

# The Prayer of Faith

*Themes From James*

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Should you always expect healing when you pray for the sick? Stay tuned. *Renewing Your Mind: Weekend Edition* is next.

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Welcome to this weekend broadcast of *Renewing Your Mind* with Dr. R. C. Sproul. Dr. Sproul is the minister of preaching and teaching at Saint Andrews, a reformed congregation in Sanford, Florida.

How many times have you turned on Christian television only to hear the televangelist challenging you to touch the TV screen to receive your healing? Do we lack faith if we are not healed? The epistle of James instructs us to go to the elders that they may pray over us when we are sick. Does that mean that we should expect to be healed every time they pray for us? Does the lack of healing mean lack of faith? Today as we conclude our study of the themes from the epistle of James, Dr. Sproul will teach us the biblical doctrine of healing and the prayer of faith.

Here is Dr. Sproul.

Change of Voice:

Today we are going to finish our brief study of the epistle of James and we are going to go to the fifth chapter beginning at verse 13 which starts with a question. And it is a question that touches us at the point where pain intrudes into our lives. James asks:

Is anyone among you suffering? Let him pray. Is anyone cheerful? Let him sing psalms. 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>1</sup>

Do you see the progression here of what James is doing? He is eliciting various real, concrete life situations that we all experience. We experience suffering. We experience

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<sup>1</sup> James 5:13-14.

joy. We experience sickness. And he says there is something that we should do in the event of each one of these eventualities.

“Is anyone among you suffering? Let him pray.”<sup>2</sup>

Now let’s talk about this, because the basic thrust of this last portion of the book of James has to do with the importance of prayer. He says, “If anyone is happy and rejoicing, let him sing psalms.” And even the singing of psalms is a kind of prayer. It is a verbal expression that is directed toward God. Anyone sick? Let him call the elders. Let them pray.

And so the focal point, the accent is on the importance of prayer. Now we have seen in our study of James how frequently James’ teaching echoes the teachings of Jesus.

We remember back in the book of Luke where Jesus tells his disciples on that occasion that you have not because you ask not and he said if we are in need we should consider God as our heavenly Father who stands ready and happy to hear our petitions and our requests.

Jesus told the story of a man who had a visitation from a friend and he didn't have the food that was sufficient to feed him. And so he went to his neighbor, another friend, and knocked on his door asking to borrow some bread. And the neighbor friend yelled out to the visitor, to his friend who had come to borrow some bread. He said, “Wait a minute. It is too late. My children are in bed. Leave me alone.”

Now you understand what is going on there is that in the ancient world and even today in the Mideast there is a very important custom regarding hospitality and the care of the stranger or sojourner in your midst. It is a matter of great importance to the Semite that if you are a sojourner and you come and you have no lodging, you have nothing to eat, it is their duty and obligation to open their tent to you.

Now God initiated that in the Old Testament because of his work of redemption for his own people Israel. He says to them, “Always remember that when you were slaves, I delivered you. When you had nothing, I provided manna from heaven. I have been with you as you have wandered through the wilderness.” And then God said, “I am going to make you my people. And henceforth you are to show other people what I am like.” And so the care of the stranger and of the sojourner in the land becomes a critically important dimension of Jewish life.

And so that was what was going on in the episode that Jesus told of the person whose friend visited him and he didn’t have the food to give him. And he was embarrassed because he had a moral obligation to feed the visitor.

And so he goes next to his neighbor and knocks on the door and that fellow won’t get out of his bed to help his friend in need. And then Jesus uses that to illustrate the difference

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<sup>2</sup> James 5:13.

between us and God. There is both similarity and difference. He goes on to say the man persisted, just like the importunate widow that Jesus told of elsewhere that kept banging on the door of the unjust judge, driving him crazy because the judge didn't want to be bothered with hearing her case. And Jesus then tells the story that if you being evil know how to give good gifts and if that neighbor will finally get up out of his bed and go down and answer the door and give his friend some bread because of the simple persistence of it, the idea here is how much more does God stand ready to answer your prayer?

