I wonder how many have been like that crucified thief next to Jesus, closing his eyes in death only to open them again in paradise with Christ.

<pause>

But there is nothing worse than living in sin and yet continuing to seemingly prosper, wrongly thinking that *nothing* is wrong and that *no* judgment is coming.

Friends, make no mistake: God's judgment is coming for all those who have sinned against him—and either *Christ* bore that punishment on our behalf if our faith is in him alone, or we *ourselves* will bear the full weight of God's wrath in an eternity in hell for our sin.

You may think that the worst thing that can happen to you is sickness and death, but hell is far worse than even the worst sickness and the most painful death in this life.

It may be God's kindness, at times, to strike us sick and make us examine our lives—if it would lead us to true repentance and faith in Christ that we may be forgiven our sins and have eternal life in him.

Even if we lose our lives in that sickness, it's far better to die and enter eternity in heaven with our Savior than to live a long life, die of old age, and enter eternity in hell apart from him.

<sup>10</sup> Or think of King Herod being struck dead by God after exuding such rampant pride (Acts 12:20-23).

<sup>11</sup> Or think of Jesus' disciples asking him about a man born blind: “Who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?” And Jesus replied, “Neither” (John 9:2-3).

<sup>12</sup> Daniel M. Doriani, *James*, REC (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2007).

Again, not *all* sickness is caused by personal sin, but do not waste your sickness by failing to examine your life and repenting of any sin and turning to the only Lord and Savior who can forgive us of our sins.

<pause>

And don't wait until you're sick and possibly on your deathbed to examine your life. Who knows when you will pass from this life? As God is confronting you with his Word, respond to him *now*.

God created you and you are accountable to him. Yet all of us have sinned against him in our thoughts, words, and actions—and so, we rightly deserve his just judgment for our sins.

But in love, God has provided a way to be forgiven of our sins in the person of Jesus Christ. He lived the perfect, sinless life that we were supposed to live, and then he died on the cross to take the punishment that we deserved for our sins, and then he resurrected three days later to show that his life as a substitute sacrifice for his people was accepted.

So now, if you repent of our sins and believe in Jesus Christ alone as your Lord and Savior, then you will be forgiven all your past, present, and future sins.

That's the gospel message that Christians believe in, and that's the good news that the whole world must hear.

If you have never heard this good news before, or if you have never responded with true repentance and faith in Christ, I pray that you would not delay but respond to him today.

<pause>

So personal prayers, elders' prayers, and third...

### III. Members' prayers (v. 16)

Look at verse 16.

[<sup>16</sup> 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.]

Now, in light of what James has just said, you might expect him to say, "Therefore, confess your sins to the *Lord* or to the *elders*," but that's *not* what he says.

Instead, he says, "Therefore, confess your sins to *one another* and pray for *one another*, that you may be healed."

These "one another" folks are "among you" (vv. 13, 14) and in the same "church" as you and your church elders (v. 14), so these are your fellow *members* in your church.

James makes sure that we do not understand the ministry of prayer to be exclusively the responsibility of the *elders*, but it also extends to all the *members* of the church.

In context, confessing our sins and praying for one another here is regarding *sickness*, but this is also a *general* principle for how members ought to relate with one another in the church.

It ought to be *normal* for fellow members in the church to confess our sins and pray for one another.

<pause>

And think for a moment just how *different* that is from how people relate in the world.

On the one hand, some in the world *hide* and *cover* their sin. They know their sin is wrong, they know they shouldn't be doing it, and so they fear that others may find their sin out and any consequences that may come because of that.

But as members of the church, we all have already confessed that the perfect Son of God had to die for our *sins*. As soon as we went public with our faith through baptism and church membership, we laid down any self-righteous façade before others and exposed ourselves to the world as wretched sinners who need a perfect Savior to be our substitute.

That means that none in the church should be shocked to hear of our struggles with past and present sin. As Christians, we have all come to grips with the fact that each of us is a desperately sinful person, yet through repentance and faith in Christ, each of us now stands forgiven and loved by our Lord.

