

Effective Prayer

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- [0 : 0 0] Well, please take a seat. It would be great if you could have your Bibles open at James chapter 5. There's also an outline in the bulletin that you might find helpful.
- We come to a somewhat, well, slightly controversial passage today. And we're going to do a little bit of Bible flicking, but I'm sure you'll be okay.
- Why don't I pray for us before we begin? Amen. Heavenly Father, we do thank you for your word. We thank you that it is a light unto our path, that you continue to guide us by it in this life.
- And so, Father, we pray that you would help us to understand your word and to live in light of it. For we ask it in Jesus' name. Amen. Well, it was about 4 a.m. when Michelle went into labor with our third child.
- We rang some good friends who had kindly agreed to come over and look after the elder two children. And we arrived at hospital very early in the morning, about 4.30, half an hour later, with Michelle's labor pains very close together, which meant the baby was about to arrive any moment.
- [1 : 1 1] But as I pulled into the car park and parked the car, I realized I hadn't quite parked between the white lines. And so, Michelle was about, she opened the door and was about to bolt out of the car.
- Well, bolt, waddle out of the car. And as I did, I said, no, hang on. Shut the door. I need to straighten up the car a little. And Michelle looked at me and gave me this look.
- You're kidding, right? It's 4.30 in the morning. There's no cars around. Just park the car. But she said none of that. She graciously closed the door and I straightened up the car.
- And our third child, Megan, was born within half an hour later. Now, upon reflection, perhaps I had missed the bigger picture and forgotten what was more important. Perhaps my approach to parking was misguided and needed a little bit more perspective.
- Well, as we come to the final passage in James this morning, we'll hear James again encourage his readers to have a right perspective in life, a spiritual perspective.
- [2 : 0 9] Now, this may sound similar to two weeks ago. Before Easter, we heard something similar. And that's because it is similar. He's talking about this spiritual perspective throughout the whole back end of his letter.
- In fact, he's talking about it throughout the whole letter. He said we are to live out the word. He said we've had to have heavenly wisdom. And he said in chapter 5 particularly, we'd have a spiritual perspective.
- They're all different ways of saying the same thing, really. And he wants them to do this, particularly when facing suffering. I don't know if you realize, but James begins and ends his letter with the topic of suffering.
- It bookends the letter, if you like. And James wants his readers to live out the word even in suffering, to have a heavenly wisdom when it comes to life, particularly in suffering, to have this spiritual perspective even when times are tough.

And so as James begins to conclude here in chapter 5, he urges his readers to have a spiritual perspective in all of life. Point 1, verse 13. He says, Here James seems to cover all of life, doesn't he?

[3 : 22] He moves from one end of life with trouble or literally suffering, it says, to the other end of life with happiness or literally cheerfulness. And no matter what the situation we're in, we'd have a spiritual perspective.

If we are in trouble, then pray, he says. If we are cheerful, then sing praises to God, he says. You see, we are to either enjoy or endure life with God in mind.

But it is sometimes easier said than done, isn't it? When it comes to trouble, we might turn to prayer quick enough. But often when we pray, it is hard to hand it entirely over to God.

And sometimes we can be like James' readers who are a little double-minded. And we saw this in chapter 1. So just flick back one page to chapter 1 for a moment. And here we see their prayer is for wisdom in suffering.

So chapter 1, verse number 5. It's halfway down the page there. Verse number 5 says, See, See, when we pray or ask God, and that's technically what prayer is, by the way, asking God, we are to do so trusting in him completely.

[4 : 57] Whether it's for wisdom, as in chapter 1, or for other help, when we're in trouble, as in chapter 5. But if we pray about our trouble, and then doubt God is working for our good, or let this trouble consume us so that our perspective is warped and everything seems hopeless, then we're being double-minded.

We're not handing it over completely to God. Now, not suggesting that if we are in trouble, we should pray and do nothing. No, we should seek medical help or do whatever we need to do because God often works through very ordinary means.

But we are to depend on God in prayer to trust him completely throughout the process. And can I say that I've been really encouraged by people here, here today, in fact, who have done that very thing.