Now if there is any text in all of Scripture that every pagan in the world has heard, it is the text, "Seek and ye shall find, knock and it shall be opened unto you, ask and you will receive," and so on. The context in which Jesus made those promises was after telling the story or the parable about the neighbor who wouldn't get out of his bed and give bread to his needy friend.

And he said, "Now, look. God is so ready to provide your needs that if you ask, you will receive. If you seek, you will find. If you knock, it will be opened unto you." And, again, saying, "What man among you as a father if your child asks for bread will give him a stone or if they ask for fish will you give him a serpent or a scorpion?"

What Jesus is saying there is that even sinful people have the basic decency of providing needs for hungry people if they see somebody in need. And a parent who may not even be spiritually inclined at all has the human capacity to feed their children and not to be putting scorpions on their plate or feeding them with stones.

Now there is where the contrast is. If we, being sinful, know how to give good gifts, how much more will God, our heavenly Father, stand ready to hear our prayers?

Now there is a danger, a big danger in that teaching. When Jesus says, "Seek and ye shall find, knock and it will be opened, ask and you will receive," without qualifying that, just in those short, terse, brief statements, some people take that as an absolute promise that as an absolute promise is going to give us everything that we want and whatever we see we will find and whenever we knock on a door, it doesn't matter what door it is, it will be opened to us.

I remember watching on television a few years ago a man who was interviewed because he had become fabulously wealthy running a franchise of houses of prostitution in the state of Nevada. And the interviewer asked him to what he owed his success in this business enterprise and he said, "Well, before I started this business, I prayed and I said, 'God, if you will prosper my business, I promise that I will give you a certain percentage of the proceeds in return.'" And he said, "And I have done that every year since then. As prosperous as my business has been, I have taken and tithed of my earnings."

And this man was trying to say that God had opened the door he was knocking on, that he helped... caused him to find that which he was seeking and he answered his prayer.

Now that is not what Jesus is talking about here. He is not saying that anything you want God is going to give you. What he is talking about here is about your basic human needs. And God's basic attitude of standing ready to give you what you need and more so. But it cannot be the basis of a whole theology, like we have seen in our day, called the prosperity gospel, the health and wealth message where we are told to name it and claim it, God wants us all to be wealthy, God wants us all to be healthy and any time that somebody is sick it is because they are not spiritual or they are not praying enough and so on.

God does not promise freedom from suffering in this world. On the contrary, as we already saw in the first chapter of James that we are told that suffering is given to us for a supernatural and divine blessing, that suffering is one of the ways that God uses to sanctify us. And we are called to be willing to participate in the sufferings of Christ. The way of redemption itself is through suffering and through pain.

Now it is just simply not true that God promises under every circumstance to remove suffering and sickness from our lives.

Now James almost suggests that here. When we look on later and he says:

“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. And the prayer of faith will save the sick, and the Lord will raise him up.”<sup>3</sup>

Now if we take that as an absolute promise, we wouldn't need any doctors. In fact, using doctors would be a sign of a lack of faith, a sign of unbelief, because James says, is anyone sick, well, what do you do? You call the elders. You let them pray over you, anoint you with oil and if you have enough faith, the prayer of faith will save the sick and you will be healed.

How many ministries have we seen that emphasize healing and say that God will heal all of your diseases if you just have enough faith. We call that faith healing. And that concept is drawn from the Scriptures not only here from James where James says that the prayer of faith will save the sick, but also from the ministry of Jesus where Jesus on many occasions in the context of healing people who are desperately ill, he will say to them, “Your faith has saved you. Go in peace.”

And so we derive from that, we deduce from that this concept that the necessary ingredient, the only ingredient we have to have in order to be preserved from all diseases and to be healed from all sicknesses is faith. If we have enough faith we will be cured of whatever afflicts us.

Now just think about that for a minute. If that were the case absolutely we should expect to be able to meet in our neighborhoods today at least some of the apostles who were

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<sup>3</sup> James 5:14-15.

living in the first century, that they had an enormous amount of faith. They were people like Paul and Peter had the faith so as to move mountains. And let's take James himself. If James had enough faith he should never have suffered. He should never have died. And all Christians who live in the first century, at least a portion of them who had abiding faith should still be walking around today alive.