So the more open we are in confessing our sins to one another, the more we experience the healing that comes from their grace-filled counsel and prayers.<sup>13</sup>

<pause>

On the other hand, some in the world *boast* and *flaunt* their sin. They try to convince themselves and everyone around them that their sin is not wrong, but it's normal. They think that if they can just normalize sin, to make it not seem like such a big deal in the eyes of the public, then it somehow enables them to live a carefree life of freedom.

But as members of the church, we know that true freedom is not found in *normalizing* sin but *dying* to it. We have been crucified with Christ (Gal. 2:20); and our old self was crucified with him, in order that our body of sin might be brought to nothing, so that we would no longer be enslaved to sin (Rom. 6:6).

Our true selves are not who we are in our *sin*, but our true selves are who we are in *Christ*. Dying to sin is not the end, but just as Christ died and was raised, we are *also* raised to new life in him.

So the more open we are in confessing our sins to one another and asking for help to kill our sin, "the more [we] experience freedom from sin and taste the power of the resurrection of Jesus Himself."<sup>14</sup>

<pause>

This is so *different* than the world, but this is part of what sets the church apart and makes the world take notice.<sup>15</sup>

When I was a university student, at the start of the year when new students were entering, we made an intentional effort as a church to get to know them. I played so much ultimate frisbee that I had trouble walking to my classes the first week because I was so sore.

Anyway, we wouldn't just play frisbee, but we'd grab meals, take them to the grocery store, show them around campus, and invite them to our apartments for games. And in the midst of our conversations, we'd share about Christ and how we were part of the same church. Some stuck around in our church, some didn't.

<sup>13</sup> Milton Vincent, *A Gospel Primer for Christians* (Bemidji, MN: Focus Publishing, 2008), 35, Kindle.

<sup>14</sup> Milton Vincent, *A Gospel Primer for Christians* (Bemidji, MN: Focus Publishing, 2008), 40, Kindle.

<sup>15</sup> Regarding the great revival of 1907 in Korea, William Newton Blair (*The Korea Pentecost* [New York: The Board of Foreign Missions of the Presbyterian Church in the U. S. A., 1910], 47) writes: "Every sin a human being can commit was publicly confessed that night. Pale and trembling with emotion, in agony of mind and body, guilty souls, standing in the white light of that judgment, saw themselves as God saw them. Their sins rose up in all their vileness, till shame and grief and self-loathing took complete possession; pride was driven out, the face of man forgotten. Looking up to heaven, to Jesus whom they had betrayed, they smote themselves and cried out with bitter wailing: 'Lord, Lord, cast us not away forever!' Everything else was forgotten, nothing else mattered. The scorn of men, the penalty of the law, even death itself seemed of small consequence if only God forgave. We may have our theories of the desirability or undesirability of public confession of sin. I have had mine; but I know now that when the Spirit of God falls upon guilty souls, there will be confession, and no power on earth can stop it."

But I remember a comment from one of the new students who *did* stick around in our church. When she came to one of the Life Groups, and as people were discussing the Bible and sharing about their lives, what struck her was how members were *confessing* their sins to one another.

And afterwards, she said something like this to me: “I realized that these people are really messed up—just like me—so I knew this was a safe place for me.”

A church that confesses their sins to one another is so *different* from the world and it is a powerful display of what the gospel does in the life of a community of believers.

<pause>

So, the most natural question to ask ourselves is this: “Do I confess my sins to fellow members in my church?”

“If not, is it because my thinking is more aligned with the world than it is the gospel?”

<pause>

Then, ask yourself, “If I *do* confess my sins to fellow members, is it specific?”

It’s not enough to acknowledge that we’re sinful or that we struggle with pride, but how are we *specifically* sinful and what are the *specific* instances and ways that our pride manifests itself?

What would you think of a patient who told his doctor that he was sick but never went into anything specific?