You have not been double-minded. You have faced, and indeed are facing, terrible times of trouble, yet you do trust God in prayer completely. I won't name names because I haven't asked for permission, but you have encouraged me and many others through your steadfast trust and prayerful dependence.

It's terrific. And in the end, even if our suffering does not go away, we know that our situation is still not hopeless, still not without hope. In fact, even if our trouble ends in death, it is still never without hope.

[6 : 18] I mentioned to you before, our friends Richard and Bronwyn, we prayed for them a moment ago. And as many of you know, Bronwyn passed away last Sunday. Here was a family in trouble, in suffering, and they prayerfully depended on God such that even after she passed, Richard wrote this.

If you're on the prayer circle, you would have seen it. He wrote, we are grateful that today is Easter Sunday, last Sunday, the day we remember that Jesus rose from the dead to rule with all authority and conquer death, the last enemy.

And so through broken hearts, we cry hallelujah. We will grieve for a while yet, but never ever as a people without real hope.

See, here are people who are not having a pity party as though there is no plan in life and no hope even beyond death. No, they continue to trust God.

They will still grieve and rightly so, but never ever, says Richard, as a people without hope. And see, we are to view life, even when we're in trouble, from a spiritual perspective, you see, and pray to our God who can help, even in death.

[7 : 30] Of course, while we may be in danger of not trusting God completely in prayer during times of trouble, we are also in danger of not completely acknowledging God during times of happiness.

You know, when things are going well, we sometimes forget to praise God in thanks, don't we? Yet as James has already reminded us in chapter one, every good and perfect gift is from above, from God the Father.

And so, while we are to trust God in times of trouble, we are also to praise God in times of joy, for everything good comes from him. You see, we are to either endure or enjoy life with God in mind.

We are to have a spiritual perspective in all of life. And we are also to have that perspective when it comes to sickness. Point to verse 14. He writes, Is anyone among you sick?

Let them call the elders of the church to pray over them and anoint them with oil in the name of the Lord. And the prayer offered in faith will make the sick person well. The Lord will raise them up. If they have sinned, they will be forgiven.

[8 : 32] Therefore, confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous person is powerful and effective. Now, these verses are a little controversial.

Some people use these verses to support the practice, the Roman Catholic practice of last rites. You know, when someone is about to die and they call in the Catholic priest to pray over them, anoint them with oil so that they'll go to heaven.

But notice here that in James, the assumption is that the sick person will get better. You know, that's the assumption there. So it's not quite a last rites kind of thing. On the other hand, other people use it to support a more Pentecostal practice where you go to a healing service and there's someone with the gift of healing and they kind of, you know, touch you on the forehead and give you a push or something or other and you're healed miraculously.

It might be similar to what you see on early morning TV with people like Benny Hinn and the like. But notice again, they're not calling for someone with the gift of healing. They're calling for the elders to pray over them. And there's also an emphasis here on forgiveness.

Did you notice? Not just healing. And so while there is nothing wrong with having a reformed healing service where we pray, rightly so, we pray for people who are ill, it's not really what James is talking about here.

[9 : 49] So what is James talking about? Well, I think he's talking about a serious sickness that is due to a particular sin. Now, we need to remember that all suffering and sickness is caused by sin in general.

That is, because we live in a sinful and fallen world, there will be so-called natural disasters, persecution, suffering, sickness. But the situation here seems to be sickness caused by a particular sin.

See, verse 15 literally says, and I've got it on the slide, the verse 15 literally says, the prayer of faith will save the one who is sick. Now, the word save can mean physically saved, as in healed, but every other time James uses this word save in his letter, he means spiritually saved.

And so in verse 15, you have the physically sick being spiritually saved. So I take it the situation we have is some kind of suffering or sickness resulting from a sin, a particular sin.

Now, we see this elsewhere in the Bible. The classic example is 1 Corinthians 11, where the Corinthians were sinning when it came to the Lord's Supper. So again, on the slide, Paul writes, for anyone who eats and drinks without discerning the body, that is, one another, eats and drinks judgment on himself.

