



The Final Six Messages in the Book of James Series

Dr. Strauss preached his last message on August 15, 2013. He went home to the Lord on September 11, 1993, after an ordeal with multiple myeloma (bone cancer). Because he usually worked six weeks ahead, he had completed the remaining messages in the James series. A booklet of these sermons was produced; the chapters are available at SpiritualGold.org, in separate PDF files for easy downloading.

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Except where otherwise noted, all Scripture quotations are from the New King James Bible.

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LET US PRAY

James 5: 13-18

Purpose:

To call us to more faithful prayer for one another—particularly for healing.

In 1968, the pilot of an airliner bound for New York realized that the landing gear would not engage. He continued to work the controls, trying to make the gear lock into place, with no success. As he circled the airport, he asked the control tower for further instructions. Responding to the crisis, ground crews sprayed the runway with foam, and emergency vehicles moved into position. Passengers were told to put their head between their knees and grab their ankles.

Seconds before landing, the pilot announced over the intercom: “We are beginning our final descent. At this moment, in accordance with International Aviation Codes established at Geneva, it is my obligation to inform you that if you believe in God you should commence prayer.” The belly landing occurred without injuries. The following day the airline offered no comment on the rule that the pilot quoted. Business continued as usual. It took a crisis to reveal this “secret” rule.¹

It's interesting how crises can turn people's minds to prayer, and make believers out of the most avowed skeptics. Not that it's wrong to pray when we're in difficult straits. While God wants us to keep the communication lines to His presence open all the time, He does invite us to call to Him in times of desperate need and pressing problems. James has said quite a bit about trying circumstances in his short letter. In fact, that's where he started—"My brethren, count it all joy when you fall into various trials, knowing that the testing of your faith produces endurance" (James 1:2-3). And if we don't have the wisdom to view our trials in that way, we need to ask God for it (James 1:5). Patience and prayer! They go together like love and marriage, and horse and carriage.

And when we wind down to the end of his book, we find them together again. In 5:7-12 he discussed patient endurance in times of adversity. So we're not surprised at all to discover that the next thing he mentions is prayer. That's the theme that runs through 5:13-18, the last major section of the book. So we finish up right where we started—patience and prayer! He introduces us to four different people (or groups of people) who pray, and teaches us an important truth about prayer from each.

1. THE PRAYING INDIVIDUAL, v.13

(Prayer should touch all of life)

"Is anyone among you suffering? Let him pray. Is anyone cheerful? Let him sing psalms" (James 5:13). Back in 5:10, James called our attention to the Old Testament prophets who suffered. He used a word that meant "to suffer evil" (*kakopathia*), to suffer things that most people would consider bad—persecution, pain, rejection, humiliation, loss. Now he uses the verb form of that same word. "Is anyone among you suffering evil?" The obvious answer is "Yes!" We all do. The prophets had their problems, and so will we. We live in an evil world, and it's difficult to get through a day without being affected by that evil in some way or other. We may suffer as a result of a drunk driver, or a blasphemous unbeliever, or a meddlesome neighbor, or an unfair boss, or a dishonest employee, or an angry customer, or a cranky clerk,

or vandalous delinquents. Or we may simply suffer from a chronic disease that is the result of Adam's sin. But one way or another, we will suffer something that causes our friends to say, "Yes, that's bad."

So what are we supposed to do about it? Get down in the mouth? Grumble and complain? Fight back with a vengeance? Go to pieces? Run away? Jump off a bridge? No! "Let him pray," says the Apostle James. Let that problem turn your mind to the Lord who has every bad circumstance under His complete control, and who promises to work every one of them together for good. Talk to Him about it. Be mindful of His powerful presence right in the middle of that difficult situation, and lay hold of Him for help.