But the reality is that every Christian who lived before 1890 or 1880 is now in heaven. We all die. There is always a final illness, if you will, from which we are not delivered. We also know in the New Testament that Paul speaks of leaving Epaphroditus sick. Does that suggest to us that Paul didn't have the faith to heal him? We know that there are occasions where people are healed in the apostolic age and other occasions where they are not healed. When Peter was thrown into prison and the disciples gathered together and interceded with intense prayer, praying for his release. And while they were praying there is a knock on the door and the maid goes over and opens the door and there is Peter standing there, because the angel of God had come and released him from prison miraculously. She slams the door in his face and comes over. And they say, "Who was that?" And she said, "That was Peter's ghost," while they were praying for the release of Peter and Peter was released. They didn't believe it when they saw him standing there in front of them. But God did answer the prayer of the apostles at that point.

But then the apostle James was thrown into prison and he was killed. Didn't they pray for him? Of course they prayed for him. And James now is using the style of wisdom literature giving us aphorisms of general truth, not absolute principles. And we can't infer from this text that every time we pray for somebody who is sick they are going to get better.

But there are two things we do need to see here. The first is that when James speaks about the prayer of faith—I can't think of anything that has been more distorted in the New Testament than that idea—the prayer of faith is not claiming your healing in advance. It is not naming it and claiming it as some of the preachers are saying. The prayer of faith simply means the prayer of trust, that when I am suffering, that when I am sick I should be driven to my knees and to pour out my soul before God in faith meaning, trusting God for my future, putting myself in his hands. Yes, of course, asking him to deliver me from the affliction, to deliver me from the illness. But at the same time trust in him for his answer. And his answer may be no.

Does that mean I am not saved? I mean, we sometimes think of death as the worst catastrophe that couple ever happen. When, from a Christian perspective, death is the threshold, the opening of the door from this world of tears and this world of travail, this world of affliction, this world of suffering into glory where death will be no more and there will be no more suffering and there will be no more tears and there will be no more sickness.

But we want to have heaven here and now. We want to grasp the future promise of God in the hear and now and leaven nothing for heaven. Now having said that, that the prayer of faith is not magic, it is not superstition. It is trusting God with your body. It is trusting

God with your life. It is trusting God in the midst of sickness and in the midst of affliction.

But the second thrust of this passage is what? The tremendous efficacy of prayer, that God does answer prayer and that God does bring about momentous responses to human prayers of intercession. And that means that we are to pray not only individually, but the elders of the church, the whole church is to be engaged in praying for those in their midst who are in pain, who are ill, who are suffering. This should be a major concentrated ministry of the people of God.

I know in our church and I am sure in many of your churches there exists what we call a prayer chain and if any of the brothers or sisters is afflicted or is injured or has some kind of suffering visiting them, immediately the notification spreads through the whole church so that people will pray.

I remember a few years ago, a couple of years ago when my wife and I were involved in the worst train wreck in the history of Amtrak and when I arrived safely with my wife back in Orlando I almost felt like Peter at the door. People looked at us like we were ghosts. And then we discovered—it was really one of the most moving things in my life—how many people had been engaged in prayer for us and how sustained we were through that, which, I believe, was a direct visitation of the tender mercy of God in our lives.

Now James uses the example here in chapter five of Elijah. He says:

The effective, fervent prayer of a righteous man avails much. 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.<sup>4</sup>

What is the truth here? The truth is not that prayer is magic, but the truth is that prayer is effective. And exhibit A is, you know, the most extraordinary example we have in the Old Testament, that of Elijah who was such a godly man and so earnest in his prayers of intercession that he was able to persuade God to hold back the rain and then to bring the rain. And the key there, the principle is:

“The effective, fervent prayer of a righteous man...”<sup>5</sup>

And there man is not used other than in the generic sense. That is, it is the righteous man or the righteous woman. The prayer of a righteous person avails much. It doesn't avail everything, but the usefulness of it is powerful.

But notice that it is the prayer, the fervent prayer, the fervent effectual prayer of a righteous person avails much. So James is calling us to fervency in prayer, not casual

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<sup>4</sup> James 5:16-18.

<sup>5</sup> James 5:16.

prayer, not just flapping our lips occasionally before the presence of God, but a fervency, a sincere, deep struggling prayer before God. It is effectual. That is, it brings results.