[11 : 06] That is why many of you are weak and sick and some have died. Here are some of the Corinthians who were sick and had died because of their sin of mistreating the body of Christ, that is, one another, at the Lord's Supper.

You see, sin is serious and boy, were some of James' readers, sinful. I mean, just look back at chapter 4 for a moment. They also mistreated the body of Christ.

Chapter 4, verse 1, he says, what causes fights and quarrels among you? Don't they come from your desires that battle within you? You desire, but you do not have, so you kill. You covet, but you cannot get what you want, so you quarrel and fight.

Or down in verse 8, chapter 4, verse 8, he continues. He says, You see, some of James' readers were sinful.

And so, what he's saying back in chapter 5 of James is he's saying, friends, look at your sickness from a spiritual perspective. Could it be that you are sick because of sin? So verse 14, he says, Is anyone sick?

[12 : 24] Because given your behaviour, I can imagine so. And if so, let them call for the elders of the church to pray over them in the name of the Lord, anointing them with oil. Oil was a symbolic act of consecrating.

It's as though they're consecrating the sick person and saying, this person now wants to set themselves apart to serve Jesus again, wholeheartedly. But the main command here is to pray for them. And so verse 15, the prayer offered in faith will save the sick person.

The Lord will raise them up and if they have sinned, they will be forgiven. See, James is not talking about sickness in general, but particular sickness as judgment for sin.

And this is actually backed up by the Elijah example he gives in verse 17 and 18. See, verse 17, he says, Elijah was a human being, even as we are. He prayed earnestly that it would not rain and it did not rain on the land for three and a half years.

Again, he prayed and the heavens gave rain and the earth produced its crops. Now, at first glance, it appears to suggest that with prayer, we can do anything. You know, we can stop the rain or we can make it rain.

[13 : 31] But again, we need to remember that the physical drought in Elijah's time was actually judgment for spiritual sin. And we heard it from our first reading, didn't we? There the people were wavering between God.

So on the slide, just so you don't have to look back there, on the slide it said, Elijah said, how long will you waver between two opinions? If the Lord is God, follow him. But if Baal is God, follow him.

In other words, they were being double-minded, weren't they? Just like James' readers. And it was because of their double-mindedness that the drought came in the first place. But then after the big barbecue off between Elijah and the prophets of Baal, we read, on the next slide, when all the people saw this, they fell prostrate and cried, the Lord, he is God, the Lord, he is God.

And it's at that point when the people repent that Elijah prays and God sends rain. You see, the physical drought was due to spiritual sin.

And so when the people repented, Elijah prays for them and God sends the rain. In fact, the Jews would have known that that was what was happening here.

[14 : 40] Because earlier on in 1 Kings chapter 8, Solomon prays, I don't have a slide for this, but just listen, 1 Kings chapter 8, he says, when the heavens are shut up because there is no rain, sorry, when the heavens are shut up and there is no rain because your people have sinned against you, very familiar, sounds very familiar, and when they pray towards this place, the temple, and confess your name and turn from their sin, then hear from heaven and forgive the sin of your servants, your people.

Teach them the right way to live and send rain on the land. 1 Kings 8. And it happened in 1 Kings 18. And that's the example that James chooses because that's what's happening in his context.

His readers were being double-minded themselves and so James is saying, your sickness because of your sin. If James was talking about a miraculous healing service, then there was a much better Elijah story to choose from.

In fact, just before the big barbecue thing in 1 Kings 18, there was a story of a boy who died in 1 Kings 17. There Elijah prays much more clearly for God to heal the boy.

And he didn't have to wait, remember? In 1 Kings 18, from our first reading, he sent the servant seven times to look for the rain. But in the story of the boy, just before, God answers his prayer like that and raises the boy from the dead immediately.

[16 : 06] If James had wanted to emphasize the power of prayer for physical healing, why didn't he choose that story of the boy who has died and then back to life immediately? No, James chooses this story of Israel's sin and the forgiveness that followed because that's what's on view in James chapter 5.

