

**James in a nutshell**

There are various themes but the major themes are;

- A saving faith is a living faith. In Chapter 1 James tells us that faith without works is dead, a living faith must necessarily be accompanied with working on behalf of the Kingdom,
- Worldliness manifests itself in various and often subtle ways among believers. Some specific manifestations of worldliness treated by James include warnings on 'the tongue' in chapter 3, the temptation of riches here in chapter 5. Strife and factions, quarrels and conflicts of believers are evidence of their worldliness (4:1-3),
- Wisdom is evidenced by knowing how to live and then doing it! *Paraenesis*. (Ch. 3) and we learned that the wise person is not in charge of their own life, they have given it over to the will and the way of Christ,
- Persevering in suffering, especially through prayer. (Ch. 5)

**Show me your faith, show me your wisdom, show me your prayers**

Let's go ahead and get started in the reading for today. . .

**James 5:13-20**

<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.

In our lives we think that with so much going on we need fast, nimble answers for the stuff of life. We long for quick fixes. A list of five things we can do to fix our marriage or three choices that lead to financial security. James takes it one better. The street answer for the stuff of life can be summarized in one word: Prayer.

**The Street Answer to everything is . . . prayer**

This isn't so new for us. We've heard this kind of sentiment before. Probably wasn't so new in the first century either. But the reality is, in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, prayer is not the first thought for most of us when it comes to facing the hardships of life. We first use our life's experience and hard earned knowledge and a quick phone call since "it's not what you know but who you know." Then there is money and when that all fails us, we pray expecting God to answer our prayer according to our wishes in our timetable. This is not the practice of prayer that James is talking about.

This way of thinking is more like that of the apostle Paul who wrote to the church in the Greek island town of Thessalonica . . .

**1 Thessalonians 5:16-18**

<sup>16</sup> Rejoice always, <sup>17</sup> pray without ceasing, <sup>18</sup> give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.

Or more like his friend Peter who wrote a more personal letter and said . . .

**1 Peter 5:6-7**

Humble yourselves, therefore, under the mighty hand of God so that at the proper time he may exalt you, <sup>7</sup> casting all your anxieties on him, because he cares for you.

Or maybe more like this 18<sup>th</sup> century believer, John Wesley founder of the Methodist movement:

**"God does nothing except in response to believing prayer." ~ John Wesley**

For me, throwing money at a problem is usually the first response. James has strong words in this chapter for when money and the hope of money's answers is our habitual response to life:

**James 5:2-3**

<sup>2</sup> Your riches have rotted and your garments are moth-eaten. <sup>3</sup> Your gold and silver have corroded, and their corrosion will be evidence against you and will eat your flesh like fire. You have laid up treasure in the last days.

"Last days" is an important theme in James. It seemingly was James' belief that Jesus might be returning soon to right the wrongs of the first century. He pleaded with the church to bear up under persecution and to be steadfast in their faith in the face of trouble and suffering.

**James 5:8, 11**

<sup>8</sup> You also, be patient. Establish your hearts, for the coming of the Lord is at hand. <sup>11</sup> Behold, we consider those blessed who remained steadfast. You have heard of the steadfastness of Job, and you have seen the purpose of the Lord, how the Lord is compassionate and merciful.

Last days . . . What are we to do with last days? Clearly we are not to get caught up in the world and worldly things. It was not about leading a life of comfort for James, but a life of living faith. CS Lewis reminds us of the folly of selfish prayer . . .

**"It is quite useless knocking at the door of heaven for earthly comfort. It's not the sort of comfort they supply there." ~ C. S. Lewis**

I have to admit that discussions of prayer puts me in a bit of a dilemma. On the one hand I think that prayer is the key ingredient of the spiritual life. If the spiritual life is really at its essence determined by the nature and the depth of our relationship with God then dedicated prayer is of course essential. In fact the health and the vitality of this relationship, like any relationship, depends on clarity and frequency of communication. And if at its very essence prayer is simply communicating with God - then prayer is the essential expression of that relationship . . . So, on the one hand it is incredibly important.

But, on the other I sometimes think that prayer is largely misunderstood, at least as it is preached today. I wonder if we expect too much out of prayer. Or if we expect prayer to be something it is not.

For me it is an area of great struggle. I think for some people prayer comes easily - they pray constantly and find great comfort and joy and meaning and energy in the act. For me it is not so. Ask me to read, to study, to give, to serve, to be hospitable, to do evangelism, to share my faith, to mentor young believers, those I can do without great struggle or great frustration - but prayer. I do it but it does not come easily, not without struggle, not without frustration - sometimes boredom, sometimes angst. Almost always fitfully and distractedly.