What would you think of the wife who told her husband that she was unhappy but never went into specifics?<sup>16</sup>

How can a doctor care for a patient, how can a husband best love his wife—and how can a member pray for you if they don’t know specifics?

Remember, this is regarding confessing *your* sins to one another—not the sins of others. Don’t gossip or slander in the name of personal confession. Keep confession about your *own* specific sins.

<pause>

And after asking ourselves these questions, don’t settle for mere conviction and contemplation, but *follow through* with actual confession of sin with another member as soon as you can. Perhaps talk to someone after Sunday Celebration, or set up a time to meet with another member later this or next week. Don’t delay.

<pause>

Now, if a member comes and confesses their sins to *you*, there are many good and helpful ways to respond, but there’s one thing that we can do that is *more* impactful than any other response—and that’s to *pray* for one another.

Praying for one another expresses that we know that it’s *not* ultimately *our* counsel or *our* efforts that will sanctify one another.

We know that we do not have the power to convert or sanctify anyone—only God can do that. So, in prayer, we’re asking *God* to do what only *he* can do for one another.<sup>17</sup>

<pause>

<sup>16</sup> J. C. Ryle, *A Call to Prayer* (Pensacola, FL: Chapel Library, 1998), 34, Kindle, quoted in John Onwuchekwa, *Prayer: How Praying Together Shapes the Church* (Wheaton, Illinois: Crossway, 2018), 60.

<sup>17</sup> Richard Foster (*Celebration of Discipline* [London: Hodder & Stoughton, 2008], 49) writes: “In fact, if we genuinely love people, we desire for them far more than it is within our power to give, and that will cause us to pray.”

James, then, gives a general *encouragement* to pray; he says, “The prayer of a righteous person has great power as it is working.”

In some sense, this *could* be discouraging to us because we know that we are *not* righteous. God’s Word says, “None is righteous, no, not one” (Rom. 3:10).

But we also know that there *is* one who is perfectly righteous—“Jesus Christ the righteous” (1 John 2:1)—and it’s only through faith in *him* that we are declared righteous. We have no righteousness in ourselves, but if our faith is in Christ, then *his* perfect righteousness is freely counted to us (Rom. 5:19; 10:4; 1 Cor. 1:30; 2 Cor 5:21).

So the Lord now hears and answers our prayers because, in *Christ*, we are *righteous* in his sight.

So if your faith is in Jesus—not in yourself, not in your goodness or good works, not in anyone or anything else—then be comforted and encouraged that the Lord *hears* your prayers and sovereignly answers to work powerfully *through* your prayers.

And that’s what James turns our attention to next.

<pause>

So personal prayers, elders’ prayers, members’ prayers, and fourth...

#### IV. Elijah’s prayers (vv. 17-18)

Look at verses 17-18.

[<sup>17</sup> 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. <sup>18</sup> Then he prayed again, and heaven gave rain, and the earth bore its fruit.]

After James gives a *general* encouragement to pray, he now gives a *specific* example of that encouragement in the person of Elijah.

Now Elijah was one of the greatest prophets in the Old Testament—second only to Moses.

- He raised a widow’s son back to life (1 Kings 17:17-24).
- He challenged the prophets of Baal and brought down fire from heaven to consume not only a burnt offering but the entire altar (1 Kings 18:20-40).
- He brought down fire from heaven to consume the armies that came to capture him (2 Kings 1).
- And amidst chariots of fire, he was taken up into heaven by a whirlwind (2 Kings 2:9-12).

And yet, James doesn’t even mention that Elijah is a prophet here. Instead, he focuses on the fact that he was just “a man with a nature like ours.”

He hungered as we hunger. He ate as we ate. He slept as we slept. And he even feared and despaired as we, at times, do (1 Kings 19:1-18). He was a mere man just like the rest of us.

But look at the *God* who *responded* to the prayers of this mere man.

