

The Power of Prayer

Epistle of James

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James 5. The first time we've been in James since December 2 actually. Our exposition has carried us all the way to the last eight verses and then we took a break for Christmas and then the new year we spent that time looking at practical ecclesiology. So this week we jump back into the epistle of James and we're going to be looking at verses 13 to 18 for a number of weeks. The title of the message, the title of the series, these six verses, verses 13 to 18 of James 5, is "The Power of Prayer." The power of prayer.

When we are out of a book this long, I feel the temptation to preach the whole book again because I feel like you've got to get the context and it is important for us to review a few things so bear with me, but I'll try not to do that, preach the whole book. But we come to a passage that is actually a passage of some extraordinary controversy. There are some false doctrines that have grown out of misunderstandings of this particular passage, we'll see. Just a couple of examples of prominent doctrines that have been twisted and misunderstood would be the Roman Catholic doctrine or the sacrament of extreme unction, the last rites actually comes from this passage, a misunderstanding, misapplication of this particular passage. Another would be in the faith movement, the word of faith movement in the church in the twentieth century and up to today. It's a misunderstanding of this passage that says, the misunderstanding is that God is promising in this passage that if any Christian is ever ill, God wills them to be healed and that healing will come through the prayer of faith. You'll see that phrase here and you'll see how these things could be misunderstood. Often as we read the Scriptures, you read it and you read the sentences and there are, you know, certain meanings can be attached to a particular sentence but as in the English language and every language, the way to find the true meaning of a sentence is to interpret it in context, and we'll see the importance of that, that if we really interpret this in context even of what James is saying in the paragraphs around these verses and what he is saying in his entire epistle, we are safeguarded from these two errors. And of course, you also interpret a passage in light of the whole of the Bible, when you put it in the context of the whole of the Bible, these things don't stand. It's always a characteristic of heresy that truth is taken out of context; that a grain of truth is taken and then isolated from its context and twisted. So the proof text becomes a twisting of the true intent of God's word, it leads to the destruction of many, and so we need to learn to interpret the Bible in context. That's why it is so important for us to have the recent series on hermeneutics taught by Todd Friel because

we all need to learn how to interpret the Bible rightly if we are going to be faithful Christians. So we'll see that as we work through this passage in weeks to come.

So today is the power of prayer, part 1. We're going to really focus in just on verse 13 this morning and what I want you to see in this particular verse, the power of prayer to just add stability and strength to our lives; that God intends prayer to be such a part of our life that it stabilizes us in the various circumstances we find ourselves in, moments of trial, moments of joy, we need to pray. In fact, if I was subtitling this I would say, you know, pray at all times, which is exactly what Paul says in Ephesians 6:18 or what he says in 1 Thessalonians 5, I think it's verse 20, no it's actually verse 19, pray without ceasing, or verse 17, 5:17, 1 Thessalonians 5:17. Pray without ceasing. Pray and keep on praying. Or what Jesus, well, what Luke says in commenting on Jesus' parable, he says about Jesus' parable in Luke 18:1, "Jesus taught these things that we might know men ought always to pray and not to lose heart." That's really essentially what James is doing as he wraps up his epistle, as he comes to the end of this epistle, his pastoral heart beating for these believers for whom he's concerned, he's wanting to tell them finally how is it that you live out the Christian life. Remember, that's his main theme. His whole purpose in writing the book is really crystallized in James 1:22 when he says, "I want you to be not merely hearers of the word but doers of the word. Prove yourself doers of the word and not hearers only." That is, live out your faith. He realizes there was a temptation for the Jewish believers to whom he was writing to believe and have in their heads certain doctrines but not live those out in their lives. It's like they didn't get to their heart and into their life.

So his whole letter has been aimed at that particular issue and so at the end he camps out here for a while and shows us the relationship of prayer to living a faithful Christian life; that the person who will become a doer of the word is the person who prays, and that we ought to pray in every circumstance. Prayer is the dominant theme of this passage. It occurred, the word "pray or prayer" occurs in every single verse from verse 13 to 18. It actually occurs eight times, seven times translated in most of the translations, there is one phrase you'll see in 5:17 when it says pray earnestly, literally in the Greek it says Elijah prayed with prayer. So actually in the Greek, eight occurrences of the word "pray or prayer" here.

So let's read God's word together, James 5:13 to 18.

13 Is anyone among you suffering? Then he must pray. Is anyone cheerful? He is to sing praises. 14 Is anyone among you sick? Then he must call for the elders of the church and they are to pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord; 15 and the prayer offered in faith will restore the one who is sick, and the Lord will raise him up, and if he has committed sins, they will be forgiven him. 16 Therefore, confess your sins to one another, and pray for one another so that you may be healed. The effective prayer of a righteous man can accomplish much. 17 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 earth for three years and six

months. 18 Then he prayed again, and the sky poured rain and the earth produced its fruit.