But life is not all bad for the believer, thankfully. "Is anyone cheerful?" That word (*euthumeo*) means literally "to feel good." That doesn't necessarily mean we're trouble-free, but things are going pretty well, and we're feeling "up." What do you do when you're feeling good? Jump up and down and squeal with delight? Throw a party? Go out and spend some money? Buy a new car? God tells us exactly what to do. Sing praises to Him. After all, He is the One who is ultimately responsible for the blessings we're enjoying, so we are to give thanks to Him. Let the joys you are experiencing turn your mind to the Lord in gratitude and appreciation. That too is a form of prayer.

Do you get the point? Whatever your lot in life, the Lord is there to share it with you. Acknowledge His presence. Talk to Him about it. Whether it's good or bad by human standards, let Him be a part of it. As somebody put it, we have a God for all seasons. Enjoy His comforting presence in the cold of a winter night as well as the warmth of a summer day. Maintain your intimate prayer communion with Him in every circumstance. A great musician once said, "If I go a single day without practicing, I can tell the difference when I touch the keys of my instrument." And if the Christian goes one day without real communion with his heavenly Father, it lowers the tone of his spiritual life. That's the

lesson of the individual praying Christian: prayer should touch all of life. Look next at...

2. THE PRAYING ELDERS, vs.14-15

(Prayer can minister healing)

a. The plight of the sick person

“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). Now we’re talking about one specific kind of adversity—sickness. The word sick means literally to be without strength. It refers primarily to physical illness, often serious physical illness (cf. Lk.7:2; Jn.4:46-47; 11:1-6; Acts 9:37; Phil.2:26-27). In this verse the sick person seems to be too sick to go to the elders of the church. He must call for them to come to him.

But the word is sometimes used to refer to spiritual or emotional sickness, to be weak in faith, or to have a weak conscience (e.g., Rom.14:1; 1 Cor.8:12). James might also have had this in mind, as indicated in v.15a, “And the prayer of faith will save the sick, and the Lord will raise him up.” This is another word for sick (*kamno*) which in its only other New Testament use (Heb.12:3) refers to growing weary under the weight of opposition and temptation. So James may have also been thinking about people who were spiritually sick, emotionally weak and weary, discouraged and depressed, ready to cave in under the burdens and pressures of life, so far down that they’ve lost the will to go on. We all know people who fit that description. Maybe we’ve been there ourselves. What are we to do?

b. The procedure to follow

“Let him call for the elders of the church” (v.14a). The elders are the spiritual leaders of the church, those who watch out for the spiritual welfare of the flock (Heb.13:17). It’s important to note that the sick person takes the initiative here and calls for the elders. This is obviously not a healing rally where the faith healer

calls for people to come forward. The sick person recognizes his need and, in faith, personally calls for the elders to come. The elders sense, in this case, that it is the will of God for them to go, so they comply with the request, go to the sick person and, having anointed him with oil, pray over him in the name of the Lord. The way it is worded makes it clear that the prayer is the major thing. The anointing with oil is merely secondary.

So what was the anointing with oil for? The word James chose for “anoint” was not the one that referred to a ceremonial or sacramental anointing (*chrio*), but rather the general term for any kind of common anointing (*aleipho*), such as grooming after washing or refreshing a guest who entered the home. Since oil was often used for medicinal purposes in the world of that day (cf. Lk.10:34), some commentators believe that its purpose here was medicinal—a sort of oil rub-down to ease the patient’s physical discomfort. Whether the person was physically, emotionally or spiritually sick, the application of oil would serve to refresh, encourage and uplift him. Since oil is symbolic of the Holy Spirit in Scripture, other Bible students think it may also have been a reminder of the Spirit’s presence and power.

But whatever function the anointing with oil served, it was clearly secondary to prayer. “And the prayer of faith will save the sick, and the Lord will raise him up” (v.15a). It was the prayer that God used to bring about healing, not the oil. The oil is not even mentioned in that verse. It was a prayer of faith! The elders believed it was God’s will to heal. That’s why they came and prayed.

c. The promise of the Lord

God promises to honor the elder’s faith and heal the sick person. But I must ask you a question. Is this a formula that guarantees healing whenever it is used? It sounds that way when we first read it. But if it is, I wonder why Paul didn’t use it to get rid of his thorn in the flesh (2 Cor.12:8-9). Or to heal Epaphroditus who

almost died in Rome (Phil.2:25-30). Or Timothy, who had chronic stomach problems (I Tim.5:23). Or Trophimus, whom Paul left sick at Miletus (2 Tim.4:20). It is clearly not God's will for every Christian to be healed of every disease in this life. Otherwise none of us would ever die.