In fact I thought we should have a guest speaker today because I feel a bit unqualified to say much in this area of prayer. But, I do not think I am alone - I think a lot of people wrestle with prayer. I think this morning James speaks to us. It is like James is setting up a continuum that encompasses the circumstances of life. On one end is the downside of life what he calls trouble and on the other end the upside of life what he calls happy - and his exhortation is simple - no matter where you find yourself on the continuum of life the proper response is prayer. Just pray!

James was a great example. He walked what he talked - An early church father and historian Eusebius noted and ancient tradition says that James spent so much time on his knees in the Temple praying for the people that his knees became as hard as a camel's. I don't know if you have seen a camel at the zoo but when they sit down they fold their long legs under them and their knee take most of the weight and they develop huge calluses. That was James. Camel knees - Can you imagine?

In these short few verses James turns on the firehose of prayer. In short order he addresses suffering and prayer, celebration and prayer, sickness and prayer and even throws in the prayer of the Elders for added value. Then he caps it all with a powerful and confusing statement about the prayer of faith.

<p><b>Prayer and . . .</b> <b>Suffering</b> <b>Celebration</b> <b>Sickness</b> <b>Elders</b> <b>Confession</b></p>
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Let's look at these briefly one by one . . .

### **1. In times of trouble – suffering**

<p><b>Is anyone among you suffering? Let him pray. Is anyone of you in trouble? He should pray. (v13)</b></p>
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'Trouble' is a kind of general term for all the hard things of life; stress, hardship, problems, difficulties, dilemmas, messes, nuisances, dangers, adversity, misfortune, losses, defeats, failures, bad luck, hard luck, disaster, calamity, disappointment, let down, pain, anguish, distress, misery, torment, affliction, grief, sorrow, regret, disillusionment, disenchantment – whatever the trouble is - PRAY!

When life is tough turn to God! I think at times there is a bit of reluctance in that - perhaps a bit of pride, perhaps a fear of using God. Doesn't that make God simply kind of the rescue squad of life?

Does simply turning to God when life is rough, isn't that in a sense using God and turning him into the cosmic super hero? Yes, but that is OK in a sense because He is the cosmic super hero - there is some truth there. I think the reason we should pray when life is hard is based on the notion that all of life is under God's control - under his sovereign direction. In other words he is in charge and if we have a problem you go to the top. In a sense he is the cosmic super hero who can intervene. He is the one who can do something. God is God and thus "Help!" is always an appropriate prayer.

### **2. In times of happiness**

<p><b>Is anyone cheerful? Let him sing praise</b></p>
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This is a less natural response. When we are in trouble we know we should pray. But, when we are content when things are going well - that is when it is easy to forget and let God slide out of the picture.

If someone is going through a hard time, a difficult struggle, it is common for them to say to me "Hey, would you keep me in your prayers?" I cannot think of one time I had somebody come up to me and say "Things are going so well I just need you to pray!" We are far quicker to ask God for help in difficult circumstances than give him praise in good circumstances. Maybe we get enamored with the gifts and forget the giver. If God is sovereign and all of life operates under his sovereign control - not only do we need to turn to him in the midst of the hard stuff but then we should be just as ready to turn to him in the midst of the good stuff. It is not permissible simply to give him blame for the hard crud but then not give him credit for the good stuff as well.

So when you are in trouble - pray! When things are great - pray! Now James goes after a specific situation (and it is more near the trouble end of things) - if someone is sick. Now here, the instructions are a little different.

### 3. In times of illness

<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.

Sickness here means an illness that is severe where the person is weak and without strength. The passage just raises a host of questions first, **Why the elders?**

It might help to understand who the elders are. They are simply the designated leaders of the early NT church. Elder was an office - a formal position of service. They were supposed to be those who were spiritually mature and farther along in their faith. I do not think that magical spiritual power is vested in the office of elder. I do not believe that they are somehow special or because of their office have a hotline to heaven. I think what he is saying is that typically those are the mature believers of the community and thus in this situation they are the ones you want praying because this kind of prayer takes maturity and discernment.

**What's the deal with the oil?** Anoint simply means to dab or rub. Some think that it is medicinal. But oil was only helpful in some illness so why apply it on others? Others see it as symbolic. For me, I understand that deeds of obedience done in the name of the Lord have mysterious everlasting power and influence. I can't really explain it. And then, **what exactly is this prayer of faith?**

#### The Prayer of Faith

**And the prayer offered in faith will make the sick person well; the Lord will raise him up. v15)**

The verse makes it sound like faith is a magic wand. We have to ask "Is this an unconditional promise?" Does faith have some kind of supernatural power? Sometimes we see faith as this magical wand that has the ability to make anything come true.