Let's pray together.

Our Father, we come to You in prayer asking that You might open the windows of heaven and pour out a blessing upon us, that the word of God might not return void but in the same way the prophet Isaiah, You spoke in his prophecy, that as rain falls from heaven and does not return there without first watering the earth, giving bread to the eater and seed to the sower, so will My word be which goes forth from My mouth, it will not return to Me empty but will accomplish the purpose for which I sent it. Lord, accomplish Your purpose in our lives and we pray with the disciples, we ask as they asked Jesus, "Lord, teach us to pray." By the power of Your Spirit through the power of Your word, we pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

So the power of prayer, pray at all times. Verse 13, James says, "Is anyone among you suffering? Then he must pray. Is anyone cheerful? He is to sing praises." There is a sense in which he captures up the whole of life in that verse. Think about where you are. He says, "Listen, is anyone among you right now suffering? Do you want to know what God's will for you is? Is anyone among you joyful? Is your heart so full today with the goodness of God? Do you want to know what God's will for you is right now?" Isn't that something you always want to know or you find yourself wanting to know at certain points more than others? What is God's will for me? What does he want me to do right now? What should I do in this moment, in this circumstance? I'm confused. And the answer, you can always know what God's will for you is in this sense, it is to pray. In every circumstance, pray, and if you do that, you'll find yourself that you're becoming more of what Paul talked about, you're praying without ceasing. Life is to be lived in the presence of God. We are to be talking with God all the time and James is reminding those to whom he writes that they are to use their various circumstances as they impact their life to drive them to prayer; to learn to turn from everything that happens and use it as a motivation to go to God.

We ought always to pray and if we are going to be doers of the word, if we are going to be living out our faith is the problem, is the reason that you're not making more headway in your Christian life, is it not just simply at this point, do we need to say, "Am I praying? How much am I praying?" James said in James 4, remember, "You have not because you ask not." You see, he returns to the theme of prayer here again at the end, the power of prayer and the power of prayer is that it connects us to God, it stabilizes our life, and then it creates the ability and no matter in what circumstance we're in, to walk with God. That's the goal. The goal is just like to be like Abraham, he walked with God. He was a friend of God. He learned in the various circumstances of his life and he knew varied circumstances. He knew what it was to live in famine. He knew what it was to experience prosperity and blessing. He knew what it was to be childless. He knew what it was to have the joy of God miraculously giving him a son. He knew what it was to be fearful for his life, so much so that he said of his wife, "She's my sister." He did that twice actually, then his son did it as well. It was apparently a problem in the family. He knew what it

was to be fearful, he knew what it was to fail, but he also knew what it was to be faithful. Look at his great faith leaving Ur of the Chaldeans, leaving Haran, going to a place that he did not know and he was only told by God, "I will show you." Walking with God faithfully. When the Lord told him to circumcise himself and all the males in his people, he did it that day. When God told him to offer Isaac, he left the next morning early in the morning to go and do what God told him to do. A man of great faith. He walked with God but he knew how to walk with God in the good times and the bad times. He learned and he was cultivated in walking with God by going through good times and by going through bad times. The way of God is to use our circumstances to get our attention.

So this is what James is saying, "Listen, if you want to live out the Christian life, you've got to learn that whatever circumstance you're in to let that circumstance remind you of who you belong to, why you are here, what is your purpose." So I want to consider this message under two points this morning that are just really clearly right there in the passage. The first is when things are hard, what do you do? When things are hard, pray. That's the first point. When things are hard, pray. The second point is going to be when things are good, pray.

So when things are hard, pray, the first point. He says, "Is anyone among you suffering?" This word "suffering" is a compound word we actually encountered it earlier in James but the compound word is made up of two words, suffer and evil, suffering and evil together, to suffer evil literally. Evil in the biblical sense doesn't always mean just morally evil, it has that connotation but it has an even bigger connotation of harm, hurt, damage. That which is evil brings damage. That which is evil breaks down and it's morally bad because it breaks down what God made to be good. You see, God made everything good, evil is that which brings it down, and so suffering evil, he's saying that you're experiencing hurt, you're experiencing circumstances, things from outside of you that are afflicting you. The King James says, "Is any among you afflicted?" The NIV says "in trouble."

