

Introduction

If you woke up in the middle of the night and smelled smoke and saw the bright illumination of flames, you would come to the realization that you must get yourself and your family out of the house and quickly. If in your frantic efforts to get to safety, you could grab one single thing on your way out the door, what would it be? Frankly, if Melissa was okay, I would be okay. I can't really say what I would grab. But I can say this, there is one thing we all need to have with us at all times wherever we go. It is something that flames cannot extinguish. No matter what we are going through, we need to have with us a prayerful heart. We might forget it from time to time, but James is here to remind us this morning of the importance and power of prayer.

[Read Text and Pray]

Clearly, one central concern is on the mind of James as he begins his downward descent toward landing the plane and concluding this very practical and instructive letter to the early church. The people of God need to be a people of prayer. Whatever time it is, is the right time to pray. James does not want us to forget to pray without ceasing. He makes his point as he declares the priority of prayer and the power into which it taps.

First, I want you to see that . . .

I. Prayer is Always in Order

James draws our attention to four occasions when what we ought to do is pray. He mentions the occasions of suffering, cheer, sickness, and sin.

A. First, James asks, "Is anyone among you suffering?" And to the one who say yes, he says, "let him pray." Suffering here refers to any kind of affliction that we may be experiencing. It certainly includes suffering from persecution. That was probably the thing that was on the forefront of the mind of James. He had just urged brothers to consider the prophets who though called by God endured great suffering. Like them, Christ's followers are to be patient in the midst of persecution. But we recall how James at the beginning of the epistle exhorted Christ's followers to consider it all joy when facing trials of various kinds. Anything which we experience of which others would say, "oh, that is bad," is an occasion of suffering. Some suffering is mild and some is intense.

I faced a little suffering this week. I awoke Monday morning and headed down to the basement to exercise only to learn that my basement floor was covered with water. With all that rain that fell—yes that rain which compelled us to reschedule the picnic—in the midst of all the rain that fell, my sump pump decided to give up the ghost. Needless to say, I did not spend my Monday the way I had thought I would. The damage was minimal; we got a new sump pump, and we are getting everything back in order. It was mild suffering. Others in this church family have experienced much more significant suffering this week with surgery. Around the world in various places, some Christians are undergoing intense persecution. But whether our suffering is mild or intense, there is one activity which is in order. Brothers and sisters, when we are suffering, let us pray.

Suffering is an occasion for us to draw near the Lord and cast our care upon him. Suffering is not a time for grumbling or complaining. It is not a time for us to give up hope. But it is a time for us to cry out to God.

Psalm 18:6 says, "In my distress I called upon the LORD; to my God I cried for help. From his temple he heard my voice, and my cry to him reached his ears."

Psalm 55:22 says, "Cast your burden on the LORD, and he will sustain you; he will never permit the righteous to be moved."

In his 2nd letter to the Corinthians, Paul declared that the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ is "the Father of mercies and God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our affliction."

Is anyone among you afflicted, let him call upon the God of all comfort. Let him or her, "cast your burden on the Lord." "Cast your care on him, for he cares for you."

I could go on and on. The Bible is full of such encouragement. But the most moving example of crying out to God in distress is provided for us in our Lord Jesus Christ. Never—NEVER—has anyone been in a position of greater suffering than Jesus. As he anticipated the cross, he declared that his soul was very sorrowful, even to death. Sweat drops of blood squeezed through his skin as he prayed. And what was his prayer? It was a prayer of dread, but at the same time a prayer that God's will be done. And God's will was done. Jesus did not evade the suffering; he was afflicted on the cross with God's wrath and suffered even to death. But he rose on the third day. And as a result salvation from God's wrath is available to all who will repent and turn to Jesus in faith.

Now, in the midst of our own suffering, God may remove the trial, but most importantly we should pray your will be done, and we should cry out for strength and grace to endure our suffering with godliness. Deliverance in suffering may mean an exit but it more likely will mean mercy for endurance. Remember what James said in chapter one. "The testing of your faith produces steadfastness. And let steadfastness have its full effect that you may be perfect and complete lacking in nothing." Much as our flesh dislikes to hear it, we need suffering; we need affliction. And affliction is a time to pray most importantly for comfort and strength for godly endurance.

B. The second occasion to which James calls our attention is the occasion of cheer. He asks, "Is anyone cheerful?" In this condition, rather than feeling distress, we are feeling peace of mind. We are upbeat. This condition does not have regard to our circumstances but to an inward frame of mind that is cheerful. Things are good within even if they are not without. In this situation, James says that such a one should sing praise. Not just sing, but sing praise. In other words his focus should not be on the way he feels but on the God who is providing such an occasion of inward rest and peace. Praise falls under the general category of prayer as it is one aspect what prayer involves. Sometimes we lose sight of the fact that prayer is more than simply asking God for help and for things. That is supplication. But what we call prayer, our communion with God, consists in praise, thanksgiving, confession, and supplication. Let us not forget it. Is anyone cheerful, let him sing praise to God.