This is a special procedure for special cases, according to the will of the Lord, when He has given the elders faith to believe that healing will occur. Don't forget that the praying and anointing were to be done "in the name of the Lord" (5:14). His name conveys all that He is and all that He desires. So our requests are always to be made in subjection to His wishes and His desires for us—in the spirit of our Lord Himself, when He prayed in the garden, "not my will, but yours be done."

But there is another aspect of God's promise that we cannot overlook. "...and if he has committed sins, they will be forgiven him" (5:15b). Sickness is not always the result of sin (cf. Job 1:1; Jn.9:3). And James is not implying that it is. But there is that possibility (Greek, 3rd class condition, "more probable future"). Jesus said to the man he had healed by the pool of Bethesda, "Do not sin anymore, so that nothing worse may befall you" (Jn.5:14). And Paul suggested that some of the Corinthians were sick because they had come to the Lord's table in an unworthy manner (1 Cor.11:30). Sickness may sometimes be God's discipline for sin. So it affords an excellent opportunity to examine our lives and confess those sins to God that we have never before acknowledged. Calling for the elders assumes that there has been repentance and confession. So James assures us that the sin will be forgiven. It's gone—wiped from God's memory, never to be held against us again. And that healing of our relationship with the Lord is far more wonderful than any physical healing could ever be.

Two people and two great truths. From the praying individual we learn that prayer should touch all of life. From the praying elders we learn that prayer can bring healing. Look thirdly at...

3. THE PRAYING FRIENDS, v.16a

(Prayer will bring us together)

"Confess your trespasses to one another, and pray for one another, that you may be healed" (v.16a). This confession is not just to the elders. It is far broader than that. It is addressed to all the believers in the Body. If we have sinned against another brother or sister, then we need to go to that person and acknowledge the sin and seek their forgiveness. Nothing can heal relationships so beautifully as one believer going to another and admitting, "I sinned against you when I spoke to you that way, (or when I ignored you, or when I failed to tell you the truth, or whatever it was). I want you to know that I am truly sorry. Will you forgive me?" I think that's what James had in mind when he said, "Confess your sins to one another." That brings healing.

But don't stop there. "...and pray for one another." Make it an ongoing habit (present tense) to mention each other before the throne of God on a regular basis. Praying for each other establishes a bond between us that draws us together. I certainly cannot complain about people not praying for me. Sometimes I am literally overwhelmed with the number of people who have assured me that they are praying. And for that I am deeply grateful. But I need to be just as faithful in praying for you. And you need to be just as faithful in praying for others. We obviously cannot pray for every person in need, but most of us could pray for far more people than we do. And it will make a difference.

I read an interesting survey released by the Southern Medical Journal indicating that hospital patients do better when someone prays for them. A total of 393 patients treated in a hospital's coronary care unit were studied over a two-year period (1982-83) as scientifically as possible. Half were chosen randomly to be prayed for. Those doing the praying never met the people they were praying for, but were given first names and diagnosis only. The patients themselves did not know who was being prayed for.

Although they were as equally ill as it was possible to group them, the half who were prayed for had fewer episodes of congestive heart failure, pneumonia or cardiac arrest, and needed less tubes for breathing or feeding and less antibiotics. What an incredibly revealing study. Prayer may well be the most powerful healing force in the universe.² So let's do what the Apostle James is suggesting, and pray more for one another. Who knows what powerful miracles of healing God may accomplish in our midst? That leads us right into the last person who prays in this treatise on prayer and the lesson we learn from him...