So you're suffering evil and the idea of the word, the compound word, the word, the second half of it, "to suffer," is a word which comes from a Greek word which means passion. So he's saying that the heart, the soul is moved. The passions of the heart are moved by the afflictions from without. Outward circumstances are afflicting you and this word tends to go with suffering from persons and personal attacks. It's not exclusively that way but it's exactly what James has been talking about earlier in this chapter. When you're suffering because of what people do to you, when you're suffering evil at the hands of others, so something is happening outside of you and the idea is it's affecting your heart, it's inflaming the emotions and moving you, moving you in a negative direction. Negative passion. You're feeling negative passion. When that happens, when you're suffering and your emotions are aroused, inflamed, in despair, misery, the misery that you can just feel, the pain that you feel. He says when you're feeling that kind of thing, what do you do?

What do we normally do? What comes natural? Isn't it natural to complain? To grumble? But what James says we are to do is when we feel ourselves moved in this negative way, our emotions are captured by circumstances and we're feeling this negative, painful, hurt,

damage, and the soul is moved, you're moving and this movement, this damage is moving you away from the good, what are you to do? You're to redirect your heart toward God. In fact, it's going to be true the other way too. He says basically both words he uses in this passage, the bad and the good, picture the soul being moved, and so what he's basically arguing, listen, life, when you live life in this world, you are going to experience the capturing of your heart by circumstances, by events, and you're going to be moved sometimes in negative, in miserable circumstances toward misery, and other times you're going to be in prosperous circumstances toward prosperity and joy, and what are you to do? Are you just to be just thrown about back and forth? How can you walk with God through those things? You direct your heart to God in both circumstances. You actively direct your heart toward God.

You don't do what the world does. What the world does is the world follows its heart and that's what they say to us, that's what we're taught from the time we're born. I mean, we come into the world disposed even ahead of time before we're born to do it because we are brought forth in iniquity, conceived in sin. So we come into the world with a disposition to do what we want to do, but the godly life, the godly person is trying to direct his heart. An interesting verse, Proverbs 23:19 says, "my son, and be wise, And direct your heart in the way." What does the world say? Follow your heart. What does God say? Direct your heart. Or another way, Proverbs 4:23, "Watch over," guard, "your heart with all diligence, For out of it are the issues of life." You have to manage your heart, direct your heart, guard your heart.

That's what James is basically saying. He's saying, "Look, circumstances will come upon you and they will move your heart and if you don't capture it, if you don't bring those thoughts in obedience to Christ, if you don't bring those emotions and direct them to God, danger." And this happens. Some of you may be today in a much colder state spiritually than you were six months ago because you've experienced afflictions and you've not been directing your heart to God in prayer; you've been grumbling and complaining and in that when we do that, we depart, we are not drawing near to God, we are running away from God. You say, "I don't think I'm running." Well, no, you are. In the moment when you're feeling those things, you have a choice. There's no neutral. I mean, if you're in neutral it's like the old days when we used to, remember those of you who can remember driving a manual transmission. I learned to drive on a manual transmission. Actually I got my driver's license before I learned to drive a manual transmission but my first car was a manual transmission, four-speed, four on the floor. And you remember when you were first learning to drive how it is, the horror of slight inclines or even worse, red light. Man, that's sweating that, right? Got to engage the clutch, get the gas at the right time so I don't roll back into the guy behind me. Never knew it was going to be like this, you know, until you do it, you just never experience it. This is incredibly difficult. This is tough. Well, the Christian life is uphill with a manual transmission. You stop going forward, you don't stay not moving for long, you go backwards. So James is saying, "Listen, when things happen, no matter what it is, you must keep directing yourself, moving toward God, always moving toward God, always finding the Lord, always seeking His face." That's what we do no know matter what circumstance we're in.

So he says, "Is any among you suffering?" And the idea of this verb is present tense. It's the Greek present tense verb, suffering, and remember the Greek present tense doesn't just mean the time of the action, it highlights the kind of action. Tense in Greek is more about the kind of action than the time of action and Greek present means ongoing continual action. So he says, "Is any among you suffering? You are suffering and suffering and suffering? Your circumstances are weighing upon you. Pain, you are feeling damage, you are being hurt and you're being hurt and you're being hurt by your circumstances, by others. Then what are you to do?" Then he gives an imperative, "Let him pray. Then he must pray." It's actually the Greek has a third person imperative. He must pray. Let him pray. In English we basically just use second person imperative, you need to pray. Sometimes we use first person, we all are going to pray or let us pray. But Greek has third person, let him pray, it's a command. If you are suffering, what you must do is pray, that's what God's word says, and you must not just pray one time. In the same way your suffering goes on, you are to continually pray just as much as you're suffering. It's the present tense as well. Ongoing, continual prayer. Ongoing affliction, ongoing suffering calls for ongoing continual prayer. It's one of the great blessings of suffering because it reminds us to pray, doesn't it? Isn't it much easier to forget about God when things are going well? James is going to deal with that in the second half of this verse but when you are suffering and you need relief, you feel like you need relief, it makes you pray.