And that's the context in which James makes that famous statement in James chapter 5 that the prayer of a righteous person is powerful and effective. See, the effective prayer is one for forgiveness, in other words, that brings healing caused by sin.

That is, it's a prayer to save sinners who repent rather than to heal any sickness in general. Now, of course, we are to pray for those who are sick. It is right and good that we do that.

And God can and has answered those prayers. Indeed, there are people here today who can attest to that. But God does not always answer those prayers with a yes, does he?

Yet the prayers he does always answer with a yes are the prayers for forgiveness, the prayers offered in faith, the prayers of the righteous who trust God for forgiveness.

[17 : 16] These prayers are always powerful and effective for those who repent. I remember teaching at a Christian school. I was a primary school teacher for a few years and one of my colleagues was watching her own sister die of a disease and so she was praying and praying for God to heal her sister.

And one morning at Staff Devotions we came to this verse in James chapter 5, the prayer of a righteous person is powerful and effective and then she asked us, she said, can you pray for my sister because I must not be very righteous.

God's not answering my prayers. Can you pray for her instead? And this very verse caused her so much distress. But you see, her sister was sick because she, like us, live in a fallen world.

It wasn't because of God's judgment on a particular sin of hers, which is what James is talking about here. Prayer is always powerful and effective because the God we pray to is powerful and effective but God will sometimes say no, sometimes say wait, sometimes say yes.

I only got the traffic light thing by the way, David, halfway through. I thought it was very clever. You know, no, wait, very good. That's how he answers prayers in general about general sickness.

[18 : 36] But when it comes to prayers for forgiveness, then he always answers yes. That's why James says in verse 16 that they are to confess their sins to each other and not necessarily every last detail but certainly if they had fought and quarreled with one another like we saw in chapter 4 and so are sick under God's judgment.

They are to confess or repent to one another so that they can pray for God's forgiveness for one another and that prayer is always powerful and effective for healing. Now I realise that for some of us this morning this might make prayer seem less powerful and effective.

I mean, if it's just talking about forgiveness and the healing associated with it, then it doesn't sound all that powerful and effective. But if it was talking about the power of prayer to always heal any dreadful disease, even raise the dead, well then, that would make prayer really powerful and effective.

That's how we often think, isn't it? But if we think like that, then we're not looking at prayer from a spiritual perspective. You see, what is a greater thing for God to do? To heal the physically sick or to forgive the spiritually sinful?

I mean, what costs God more? God made the world so he can fix a relatively small thing like sickness, but to heal us of the real disease called sin that cost him his only son, Jesus, did it not?

[19 : 57] So which do you think God would see as the greater thing to do? To heal the sickness or to forgive sinners? Which would the angels rejoice over more? To the sick person given health or the sinner given forgiveness?

You see, we think when we pray for the sick person to be made well, we are asking more of God than when we pray for forgiveness. But it's the other way around. To ask for forgiveness costs God so much more.

It's the greater request, you see. It's just that he always answers yes to forgiveness and only sometimes to physical healing for our good. And so we forget how powerful and effective that prayer for forgiveness is because we take it for granted.

He always says yes to it. And so when a sick person is healed, we ought to rejoice. It is a great answer to prayer. But when a sinner who repents is forgiven, then we ought to rejoice all the more because that is an extraordinary answer to prayer for it's the more costly request.

We'd have a spiritual perspective when it comes to sickness. And so if we are sick, then it's not a bad thing to ask ourselves, could this be because of my sin? Could it be God trying to get me to take sin more seriously?

[21 : 13] To take him more seriously? And so we are to examine ourselves and see if there is an unrepentant sin in our lives. And if there is, then we are to ask God for forgiveness.

And that prayer is powerful and effective. If we have sinned in a way that has caused our sickness, God will forgive us and he will heal us of that sickness. Of course, more often our sickness is not a result of a particular sin but simply living in a fallen world and so we may not be physically healed.

Either way, we are to view it from a spiritual perspective. The question though is how do we know? How do we know if our sickness is due to sin or not? A particular sin or just living in a fallen world?

Well, if you see a particular sin in your life that you're continuing in and if you repent and pray for forgiveness, the promise of God is that he will heal you of that sickness reasonably quickly it seems.

