

A Call to Godward Living

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[0 : 00] Thank you very much, Anika.

It's good to see my aunt, Linda, with us again this morning.! We'll see Brother David back with us and gathering regularly once again.

Please turn your Bible to the book of James, James chapter 5. And this morning we're returning to our extended sermon series in the book of James.

And this is the second to the last sermon in that series. And the passage that we come to this morning is one of, if not the most, perplexing passages in the book of James.

The passage contains a few verses on praying for the sick that have been the basis for a lot of controversy and disagreement among Christians.

[1 : 21] For example, the Roman Catholic Church bases its erroneous teaching of extreme unction on these verses.

And there are many faith healers who tell us that all Christians who are sick will be healed if those praying for them pray with enough faith.

They tell us that these verses that we're going to find in this passage guarantee healing through prayer if the people doing it have enough faith.

And so a lot of us use it as a case study for anointing people with oil. But what is this passage about?

Does it teach any of those things or does it teach something else? Well, let's go ahead and read it and I will pray and ask God's help and we'll consider this passage.

[2 : 34] James chapter 5, beginning in verse 13. Is anyone among you suffering? Let him pray.

Is anyone cheerful? Let him sing praise. 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 one who is sick. And the Lord will raise him up.

And if he has committed sins, he will be forgiven. Therefore, confess your sins to one another and pray for one another.

And the prayer of a righteous person has great power as it is working. Elijah was a man with a nature like ours.

[3 : 38] And he prayed fervently that it might not rain. And for three years and six months, it did not rain on the earth. Then he prayed again.

And heaven gave rain. And the earth bore its fruit. Let's pray. Lord, we pause in this moment, as we always do, because we need your help.

But we especially need your help, Lord, as we come to a passage that has been the source of much controversy and disagreement among those who profess to belong to you.

And so we ask for your help this morning. We ask, Lord, that you would grant illumination in the text of your word.

Lord, I ask for special grace and unction to be faithful and to proclaim the truth of your word this morning.

[4 : 48] And, Lord, I do ask that you would help me to humble myself and recognize my need for your spirit. And, Lord, would you cause the preaching of your word this morning to benefit the souls of all who hear, and most of all, to bring glory to your name.

I pray and ask these things in Christ's name. Amen. So what is this passage about? What is it that James is calling the people of God to?

Here's how I would summarize it. Believers in Christ are called to live God-wardly, praying in life's sorrows and praising in life's joys.

I think James is saying to us that whatever circumstances we find ourselves in, we must reference God. We must live God-wardly.

Praying to God in our sorrows and praising him in our joys. I want to consider how James makes this point that we are called to live God-wardly in all circumstances by doing so under two headings.

[6 : 13] And the first is a call to God-wardly in all circumstances by doing so under three things. And the first is a call to God-wardly living. We see that in verses 13 through 16. And then an example of God-wardly living.

We see that in verses 17 to 18. So first, a call to God-wardly living. James begins by asking three questions. Look again at how he does so in verses 13 and 14.

Is anyone among you suffering? Let him pray. Is anyone cheerful? Let him sing praise. 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. Three questions and three responses to those questions.

Now, I believe that all of us this morning can find ourselves and locate ourselves by our circumstances in one of the two first questions that James asks.

[7 : 25] When you think of your life at the moment, are you in your life being marked more by suffering, challenges, trials, temptations, unrest in your soul?

Or would you say that your life at the moment is more marked by buoyant happiness? Not fully free from trouble, but the accent of your heart is joy, joy of spirit, joy of soul.

Well, James responds, wherever you find yourself this morning, is that you are to be Godward. He says, if you are suffering, pray. Turn it to God.

Turn to God. He says, if you are cheerful, then you are to praise God. Now, there are some people who do exactly what James is saying that we should do.

When they are suffering, they pray. And I wonder if you locate yourself this morning as one who would say, my life is more marked by suffering, by trials, by weariness and anguish of soul.

[8 : 43] I think the question is, how are you responding? Are you among those who are responding by being Godward and praying? Or are you complaining?

Or instead of drawing near to God and being Godward to God, are you more withdrawing from God and being Godless instead of being Godward?

You know, one of the realities is that God in his sovereign providence brings circumstances of suffering in our lives to cause us to be Godward, to cause us to draw near to him, to cause us to pray.

That is the good that he has in circumstances of suffering for his people many times. And when we understand it, drawing near in prayer is the result.