Now that brings up the question if when things are hard we are to pray, what are we to pray for? And I just mentioned relief. I think it's okay to pray for relief but that's not the main thing we should pray for. I mean, God wants us to take our hearts to him and to pour out our hearts to him. This is one of the beautiful things about prayer is that prayer is not us going to God with all the right answers at the beginning. This is modeled for us when you read the Psalms. I mean, we have in the Psalms an inspired prayer book, divinely inspired prayers by people in all different kinds of circumstances who went to God. That's what the Psalms are, they are songs of praise but they are prayers. Songs of praise are praying. And so often those songs of praise don't start out praising, they start out saying things like, "Lord, how long? How long, O Lord, are You going to leave me in this suffering? How long are You not going to hear my cries to You for relief? How long, O Lord? Why, Lord?" But the key thing is the psalmist is going to God with his questions, with his pain, with his agony. That's the turning point. That's the hinge upon which everything turns, go to God.

So you go to God and you start off just pouring out your heart, "Lord, I'm in agony. I'm in pain. I don't know why this is happening and I would like relief." But we have some guidance here in the passage for what we are to pray for as we continue pouring out our heart, what movement are we going to see? I mentioned earlier that one of the problems or one of the areas of false teaching that grows out of this passage is misunderstanding the prayer of faith in verse 15. What helps to put it in context and we're going to see, I want us to look at what we're supposed to pray for when you're suffering. And I think that in the book of James, it's amazing how much answer he gives to that question already before, and when you're reading the Bible, you don't take a verse and isolate it and say, well, it would be like if you take somebody's statement and you isolate a statement from

it and then you make it say something they didn't say. It's like what the media even does now. It's just so weird the day we live in, but they take it and they shape it and sometimes they just want to hear it a certain way so they hear it a certain way but in the context that's not what he was saying. Well, the same thing with God's word, you hear it in context. James is saying something and when he says what he says in verse 15 about the prayer of faith, it's not to be isolated from everything else he said. So when he says in verse 13, he must pray when you're suffering, what is James telling us to pray for? Is he telling us, "You must pray for relief. Lord, please give me relief. Give me relief. Give me relief," and just keep saying that over and over and over again?

Well, let's look at James, the context. First of all, let's go back to the very beginning of the book, James 1. When things are hard, pray. What do you pray for? James tells us in James 1:1, he's a bond-servant of God and the Lord Jesus Christ. He's writing to the 12 tribes who are dispersed abroad, greetings. He's writing to Jewish believers, the 12 tribes, these are Jews who have come to believe in Jesus as the Messiah, and they have been dispersed abroad by the persecution described in Acts 8. They have been spread out. They've had to leave their homes. Some are still in the greater Palestine area, others are in different parts of the Mediterranean world, probably he's writing to folks in the eastern Mediterranean, Cyprus, other places like that. They've been spread out and they were a part of the church in Jerusalem and now they've been dispersed. So they have already been experiencing persecution and they are experiencing the difficulties that come. Imagine if we had to flee for our lives, you had to leave your home and everything that you have, and you had to go somewhere else and live. Life would be hard. You don't get to sell your house and take your money with you. They didn't have credit cards. They left all their resources behind many times or they carried what they could in a hurry and got out of town, and he's concerned for them. He knows. And they are not only suffering because of that, they are suffering broken relationships. To be a Jewish believer in some ways was harder than being a Gentile believer. I mean, it was hard either way. You come to faith amidst a family of Gentiles and they could reject you the same way, but the Jews could be especially vicious. It was not the majority of Jews but the minority of Jews that came to Christ. The majority missed him.

So they not only lost their goods and many times their farms or their land, or their possessions, they lost their families, and so James writing it with a pastoral heart, what does he talk about at the very beginning of his letter after he tells them who he is writing to? Verse 2, James 1, verse 2, "Consider it all joy, my brethren, when you encounter various trials." He's talking about suffering. "Listen, guys, the thing I need to tell you right up front is how the mindset that you need to have when you experience suffering, and it's a different mindset than you expect. You need to count it joy." That is certainly counter-intuitive, isn't it? Count it all joy when you encounter various trials. How can that be? Look what he says, because trials do something profound. Verse 3, "knowing that the testing of your faith produces endurance. And let endurance have its perfect result, so that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing." He says that going through trials, going through suffering produces endurance. The word "endurance" here means "to remain under," you're under something, under the weight of something, and particularly circumstantial is the idea of this word normally, circumstantial pain and difficulty, and as

you remain under it, your character is forged, the character of endurance, the ability to remain under this weight, this burden long and still be faithful to God. And if you stay under it and you remain under it and you grow in faithfulness, you're going to also grow in character so that you are perfect and complete, lacking in nothing, and the implication is that when suffering comes, you have an opportunity that you don't have in the good times. You have an opportunity to develop the character of endurance and to become perfect and complete. That's why you count it all joy.