<pause>

And here, given everything about sickness that James has just said in verses 14-16, you would expect him to share about how Elijah raised a widow’s son back to life.

But that’s *not* the example that James chooses to highlight.

Instead, his example is about Elijah praying that it might not rain (and it didn’t rain for 3.5 years), and then Elijah praying that it would rain (and it rained).

Of all the examples that James could have picked, why in the world would he pick *this* one?

I think James chooses this example of praying about rain here to highlight not only that God answers the prayers of his people but that he answers prayers “for his purposes.”

What do I mean by that?

We need to understand that this was *not* just a random prayer that Elijah prayed about rain. This was a prayer according to God’s Word.

Before God brought his people into the promised land, he told them what he would do if they *obeyed* his covenant and what he would do if they *disobeyed* his covenant.

Listen to what God’s Word says in...

Deuteronomy 11:13-17: “And if you will indeed obey my commandments that I command you today, to love the LORD your God, and to serve him with all your heart and with all your soul, he will give the rain for your land in its season, the early rain and the later rain, that you may gather in your grain and your wine and your oil. And he will give grass in your fields for your livestock, and you shall eat and be full. Take care lest your heart be deceived, and you turn aside and serve other gods and worship them; then the anger of the LORD will be kindled against you, and he will shut up the heavens, so that there will be no rain, and the land will yield no fruit, and you will perish quickly off the good land that the LORD is giving you.

So prayer about rain was not random or arbitrary, but it had to do with God’s promised blessings and curses, depending on his people’s obedience or disobedience to their covenant with him.

<pause>

To understand Elijah’s prayer a bit more, we need to understand the *context* in which he was living.

Israel had lived in constant rebellion and idolatry against God. In fact, Elijah lived during the reign of King Ahab, who was known to be the *most* evil king of all who came before him (1 Kings 16:30).

[<sup>17</sup> 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. <sup>18</sup> Then he prayed again, and heaven gave rain, and the earth bore its fruit.]

So the Lord had told him to prophesy that a drought was coming (1 Kings 17:1), and Elijah *knew* what that meant according to Deuteronomy, and so he prayed “fervently”—or intensely or passionately—that God’s Word would come to pass.<sup>18</sup> And that’s exactly what happened—there was famine in the land for 3.5 years.<sup>19</sup>

And then, after his confrontation with the prophets of Baal and the powerful display of fire from heaven consuming the whole altar, God’s Word says in 1 Kings 18, “And when all the people saw it, they fell on their faces and said, ‘The LORD, he is God; the LORD, he is God,’” and they followed through with repentance by ridding themselves of the prophets of Baal (1 Kings 18:39-40).

And after their radical repentance, Elijah then prophesies to King Ahab that it will rain again, and then he prayed fervently that God would again pour out his blessings upon his people according to his Word—and God once again provided rain and fruit for his people (1 Kings 18:41-45).

<pause>

<sup>18</sup> R. Kent Hughes (*James*, PTW [Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2015]) notes: “‘He prayed fervently that it might not rain’ is literally ‘in prayer he prayed,’ a Hebrew idiom for intensity or passion.”

<sup>19</sup> Grant R. Osborne (*James Verse by Verse*, ONTC [Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2019]) notes: “First Kings 18:1 places the events three years later rather than three and a half, but that was at the beginning of the Mount Carmel incident, and we don’t know how much time ensued between that and the rainstorm of 18:45. It may be that ‘three and a half years’ stems from Jewish tradition as a symbol of judgment (Dan 7:25; Rev 11:11; 12:14).” See also Jesus’ recount of “three years and six months” in Luke 4:25.

Yes, Elijah was a prophet, but that's *not* what James emphasizes here.

Rather, he emphasizes that Elijah *knew* God's Word and he prayed *fervently* and *perseveringly* for God's Word—for God's *purposes*—to come to pass.