Some people ask the question theologically: Well, does prayer change God's mind? Of course not. I am not God's guidance counselor. I don't give him information that he lacks. But God works through prayer just like he works through preaching. One of the means of grace that God himself uses to show forth his power and his salvific mercy and love is prayer. And he said, "You know, this is your job. My job is to bring about the result. But your job is to be on your knees fervently, effectually, righteously coming to me with your pain and your suffering in faith."

Here James is preaching what he lived. We remember in the beginning of our study that James was described as the man with knees like a camel, because he was a righteous man who spent so much time on his knees, that he saw this as a ministry to the people of his day who were suffering.

Change of Voice:

You are listening to *Renewing your Mind: Weekend Edition*. Stay right there. Dr. Sproul will return in just a moment with some closing thoughts.

On July 10<sup>th</sup> the church celebrated the 500<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the birth of John Calvin. In fact, the celebration is still going on. Perhaps the greatest contribution Calvin has given to the Church was his faithfulness to the expository preaching of the Scriptures. In the modern evangelical Church expository preaching is a foreign term. To help you understand the need for us to return to this kind of preaching, Dr. Lawson has written a book entitled *The Expository Genius of John Calvin*. And today it is available for a gift of any amount. So give us a call at 1 800 435 4343. Again that is 1 800 435 4343.

Many people in the Church today simply take expository preaching for granted as if preachers have always preached through the Scriptures verse by verse, chapter by chapter and book by book. But this has not always been the case. In fact, many preachers still don't take this approach. Although this book makes a great gift for preachers and teachers, it is for all of the people of God who want to see preaching elevated back to its proper place in the Church.

Again, the book *The Expository Genius of John Calvin* is available for a donation of any amount. So call now. Our toll free number is 1 800 435 4343. Again that is 1 800 435 4343. Our resource consultants are available Monday through Friday from 8 AM to 8 PM eastern time or you can go online to RYMOffer.com. That is RYM as in renewing your mind and the word offer dot com. Again that is R Y M O F F E R dot com. That web address is for this week's special offer only.

Once again, let's join Dr. Sproul for the rest of today's message.

Change of Voice:

Today as we conclude our study of James which has been a look at things that are so practical, so relevant to the actual living out of the Christian life, that has given us so much wisdom. I think it is appropriate that James concludes that teaching with a major emphasis on prayer and that we, as God's people, are called to be people of prayer and, in this case, intercessory prayer. There are other parts of prayer—adoration, thanksgiving, confession—all of which are important, but here he is speaking about praying for people in affliction. I don't know about you, but one of the sweetest things of times that I have been able to enjoy as a Christian in the presence of God is going to God not just on behalf of my own problems, but in behalf of other people and have undertaken in cases where people have been seriously ill of praying for those people every single day and making it a matter of discipline not to miss a day, to pray for them and staying in touch with them and hear how they respond knowing that they are being upheld in prayer. I have people that pray for me every day and I know that they do. And I also know that sometimes when I pray I hedge my prayers, particularly when I am praying for myself.

“Oh, God, please heal me of this sickness that is making me hurt.”

And I don't know whether this is un-faith or what, but I think it is faith when I say, “God, if you are not pleased to do that, take away my fear of it, because I am embarrassed that part of the problem with illness is the fear that it generates. Help me to be able to trust you in faith with my life.”

That is how we apply this teaching of James.

Change of Voice:

Today's message “The Prayer of Faith” is from a 15 part series entitled “Themes from James.” In this series Dr. Sproul teaches the many themes James covers in this New Testament treasury of practical wisdom. This entire 15 part series is available on five CDs for 30 dollars four cents plus shipping. To order your copy of “Themes from James” call one of our resource consultants using our toll free number, 1 800 435 4343. Again, that is 1 800 435 4343. You can also log on to our website at [Ligonier.org](http://Ligonier.org). That is L I G O N I E R dot O R G.

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That will bring a close to this weekend edition of *Renewing Your Mind*. Thanks for joining us for our study of themes from the book of James. Be sure to join us again next weekend as Dr. Sproul returns to lead us through an in depth study of an early hero of the faith.

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