Now you understand that, when he says then, when you're suffering in chapter 5, verse 13, pray, you don't immediately start, I mean, it's okay to pray for relief at some level, but we ought to pray like Jesus taught us to pray, we should try to get on God's agenda when we pray. "Our Father, which art in heaven, hallowed be Your name." The first three petitions are about God and his agenda. "Hallowed be Your name. Your kingdom come. Your will be done." Then to our request, "Give us this day our daily bread, forgive us our debts." So we want to get on God's agenda. What is God's agenda? God's agenda is to make me and you, if you belong to Jesus, his agenda is to make us like Christ.

So when we pray we should be praying for the grace to endure or back still in James 1, look at verse 5 because he brings up prayer here. After he's talked about considering it all joy when you encounter various trials, verse 5, "But if any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask of God." Clearly in the context he's saying wisdom for how to endure. Wisdom for how to bear up in trial. When you're suffering, pray for wisdom so that God will show you. Remember wisdom is knowledge applied to life. It's God's truth applied to life. How do I apply your truth to my circumstances right now? What does it look like to follow Jesus in this situation? That's the wisdom we need. What would Christ do in this situation? What should I be thinking? My heart, I want it to imitate God, what should I be thinking in this situation? What should I be valuing in this situation? What should I be doing in this situation? I want my heart to be like you, Lord, I need wisdom.

Now turn over to chapter 5. What does this mean? What are we to pray for? We are arguing it's not just relief, it's something better than that. Look at chapter 5, verses 1 to 11, because again, verse 13 comes right after that. Remember what he's talking about in the first 11 verses, he's talking about the oppression of these Jewish believers to whom he writes, most of whom are poor, many of whom he knows are working for wealthy landowners who are taking advantage of them. He's heard the reports. He's seen it. And the first six verses, remember is a pronouncement of judgment on those wealthy landowners and the message for the believer is, "You be patient and leave the wrath of God, leave the wrath to God. Vengeance is Mine, I will repay, says the Lord." That's his basic message.

In verses 7 to 11 of this passage, we titled that, we had three messages titled "A Christian Response to Injustice," because that's exactly what's happening here. These people are being treated with injustice, these believers, and what is the Christian response? Not what's the worldly response, what is the believer's response to being treated unjustly? In two words, be patient. Verse 7, "Therefore," two imperatives, verse 7, "Therefore be patient, brethren, until the coming of the Lord." In other words, be patient, wait on the

wrath of God to deal with the ungodly. Wait on the wrath of God to deal with those who oppress you. Wait on the wrath of God to deal with those who mistreat you. Verse 8, he repeats it again, "You too," after he talks about the farmer who waits for the produce, "You too be patient; strengthen your hearts, for the coming of the Lord is near." The need is patience. In fact, that's the key word in the whole passage, verses 7 to 11. It occurs four times. Verse 10, "As an example, brethren, of suffering and patience, take the prophets who spoke in the name of the Lord." That word "suffering" in verse 10 is the same word as "suffering" in verse 13. It only occurs three, four, five times in the whole New Testament, twice here and three times in 2 Timothy. The word "suffering," it's the same word. It means "to suffer evil." "As an example, brethren, of how to suffer evil and be patient, look at the prophets." Then he gives the example of Job after that. Look at Job.

So what are we to do? We're to be patient. We're to pray for patience and that word "patient" that occurs four times in those five verses, verses 7 to 11, is a word which means "to suffer long." It's actually a related word to this word because it has the idea of the soul again suffering, the word that we're going to look at in a minute, *makros*. But it's suffering, *makrothumia*, *makros*, long, *thumos*, can mean wrath. The heart is moved. The heart is moved with legitimate anger and you have that for a long period of time. You can't get rid of the fact that you know injustice is being done, but you suffer trusting God. You entrust yourself to God and leave it to him, that's *makrothumia*, that's patience.

So he says you're dealing with oppression, you're dealing with injustice, be patient. That's the Christian response. That's what Jesus did. So what do you pray for? You pray for patience. "Lord, help me as I'm suffering to be patient." And you also pray for endurance. He comes back in verse 11 to the word that we looked at in James 1:2 to 4, the word "endurance." "We count those blessed," this is James 5:11, "We count those blessed who endured. You have heard of the endurance of Job." This is the word that I talked about a moment ago that means "to remain under." You pray for endurance. "Lord, help me endure this situation. Give me strength. Let me bear up under this." That's what we pray for.