When we don't, we think that somehow God is in fear, we complain, and we begin to do what we heard in the prayer this morning. We don't deserve. We don't deserve anything from God.

[9 : 59] We can't demand anything from God. But sadly, there are even some people who, when suffering comes their way, the first response is not God, it's the devil.

And they rebuke the devil and bind the devil. And the devil is all in view of them because they don't have an understanding of a sovereign God who is sovereign in all things and over all things, including our suffering.

And so, they raise their suffering that God has ordained to cause them to pray, to cause them to be Godward.

Then on the other hand, there are believers who, because of the blessings of God and the kind providence of God, they find themselves cheerful, happy in their soul.

And instead of praising God and directing the gift of those circumstances to God, they become self-indulgent. They begin to engage in self-referential pleasures and distractions that do not have God in view.

[11 : 18] And that was not the aim. The aim was that they would reference their circumstances to God and praise God for the cheerfulness and the bountifulness of their souls.

It is in cheerfulness, it is in when things are well, that we can become complacent, we can become lazy, and sadly, we can become self-sufficient.

Looking to ourselves and not looking to God, the one who is ultimately responsible for our cheerful circumstances and happiness of soul.

And sadly, it takes a season of suffering to redirect us back to God. I think it's important to note what James is not saying.

James is not saying that those who are suffering must only pray. And he's certainly not saying that those who are cheerful must only sing praise.

[12 : 31] James is only telling us to primarily do what we tend to primarily neglect. But the truth is, when we are suffering, we don't just pray, we praise God as well, because we recognize that he is the sovereign Lord over those circumstances.

And when we are cheerful, we don't just praise, we pray to God as well. So what do the suffering pray, and what do the cheerful sing?

Well, James doesn't tell us exactly. And I think the reason he doesn't tell us is because that is not his point. James simply wants us to be Godward. He simply wants us to reference God in whatever circumstance we find ourselves.

And how wonderful that is, brothers and sisters, to know that wherever we are, we can reference God. In all of life's seasons, in all of life's circumstances, we can be Godward.

And so where are you this morning, and how are you responding? If you've assessed your life, and you've determined that suffering best describes where you are today, are you responding Godwardly?

[13 : 57] Are you praying? I mean, you can try to think about it in terms of maybe you can remember when there was this onset of suffering.

Maybe you can remember the circumstances that brought about the suffering. And I think the question is, did it cause you to be more prayerful? Did it point you more to God in dependency and awareness that God is sovereign over all of this?

That's what Job did. In his losses, in his sufferings, he said, the Lord has given, and the Lord has taken away.

Blessed be the name of the Lord. And that's what we need to do as well. And certainly it should be carving out time to pray, carving out time to be specific about that situation of suffering, praying for wisdom, praying for perspective, praying for endurance, praying for God's strength.

But it's more than just an activity that we do that I'm going to do in the morning, I'm going to do it the night. It is, it is living in a Godward way.

[15 : 18] It is being prayerful in heart. And friends, if our prayer lives are only marked by the times that we get on our knees or that we say, I'm going to pray right now, I'm saying, we're not praying enough.

The Bible says we have to be constant in prayer. We're learning that right now. And that means in an ongoing way to have our hearts postured to God in prayer, communing with Him as we go through our days and we do our various activities when we are in the season of suffering.

But if you're cheerful, then I would say to you in a very similar way that intentionally we should be lifting our hearts to God in praise and in thanksgiving and in gratitude, referencing our circumstances back to Him.

That's what God wants us to do. That is the aim that He has in all of life's circumstances, that we would become Godward in them, that we would not be like those who don't know the Lord.

And brothers and sisters, it needs to be this way. It must matter that if you and maybe a co-worker have experienced particular providences of God that cause you to be cheerful in your soul, it ought to be that if that co-worker does not know the Lord, that your heart is directed towards God and praising Him, recognizing that ultimately He is the one who is responsible for that.

[17 : 07] So we're called to commune with God in whatever our circumstances are. In verse 14, James turns his attention to those who are very sick.

And clearly, he is now coming to a category of persons who seem to be beyond just ordinary suffering. It seems like these ones were not captured in this broad category of those who are suffering.

They are suffering in an extraordinary way. They are those who are direly sick. so sick that they need others to come and help them and others to come and pray for them.

Others to exercise faith that they don't have. James tells us that it is the prayer of the elders that they are depending on, the faith of the elders they are depending on to raise them up.