C. We come next to the third occasion for prayer. "Is anyone among you sick?" The word translated as "sick," can also mean simply weak and perhaps relate to being weak and weary in faith. However, the fact that the affected person has to call for the elders to come to him and that James connects it to anointing with oil swings most interpreters to conclude that James is specifically talking about a significant illness.

The one who is seriously ill (and perhaps the one who is seriously spiritually weakened) should call for the elders of the church. Again, it is an occasion for prayer—this time for the prayers of others. The elders of the church are to be devoted to the word and to prayer. So they should be called for in these particularly serious situations. They are to pray over the one who has called, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord. I believe the use of oil here is an expression of seeking the power of God to be applied to the individual. Should sick people take their medicine? Absolutely. Should elders literally apply oil when they come and pray for the sick or for the weak in faith? Well, the disciples did it as they were healing the sick. Mark 6:13 says that Jesus sent out the twelve two-by-two, and they “anointed with oil many who were sick and healed them.” So I am perfectly comfortable applying oil as I pray, if that is what the sick would like. Any healing that is to be done will be accomplished by the Lord himself although in response to prayer.

James says 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.”

The prayer of faith is an important matter for consideration here. James has already told us in chapter 4:1-2 that the reason the Christians are asking but not receiving is because they are asking wrongly. They are asking with a divided heart—their own pleasures are at the core of their requests. The prayer of faith, therefore, must in part be a prayer that is grounded not in selfishness but in the will and the glory of God. It is committed to what it is that God desires to do in the given circumstance. Furthermore, it is convinced in this case that it is the will of God to heal and raise the person up. It appears to be a real though uncommon occurrence. The prayer of faith does not pertain to the quantity of faith but a certain kind of faith—the conviction that it is God’s will to heal. In response to that faith, the sick will be made well. God will raise them up. If they have committed sins they will be forgiven.

Not always directly, but sometimes, sin is connected to our experience of sickness. That was the case in Corinth. Their abuse of the Lord’s Supper was the reason many were sick and some had died. Sickness is sometimes the occasion for a season of reflection in which we are made aware of sins we have committed. Sickness can also be the occasion of sin in that we respond faithlessly and resentfully to our suffering. The assurance is given that when the Lord raises up the sick, he has forgiven those sins.

There are other aspects to note here. First, the elders are the ones who are praying—not the one who is sick or weak. Second, it is not a healing service but elders have come to the location of the sick. Third, this is not preparation for death but for life.

D. We come to the fourth occasion for prayer to which James directs our attention. It is the occasion of sin. He says, “Therefore, confess your sins to one another and pray for one another that you may be healed.” James has exited the situation involving the elders and has moved out to the church family as a whole and relationships within the family. He sees sin for what it is. It is a sickness to the soul; it needs to be healed.

The way for this to take place is for brothers and sisters to deal effectively with the sins they commit against one another. James is not talking about a gathering where people tell one another how they have sinned. He is not speaking of a public meeting for confession as though everyone ought to be sharing their sins with the whole community.

The context is with one another. It corresponds to what Jesus taught in Matthew 18 that you confront, confess, and forgive privately those offenses committed against one another. We must confess and seek forgiveness from the party we have offended. On occasion that may be a public confession when we have sinned against a group or a congregation.

When such confessions are made, we pray for one another for restoration, for healing. It takes humility to confess when we have sinned against another. It takes humility to readily forgive one who confesses. It takes mercy to pray together and seek healing. But healing comes at the point when hearts are joined together in prayer. Here there is intercession for one another. And it is critical for spiritual healing of our sin-sick souls.

E. So you see four specific occasions which call for prayer: suffering, cheer, sickness, and sin. These four occasions cover the gamut in a Christian's life. We are all in one of these occasions all the time. We are suffering. We are in the midst of what seems like smooth sailing. We are sick. Or we are in sin. Sometimes we experience more than one of these occasions at a time. But no matter what our experience, it is an occasion for prayer. It is as Paul said to the Thessalonians: "Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances, for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you." (1 Thessalonians 5:16-18). Prayer is ALWAYS in order. It should always be a priority. We must not neglect to pray.

We turn next to see that . . .

II. Prayer Taps in to the Power of God.

Why is James so intent about the priority of prayer? Why does he want to urge Christians no matter what their situation that they should be heartily engaged in prayer whether confession, praise, intercession or supplication? Why should you and I be relentlessly engaged in prayer, no matter what we are going through? Why should it be such a high priority and the regular course of our lives? It is because of the power associated with prayer. Prayer is a human action with God-sized results because prayer taps in to the power of God.

Consider the statement that we find right in the middle of this text on prayer: "The prayer of a righteous person has great power as it is working."