So what this shows, though, and James's heart is to protect us, to protect the believers to whom he writes and us who are reading it today. Negative circumstances, when people mistreat us, when we find ourselves the victim of seemingly random circumstances, there are no random circumstances but they seem like that to us, we don't know why things happen the way they do, when we find ourselves overwhelmed, weighed down so that our soul is moved in a negative direction toward grumbling and complaining, what we must do is turn to God in prayer. It's either going to be grumbling or complaining or it's going to be praying, and remember prayer starts with pouring out your heart. It can start with, "Lord, I need relief." That's what the psalmists do. It's not wrong to do that, it's just you don't stay there. You don't pray for relief and pray for relief and keep complaining that he hasn't relieved you, because you start as you go to God, you come into the sanctuary of God and you remember he has bigger purposes than just my relief. This world is temporary, this life is temporary anyway. It's not just about me feeling good. No, it's we're heading to heaven. That's where everything is going to be wonderful. This world and the sufferings of this present world, Ted alluded to this earlier, where the sufferings

of this present world are not worthy to be compared with the glory that shall be revealed in us. These momentary light afflictions, Paul says, momentary and light, and he was talking about some serious, he was a man who knew what we would call heavy, weighty afflictions. He says, "My heavy weighty afflictions that appear to be heavy and weighty to you, in light of eternity are momentary and light compared with the glory that shall be revealed in us." The weightiness that awaits in heaven.

So when things are hard, pray. Go to the Lord. Pour out your heart to him and pray earnestly for strength, rejoicing in the fact that when we don't know what to pray, the Holy Spirit intercedes with us with groanings. I love that. That's so awesome. Romans 8, read 18 to 28, 18 where he talks about the sufferings of this present age, and then he ends up, Romans 8:28, "We know all things work together for good," but you've got to read on to verse 30 so you see what the good is, to be made like Jesus. But in the midst of that he talks about how we groan. The whole creation groans. This suffering is a part of this life and the whole creation groans under the suffering that sin has brought and he says, "We ourselves groan within ourselves." There's an inner groaning, longing to be out of this messed-up world, out of this messed-up body, out of these messed-up relationships, out of this sin-sick world. We groan and the astonishing thing is that when you don't know what to pray as you're groaning, the Holy Spirit does. Do you know where he starts with his prayers? He groans with you. The Spirit himself intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words. Such is the nature of our God, he comes into our suffering and he suffers with us. You start understanding how this suffering has such power to connect you to God that it becomes something precious. Paul, 2 Corinthians 12 says, "I have learned that when I'm weak, I'm strong, so I glory in sufferings because sufferings show me my weakness and then I see Jesus is my strength," as he said, "My grace is sufficient for you for My strength is made perfect in weakness." Now remember that's when Paul had a thorn in the flesh and he prayed three times that the Lord would deliver him from it and God chose not to, and it wasn't because Paul didn't have enough faith. It was because Jesus wanted to bless him more than delivering him from his thorn in the flesh and he said, "My grace is sufficient for you. My strength is made perfect in weakness." Therefore Paul says, "Therefore I glory in my weaknesses."

This is where we begin to understand that suffering actually is the doorway to blessing. We don't start out there. We all naturally, we pull back from pain. Of course we do, and we long for the day when there will be no more and it's right to do that, but in this life suffering is an opportunity to draw near to God, the Holy Spirit, but also Jesus. I mean, you look at Hebrews 2:13 to 18, Hebrews 4:14, Hebrews 5:1 to 11, and what you see there is Jesus has experienced everything we've experienced and he is able to sympathize. The word, when we suffer evil, it's the word "kakos," which is evil, with *patheo*, *pathos*, which is the feeling, the passion. Well, our English word comes from the Greek idea of sympathize means to sum with, *pathos*, feel. Jesus sympathizes. He feels with you your pain. He genuinely feels it. It's not some platitude that he throws out. No, he knows exactly what you're going through. In fact, this is absolutely clear because he says in Hebrews 4:14, "He was tempted in every way yet without sin." That is, whatever your circumstance, it may not have been exactly precisely that he experienced exactly what you are, he couldn't experience what it was to be a woman, for instance, but whatever

you're tempted in, the weight of whatever you're feeling, the doubt, the perplexity, the frustration, whatever it is Jesus has felt it to a greater degree, overcome it, and therefore he's able to come to your aid because he was tempted in all the ways you are. So suffering, Paul says, "Then I long to experience the fellowship of His sufferings. To experience the fellowship that comes with suffering with Christ. It makes my heart malleable before Him."