But faith is not magic though at first glance in the passage it sounds like it. But as you think about that it doesn't make much sense - it does not fit reality or experience.

**"In Gethsemane the holiest of all petitioners prayed three times that a certain cup might pass from Him. It did not. After that the idea that prayer is recommended to us as a sort of infallible gimmick may be dismissed." ~ CS Lewis**

The key question is what is the prayer of faith? I have five terms that will help you understand the prayer of faith:

BELIEF  
UNDERSTANDING THE CHARACTER OF GOD  
SUBMISSION TO GOD  
DISCERNMENT  
TRUST

- **Belief** - It includes the conviction that God can and does heal. That he is powerful and does the supernatural. So, faith includes intensity of belief - but is not limited to simply the intensity of one's belief.
- **Understanding God's character** - Faith has to have an object and the nature of the object always plays into the nature of the faith. Ultimately my faith is only as powerful as the object I place my faith in. So, faith includes an understanding of the nature of God and his ways. Who he is and how he acts.
- **Submission to God's will** - It includes an understanding of the nature of God's will - how and why he acts. That he heals for his purposes and glory. Jesus conditions prayer in other places by his will.

- **Discernment** – A Spirit-given conviction that in this case God will heal.
- **Trust** - A yielding to his love and compassion.

Thus, all of the above go together to make up the prayer of faith. Thus, the prayer of faith cannot be prayed at will. It rather is that notion that it is given of God in certain cases, to serve His own living purposes, and in strict accordance with His sovereign will. Thus, it is not just an ordinary prayer for another, however good and sincere it may be, but the prayer prompted by the Spirit-wrought conviction that it is the Lord's will to heal the one being prayed for. Thus, the prayer of faith is not something that can be manufactured by the one praying as much as discerned.

I want to give you a secret, not an easy secret, but a profound secret nonetheless. If you want to see great power in prayer and great results in prayer, **only ask for what the Father intends to give**. That is the secret to Jesus' ministry.

#### **John 5:18-20**

<sup>18</sup>This was why the Jews were seeking all the more to kill him, because not only was he breaking the Sabbath, but he was even calling God his own Father, making himself equal with God. <sup>19</sup>So Jesus said to them, ***“Truly, truly, I say to you, the Son can do nothing of his own accord, but only what he sees the Father doing. For whatever the Father does, that the Son does likewise.”*** <sup>20</sup>For the Father loves the Son and shows him all that he himself is doing. And greater works than these will he show him, so that you may marvel.

How do you know that you are asking for what the father wants to give you? Hours in prayer building your relationship with him will give you that. It is quite a mystery;

#### **The Mystery of Prayer**

Power - stand next to a huge waterfall, a jet engine, a dragster - they all have raw power. Prayer is not as dramatic but it has that kind of energy in it. Prayer moves the hand that moves the world!

Prayer is part of God's Modus Operandi for changing the world! You know what the problem is with the Genie in the bottle - it always gives you what you want - with all its unintended consequences. The fact is God is far better than the Genie. Here God is better because He does not just give what you ask for but gives you what you need most. He knows all the consequences of our requests and works to bring about his purposes and our good. In every circumstance from suffering to happiness to illness we must resort to prayer because the prayer of the righteous is powerful and effective. It allows us to participate in accomplishing the purposes of God. In every situation of life pray - because prayer works!

#### **Congregational prayer - Standing in the need of prayer**

##### **Benediction**

**"I have seen many men work without praying, though I have never seen any good come out of it; but I have never seen a man pray without working." ~James Hudson Taylor**

#### **Discussion Questions**

What kind of life event brings you to the 'end of your rope'?  
What do you do when you are at the end of your rope? How do you cope?

#### **Read 1 Thessalonians 5:16-18**

Scripture says in 1 Peter 5:7 "Casting all your care on Him because He cares for you." What does it mean to you to pray without ceasing and to cast all your care upon him?

Do you think that if you have trouble or pain you can simply 'pray about it and forget about it'?

**Re read James 5:13-18**

Do you pray when you are troubled or sick?

Do you pray when you are happy?

Have you ever asked for the prayer of the elders? How was that for you? Why not if not?

What do you think is the Prayer of Faith?

What do you think of the idea of confessing your sins one to another?

Dave called prayer "a mystery." Do you agree with that sentiment? How so is prayer a mystery?

How can we encourage each other toward a more vibrant prayer life in this Community Group?