But if there is no obvious sin and you are not healed then I take it your sickness is part of living in a fallen world. That's how you know. And often that's what it is the cause of our sickness.

[22 : 19] Yet even then we still have that spiritual perspective that James has already given us. Remember chapter 5 verse 7? He says, Be patient then brothers and sisters until the Lord's coming. See how the farmer waits for the land to yield its valuable crop.

Patiently waiting for the autumn and spring rains. You too be patient and stand firm because the Lord's coming is near. And then in verses 10 and 11 he gives the example of the prophets who have their patience and perseverance in the face of suffering.

See we are to stand firm persevering know that Jesus will return and it will all be worth it. Well the last two verses also support this idea of the underlying issue of sin and forgiveness.

It's a much quicker point don't worry. We've dealt with the big complex one. In the last two verses James wants his readers to have a spiritual perspective when it comes to those who wander from the truth.

So point 3 verse 19. He says, My brothers and sisters if one of you should wander from the truth and someone should bring that person back remember this whoever turns a sinner from the error of their way will save them from death and cover over a multitude of sins.

[23 : 31] Notice again the issue is saving people from sin and death that is eternal death. In other words we have to have a spiritual perspective when it comes to one another especially those who wander from the truth.

Because to wander from the truth of Jesus is to wander away from eternal life. Eternity you see is at stake. And so James wants his readers to know that to bring a person back to the truth of the gospel is to save them from hell and a multitude of sins for God always answers yes to a humble prayer for forgiveness.

And so I take it we have to work hard at asking after one another here at 10am church. If we don't see someone for a few weeks then we have to give them a ring find out how they're going.

You will not only encourage them because you notice their absence but if they are drifting away then you may just save them from hell by bringing them back to Jesus.

And the stakes are high and so we have to do what we can to love and encourage one another to help each other keep trusting in Jesus especially those who start to wander.

[24 : 39] There was a lady called Natasha at my old church I taught her son CRE and they started coming to our church and subsequently became Christians but she was a single mum and a young Christian who didn't realise the dangers of dating non-Christians and so she started seeing a non-Christian man and very quickly she stopped coming to church this was around the time that Michelle and I moved to Melbourne and to here but a friend's wife called Karen actually continued to follow her up not in a pushy way and sometimes they didn't talk much about Christian things but she kept the friendship going she kept praying for her and every now and then would invite her to a women's Bible study or to a Christmas service and so on in fact I think they ended up meeting one to one just to read the Bible but the point is Karen kept caring for Natasha who had wandered from the truth and was in danger of eternal death and now as I understand it she and her two children are growing in their relationship with Jesus back in church growing as Christians you see God used Karen's willingness to save Natasha from hell and to bring her forgiveness and I rejoice in that well let me wrap up in life in life we can get distracted by all sorts of things and we can miss what matters most

I missed it when Michelle was about to give birth I was more worried about the white lines than the baby but we can also do it in life can't we we can miss the forest for the trees so to speak or is that the other way around I can never remember which well when it comes to the matters in life as Christians we are not to miss what matters most namely God instead we are to have a spiritual perspective in life where we enjoy and endure all of life with God in mind and we are to take sin seriously such that we even consider whether our sickness could be a result of sin and if we think it is then we are to pray for forgiveness and that prayer is always powerful and effective God will always say yes to forgive sin and if not if it's not because of sin then we are to be patient and persevere continuing to trust in Jesus continuing to not just listen to the word but to live it out and we are to do what we can to help each other continue trusting in Christ so that on the last day we might all stand side by side and enjoy God's rest forever let's pray that we would do that let's pray our heavenly father we do thank you for this letter of

James we thank you that he does not pull any punches but he clearly teaches us how we are to live as your saved people father we pray that you would help us to live out the word that you would help us to live with heavenly wisdom as James calls it to have a spiritual perspective in life father help us to do this even through suffering and help us to remember that prayer is indeed powerful and effective for through it we can claim forgiveness from you because of Jesus father we thank you for these things in his name amen we're going to