So when things are hard, pray. Direct your heart to seek the Lord. That's the way. The second point, when things are good, pray. Verse 13, the second half, after he says, "Is anyone among you suffering? Then he must pray. Is anyone cheerful? He is to sing praises." Cheerful. That's not a word we use much anymore. It's a little better than the King James's, "Is anyone among you merry?" Except for Christmas, that's the only time we use that word, isn't it, merry? "I feel really merry today." I don't think I've said I feel very cheerful today either, so it's not much better to say cheerful. The NIV translates it happy.

The word, though, it's a rich word and it's, again, something of a compound word. It's the word "thumos," I mentioned just a minute ago with makrothumia, suffer long, so it's a word that can mean suffer but it doesn't mean suffer exclusively. The word "thumos" actually means "mind, soul." It comes from a word for breathe or bleed. It pictures movement like breath. Actually the reason that the etymology of the word "thumos" came to mean soul and mean anger and wrath, it's often translated anger and wrath in the New Testament, was because of the idea of being out of breath, emotionally stirred up and you're breathing hard. Wrath, you're angry. You're breathing hard. But this word is "thumos" with the prefix, two letter prefix that we transliterate in English into e-u. You, like eulogy is a good word. It means good. Euphemism, good way to say something that's not so pleasant, use a euphemism, a good word. So this is euthomos and so it means a good passion, a good movement of the soul. The soul is stirred up to movement in a way, the soul is stirred up breathing hard, as it were, but it's in a good way. You're moved by a good outcome, a good circumstance, a blessing. It's a passion of joy. I think I would have translated it joyful, even though I understand the challenge, it's not the word "joy," it's this word which pictures the heart.

When you're feeling joy in your life, when things are going wonderfully, when things are really good, what do you do? What is God's will for you when things are great? Pray, that's his will. Pray. Now he says sing praises but essentially pray. When you're joyful, prayer looks like this, sing praises to God. Turn from the joyful experience that you're having to the Lord. Again, there is something, when the heart is inflamed, when the passions are inflamed, there is potential for hurt either way. I mean, if you are going through some really hard circumstances and you start grumbling and complaining, you can turn away from God and go into the darkness very quickly. An irony is that when things are very good, everything is wonderful, you can turn away from God very quickly, in some ways it may be easier, and that's what James is worrying about.

Is anyone cheerful, joyful? He is to sing praises. The power of blessing is to turn the heart. The power of difficulty is to turn the heart away from God are mirrored by the

power of blessings to turn the heart away from God. You see this in Deuteronomy 6, a very familiar passage, verses 5 to 9. Right after that, that's actually 4 to 9, verses 4 and 5, the Shema, the Hebrews called it, "Hear, O Israel," Shema means "hear." It's a famous verse that they learned as children. "Hear, O Israel! The LORD is our God, the LORD is one! You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might." This next part is familiar, we read it many times, the different times in messages when we dedicate our children, "These words, which I am commanding you," this is Deuteronomy 6:6, "These words, which I am commanding you today, shall be on your heart. You shall teach them diligently to your sons and shall talk of them when you sit in your house and when you walk by the way and when you lie down and when you rise up. You shall bind them as a sign on your hand and they shall be as frontals on your forehead. You shall write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates." Why all of that emphasis on making sure you are constantly speaking about the word of God, you're constantly directing your heart in the way? Look what he says in verse 10, "Then it shall come about when the LORD your God brings you into the land which He swore to your fathers, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, to give you, great and splendid cities which you did not build, and houses full of all good things which you did not fill, and hewn cisterns which you did not dig, vineyards and olive trees which you did not plant, and you eat and are satisfied," verse 12, "then watch yourself, that you do not forget the LORD who brought you from the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery. You shall fear only the LORD your God; and you shall worship Him and swear by His name. You shall not follow other gods, any of the gods of the peoples who surround you, for the LORD your God in the midst of you is a jealous God." He's saying there's something powerful when you come and what a blessing, I mean, they walked into Canaan, God destroying the people in front of them, giving them the land of Canaan, they received a land and cities they didn't build, houses, new houses. There it is, walk into it, enjoy it. Here's the flocks. Here are the gardens laid out. You didn't do any of this and you experience, what a great day that would have been. This is unbelievable. This is awesome. He says, "That's a very perilous moment. Danger. When your heart is satisfied," he says, "when you eat and are satisfied, then watch yourself. Watch yourself because you're prone to forget the Lord who brought you from the land of Egypt out of the house of slavery." He's saying, "When things go well in your life, you and I, we must discipline ourselves to worship Him." We must discipline ourselves to take the fullness of our hearts to God too, not just the sorrows but the joys. We have a conversation with your child and it goes wonderfully and you're excited about what God is doing in their life or just when they are doing really well, they get a great report of, you know, from college or doing so well in school, or just doing well in their relationships. When things are going great, when every green light is green, now I usually call them red lights because we expect them to be red, don't we? When every stoplight is green, when everything goes exactly the way that you want it to go, what are you to do? Sing praise to God. We must do that. Turn it, remember, These blessings are coming from Your hand. I praise You, Lord."