James describes which prayers have great power. The prayer of a righteous person has great power. Uh-oh. Right there some of us might already count ourselves out. After all, the Bible says, "there is no one righteous, not even one." Not so fast, brothers and sisters! Because if James was talking that kind of righteousness, Jesus is the only one whose prayers would count. It is clear from James's description even of himself in this letter that he does not mean sinless. Remember back in chapter 3 and verse 2? He said, "For WE ALL stumble in many ways." Furthermore, he is about to bring Elijah to our attention as the example for powerful prayer, and although Elijah was mightily used of God, he was FAR from perfect. He is introduced, after all, as a man with a nature just like us. And we can call to mind how Elijah ran in fear when threatened by Jezebel. In a fit of depression, he complained that he was the only one left and even asked God to kill him.

If Elijah is an example of a righteous person in prayer, then James does not mean perfect by any stretch of the imagination. But he does mean a person who has genuine faith. His works demonstrate that he truly believes. This is not an extraordinary level of Christian discipleship, but what is true of every follower of Jesus. If you belong to Christ, you have repented of sin and believed in Jesus, in Christ, you are the kind of righteous person James is talking about.

Now, as such, you and I are able to tap in to the great power of God. And the way we are able to do so is through prayer. It is not that we become powerful; it is that God works powerfully in response to our prayers. It takes place as we draw near to God in worship and appeal to him to work. He moves mountains. He who created what is seen from what is unseen, He who calls each of the stars by name, will work in response to a righteous person's prayer and will do what only he can do. Prayer should always be a priority because God will work powerfully in response to it. It pleases God to use what looks like foolishness in the world to display his power, and prayer is just such seeming foolishness.

Elijah is a vivid example. As James says, he is simply a guy just like you and me. Elijah had no special power of his own. But he was a man who was right with God despite his sins. And when he prayed, God worked mightily. He worked supernaturally. He worked when Elijah prayed for the son of the widow of Zarephath. The son had suddenly died and the widow was distraught, but Elijah prayed and the Lord restored him to life. Then on Mt Carmel there was the great showdown between Elijah and the prophets of Baal. Whose God would respond in power to the prayer of his servant? Baal's prophets prayed all day, but nothing happened. In the evening, however, Elijah took his place and prayed to the Lord to answer his cry so that the people would know that the Lord is God. That is when the fire fell. The true God is marked by the fact that he answers prayer.

Even in his weakness when in despair, Elijah cried out to God. He asked the Lord to kill him. And just to show that God does not answer every prayer the way we ask it, God did not do it. But when our cries align with his will, God is pleased to work in mighty ways. James points us in particular to Elijah's prayer concerning rain. Elijah had told Ahab that there would be neither dew nor rain for years except by his word. And we learn that the word he was talking about was his word of prayer. For after three and a half years the Lord said he would send rain, and Elijah prayed accordingly, and God sent the rain.

Commentators make the point that our translations can be misleading here. The word ferently or earnestly is used to describe the prayer of Elijah. However, the original Greek places emphasis not on the fervency of the prayer but on the fact that Elijah did nothing other than pray. Literally, the text reads, "with prayer, he prayed." It was certainly a genuine prayer. Surely it was fervent prayer. Elijah really meant was he was asking. But James's point is that God acted because Elijah prayed. Elijah asked and God put a stop to rain and dew. It lasted for 3 and a half years, and then at God's instruction, Elijah believed God's promise and prayed that it would rain. He persisted with patience. Seven times he sent his servant to look for a cloud. Six times the servant returned saying he saw nothing. But Elijah continued to pray until that seventh time, the servant saw a cloud forming. Jesus taught us also that our prayers should be persistent.

But the point is that God works powerfully through the simplicity of human prayer. Faith evidences itself by latching hold of God's promises. And James is telling us that even we, as puny as we are, can have a part in God's wonderful works through asking. Remember that straightforward statement from James 4:2? You do not have because you do not ask.

Conclusion

Brothers and sisters, from time to time we need to be reminded of what is important. We can let important things go and suddenly realize we are in a world of hurt. That was certainly the case for me this week. The tag on my sump pump said it was made in 1997. We have lived in our home for almost twelve years now, and I had heard it cut on from time to time when the rain was really heavy. I just never stopped to imagine that it would need to be replaced at some time. I even had

the thought go through my mind last Sunday that maybe the rain was not as heavy at my house as they were saying because I had not heard my sump pump operate. But after 25 years of operating steadily and without attention the pump gave up the ghost and I only realized it Monday morning when a shallow layer of water covered the basement floor.

You and I neglect prayer at our peril. We sail along as individuals, families, and as a church. And the mercies of God are ever new. We can begin to slip in our appreciation of how important it is to pray. But we must not!

The early church was devoted very clearly to four main priorities. They were the apostles' teaching, fellowship, the breaking of bread, and prayer. One of the reasons Wednesday's Learning and Leaning includes LEANING is because as a church, we NEED to pray! If you are a member of Grace Community Church and you are able to be here, you need to be. We need you to be. Do you want to see the power of God at work in this body? We tap in to divine and supernatural power through the wonder of talking with God in praise, confession, thanksgiving, and making known our requests.

I hope this reminder stirs you personally in your prayer life, but also to be devoted to corporate prayer as well! Hope to see you Wednesday night.