4. THE PRAYING PROPHET, vs.16b-18

(Prayer has great power)

The last half of verse 16 makes the point — Literally, “The effective prayer of a righteous man has great power.” There are two conditions for powerful praying suggested in this verse:

a. It must be effective, v.16b

When we think of effective, fervent prayers, we conjure up visions of a person raising his pitch and volume, gritting his teeth and clenching his fists, and belting it out. But that's not the idea at all. Our word “energy” comes from this Greek verb (*energeo*). It is God Himself who energizes our prayers, and He does so when we pray as He tells us to: according to His will (1 Jn.5:14), in Christ's name (Jn.14:13), abiding in Him (Jn.15:7), believing that He will answer (Mk.11:24), with specific requests, not generalities (that's the idea in this particular word for prayer, *dee-esis*). And last but not least, we need to pray with a desire for His glory (1 Cor.10:31; Jn.14:13b). This one is most important of all. Prayer is not primarily a means to get what we want from God, but a means for God to get what He wants from us—namely, lives that glorify Him. Prayer is more concerned with us aligning ourselves with God's purposes than asking Him to align Himself with ours. When we come to Him with that attitude, He energizes our prayers and they have great power.

b. It must come from a righteous life, vs.17,18

James is probably not referring to our righteous standing before God because of our faith in Christ, but a consistently righteous life—a life lived in obedience to God's Word and submission to His will. Nobody's perfect, but the people whose prayers have power are those who demonstrate their faith by endeavoring to live what they say they believe. They are doers of the Word and not hearers only.

There was no better example of this powerful praying than the prophet Elijah. “Elijah was a man with a nature like ours, and he prayed earnestly that it would not rain; and it did not rain on the land for three years and six months. And he prayed again, and the heaven gave rain, and the earth produced its fruit” (vs.17-18). Elijah was human just like us. He felt pain and suffering just as we do. He got weak and weary, discouraged and depressed, just like us. On one occasion he even asked God to let him die. But he wanted his life to please the Lord and he lived in submission to God's will. And as a result, his prayers had great power and accomplished great things (cf. 1 Kings 17:1; 18:42). They brought a measure of healing to an entire nation. I wonder how our prayer lives measure up by comparison.

CONCLUSION

Well, that's James' discourse on prayer. It may be the most important subject he covers in his entire letter. We talk a lot about it; we admit we need more of it; but we seldom do anything about it. Let's change that. Let's get down to the serious business of effective praying and enjoy the healing that it brings.

I recently read a true story that brings this study to a fitting conclusion. A young boy had infantile paralysis and was fitted with a leg brace. While very young, it didn't bother him much, but as he grew older and had to compete with other boys, he longed to be healed. One day he said to his father, “Daddy, do you think God

will ever heal this leg of mine?" Some time later his father took him to a great cathedral where some people had reportedly been healed of various physical difficulties. They walked together to the altar, knelt in prayer, and asked God to display His power by performing a miracle. As his dad was praying, his son looked into his father's face and saw that it was full of faith and hope. But as they walked out together, he still dragged that withered leg as it thumped along behind him. But...halfway up the aisle, the boy was engulfed by an enormous happiness that seemed to well up within him. And now as an older man, he says, "I can remember to this day the glory and might of that experience. I knew that I was healed...not in my leg, but in my mind. And from then on, it made no difference that I had a lame leg. I now had a mind full of faith and hope." Let's give ourselves faithfully to prayer, that we too may be healed.

Complete healing is promised in heaven—no death, sorrow, crying or pain (Rev.21:4). Do you know for sure you will be there? You can be sure by trusting Jesus Christ as your Savior. It was He that paid the penalty for our sin. Our sinful nature separates us from God. On the cross Jesus bore our sins. He took care of our sin problem. This was His gift to us. Trust in what He did and receive His gift of eternal life.

¹Discovery Paper, Cat. 3995, March 22, 1987, Gary Vanderet, (James 5:13-18).

²Better Breather's Bulletin, American Lung Association, Vol. 1, No. 3, March 1990, p.5-6.