When we do that, we remember that there is something powerful about praise. This is why we are always to be giving thanks because truly everything has come from him, hasn't it? Your strength, I mean, the fact that you're alive is a gift. The fact that you're

breathing is a gift. The fact that you have strength is a gift. The fact that you are in your right mind is a gift. The fact that you have a job, if you have a job, is a gift. Everything is a gift from him and through him and to him are all things. So if we really believe that, when we are enjoying the gifts, we need to praise him. You know, when you're enjoying that wonderful meal, praise him. When you're having that not so great meal, that's the part, hey, when things are hard, pray. When things are good, pray. No, when you enjoy the taste of food. I had a cup of coffee this week that was incredible. I'm sorry, it just came out. It was unbelievable. In fact, I got the card from the person that knows where the coffee came from and I'm going to order some. But anyway, I'll share it with you. I'll let you know too. But in that moment, God made these things to be like this. Wow, the Lord is so good.

So don't enjoy it apart from him. Turn to him in the moment and praise him. Driving in the car, sing to him. As a family, sing to him. In your hearts, singing and making melody in your hearts to the Lord. When you don't want to sing out loud because other people are around and it's not appropriate or kind, especially if you have a voice like me, then sing in your hearts to the Lord, and in doing that what you're remembering is, this is the most beautiful thing is you're moving from the gift to the giver. If you just look at the gift, you can idolize the gift. It can become so precious to you that it separates you from God. But if when you receive the gift, you discipline yourself to go to the giver with the gift, it makes the gift so much richer but the gift does not enslave your heart, the gift becomes truly what it was intended to be, something that would lead you back to the one who has given every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights. James said that in James 1:17. Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights in whom there is no shifting shadow. It's from his hand.

Direct our hearts in the way and in doing that, it reminds us that even as good as these gifts are, they don't compare to what it will be to be in heaven, like we've been singing about. When we get to heaven, the incredible joy and bliss of being before God who has made all of these things, I mean, thought of all of these ways to bless us, all of these ways to shower kindness upon men. I mean, the beauty of the way he made the world, the way he made our eyes to be able to see color, the rich colors he's put in the world and we're getting ready to see, they are already starting, the flowers are starting to bloom, the trees are starting to bud. You're going to see the dogwoods soon and the azaleas and the roses after that, then in the fall we get to see the colors turn back. Even the dying is beautiful and all of this is a reflection of the divine artistry and beauty of God who made it all. The wonder of holding a newborn baby, a baby, what an amazing thing that is. God has made all of it. It's all his idea and so when we remember that every gift and we take it back to him and we praise him for it, we thank him directly for it, we discipline ourselves to say, "Lord, thank You for this," it completes the enjoyment and we remember.

I want to read something I read not too long ago but it's worth reading again. Jonathan Edwards, the blessing is only a taste of what it will be to be with the one who has blessed. It's an extension of him. He said, "The enjoyment of God," Jonathan Edwards, "The enjoyment of God is the only happiness with which our souls can be satisfied." To enjoy God himself, he says. "To go to heaven fully, to enjoy God is infinitely better than the

most pleasant accommodations here. Fathers and mothers, husbands or wives or children, or the company of earthly friends are but shadows. God is the substance. These are but the scattered beams, God is the sun. These are but streams, God is the ocean." So in the good things, remember these are the beams, he's the sun. These are the streams, he's the ocean.

Let's pray together.

Our Father, how grateful we are for the wonder of Your kindness in revealing Yourself to us. We thank You for the Gospel that makes us able to come to know You in a personal way through the gift of Your Son, the Lord Jesus Christ, the greatest expression of love the world has ever known, that You would give Your Son and to die in our place, that as He suffered and died He bore the sins of everyone who would ever believe and He satisfied Your wrath fully and completely, and He offers us His righteousness so that we will one day be able to stand before You and look upon Your glory, to see Your beauty with unveiled face and to know a delight that will only increase and grow throughout all eternity, to be more and more fully satisfied because of Your amazing and wonderful beauty and love. Lord, help us to be people who turn from all of the earthly distractions, the troubles, the trials, the blessings and the joys, may they all turn us to Christ, always centering and looking back to You. Lord, teach us how to live this way. Teach us to pray. We pray in Jesus' name. Amen.