<pause>

Phil Ryken, an American Christian leader, reflecting on his time spent at a church in Scotland in the early 1990s, wrote this:

Back in 1992 it was typical for a member of that church to thank God for the way he had brought down the Iron Curtain of communism in eastern Europe. From the way they prayed, it was clear they believed their prayers had something to do with the collapse of the Soviet Empire. I was tempted to pull one of them aside and say, "You know, it was a little more complicated than that. The global economy had something to do with it, not to mention the arms race and the spiritual bankruptcy of communism. It took more than your prayers to pull down the Berlin Wall."

I was tempted to say such things, but I knew better. Who is to say what part a praying church actually plays in world affairs? To go to Gilcomston [the name of the church] on a Saturday night was to know what was going on in the world. The prayers of God's people really are at the heart of what God is doing, and when the true history of the world is finally written, we'll almost certainly discover that Christians like the ones in Aberdeen had a profound influence on world events.<sup>20</sup>

Now, I wonder, what are *you* praying for?

As it's been provocatively asked, "If God answered all of your prayers, would the *world* look different or just *your* life?"

<pause>

Of course, that could be asked of our church as well—what are *we* praying for as a church?

In our regular corporate prayers [in both Tangerang and Jakarta], we pray for...

- the regular preaching of God's Word;
- for specific members;
- for a culture of discipling and evangelism in our church;
- for our holiness, love, and unity;
- for the raising up of more biblically qualified elders and deacons;
- for other gospel-proclaiming churches in our city, nation, and world;
- for the many unreached people groups in Indonesia;
- for those in high positions;
- for the persecuted church;
- for gospel workers and ministries that we support;
- and for the glory of God to be displayed and enjoyed in our lives, in our church, in our city, and among the nations.

We pray for those things and many more things that we see God's Word calling us to pray for.

So, I am quite confident that if God were to answer all our prayers as a church, the world would look quite different—the earth would be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the LORD as the waters cover the sea (Hab. 2:14). And one day, that's exactly what it will be as the Lord returns and restores all creation in the new heavens and new earth.

We're not there yet, but until that time, we're called to know God's Word and pray for God's purposes.

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<sup>20</sup> Phil Ryken, "Praying as a Church for the World and Your City," June 21, 2016, <https://www.9marks.org/article/praying-as-a-church-for-the-world-and-your-city>.

[<sup>17</sup> 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. <sup>18</sup> Then he prayed again, and heaven gave rain, and the earth bore its fruit.]

We may not be around to see some of the answers to all our prayers, for it's been said, "the seed may lie under the clods [or under the soil] till we lie there, and then spring up" (Charles Bridges).

But we don't need to see the fruit of our prayers to know that the Lord is faithful. We only need to look at the cross and the empty tomb to know that he is faithful and good and sovereign in all circumstances—and so we can continue to pray fervently and perseveringly by faith in *Christ*, and trust that the rain and the fruit *will* come.

## Conclusion

As we close, I want us to consider: Is there anyone *better* that we can go to in all our times of suffering and cheerfulness or any other circumstance?

Consider the One who invites us to pray to him in all circumstances.

- He is the only self-sufficient One, perfectly happy and full as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.
- He doesn't need our worship to be happy, yet he invites us into the fullness of *his* happiness.
- He doesn't depend on us for anything, yet he gives us everything—even his own Son.
- He fearfully and wonderfully created you and has been nothing but good and merciful to you.
- There is none who is more holy, more loving, more gracious, more compassionate, more patient, more constant, more wise, more powerful, more just, more truthful, more trustworthy, more perfect than him. None!

And *this* is the God who wants to speak with *you*!

It doesn't matter how old or young you are, it doesn't matter how many good or bad things you've done, it doesn't matter if you grew up in the church or if this is your first time walking in, *this* is the God who wants to speak to *you*!

<pause>

So when James' exhorts us to pray in all circumstances with your church for God's purposes, *this* is the immense privilege that he has in mind because *this* is the God who invites us to pray to him.

So let's go to him now with that sense of awe and privilege.

Let's pray.