In verse 15, this, the words, the one who is sick, can literally be translated, the one who is weary and worn out. The picture is that someone bad ridden, that someone who has so little ability to help themselves.

[18 : 42] This is a severe sickness. and weakness that this person is facing. But they're conscious enough to call for the elders of the church.

And here we see a problem with the Roman Catholic practice of extreme unction where they essentially are praying for the dead.

This person is conscious. and so that is not, there's no biblical basis for that sacrament of the Roman Catholic church.

But here James says the elders are to be called and the elders are to do two things. He says first, they are to pray for the sick person and second, they are to anoint the person with oil.

Or as they're praying for the person, anoint the person with oil. Now, those who give a lot of attention to the oil, more than the prayer, and some of them actually believe that you need special oil.

[19 : 56] You need this one to pray for the oil, or that one to pray for the oil, and only that oil can be used to anoint the sick. But it's clear that the oil is incidental.

the oil is not the accent of what James' instructions are. He says you're to pray, anointing them with oil.

And in James' day, oil was used medicinally, and in this context, I think it is there to give a visible expression of the healing power of the Holy Spirit, and that's the understanding that we have today as well.

That it represents the healing power of the Holy Spirit, not that it is in and of itself the healing power of the Holy Spirit. It's very clear, if we consider this verse, that the focus is that it's the prayer that is active, not the oil.

Now look at what James says in verse 15. Look at what he says again. he says in the prayer of faith will save the one who is sick, and the Lord will raise him up, and if he has committed sins, he will be forgiven.

[21 : 23] Now whenever we read these verses, I would say there's an elephant in the room. there's an elephant in the room because I think most of us have lived long enough, been around the church enough, served God long enough to realize that this is not automatically our experience.

I can say this morning that in my 30 years plus of pastoral ministry, I've never had the experience where together with fellow elders having been called to pray for someone who's very sick and anointed them with oil, prayed for them that they were healed.

There's a lot in that, and I won't take the time to unpack it, other than to say it in that very general way. And for those who are still wondering, I've never been called to do this.

But I've also not heard of anyone else in all of my pastoral ministry who has been called to pray in this manner, and that they've had this experience.

Now that could be because of my circles and my limited exposure that this has been my experience, but I think even more broadly, I don't believe that there's anyone on record who is able to say that even if there have been occasions where they have been called to pray in this way, that every single time they did that, this was the result that they got.

[23 : 11] I attended the funeral of a dear friend yesterday, faithful man, faithful believer, and I have no doubt that the elders of his church prayed for him, and many, many saints also prayed for him, but this was not his experience.

I want to do something this morning that I will rarely do, I have rarely done, but I think it would be profitable, and so I'm going to do that.

I'm going to extensively share some quotations with you from J.A. Mottia and his commentary. I find such wise insights on this verse and how we should be thinking about it in a biblical manner that I think would really serve your souls, and I trust you're able to follow along.

They're going to be projected on the screen also for those who are watching by live stream. But this is lengthy. There's several quotes, but I want you to hear this wise pastor and theologian, and I'm reading him verbatim because I cannot improve upon what he has shared and I have found what he has written to be very helpful.

He writes, this is from his commentary on James, the message of James. It cannot be accidental that in speaking of the prayer of faith, James uses, James both uses an expression not found elsewhere in scripture and also departs from the usual Greek word for prayer in favor of a word rarely used with this meaning.

[25 : 22] A writer as sure-footed in his Greek as James and as sensitive to the task of getting the right word in the right place must have intended to signal to his readers that he was bringing something special before them.

He goes on. This whole passage, verses 13 to 18, is about prayer. And the central truth about prayer is a deliberate but peaceful acceptance of the will of God.

But when he writes of the prayer of faith, James seems to intentionally direct our gaze not into the hearts of the praying elders but to the result that such a prayer produces.

It will save the sick man and the Lord will raise him up. In other words, he seems to speak of faith not as a commitment to the will of God but as a conviction that it is the will of God to perform this miracle.

spiritual. And he goes on and he begins to make the point about how when elders are invited to pray for someone in such a situation, how they need to be thoughtful and prayerful and they need to do it with seriousness.

[26 : 50] And they need to be praying and asking the Lord if he is granting this special unction of faith whereby in praying this person is going to be healed.

And then he goes on. The majority of prayers are in fact prayers of rest and rightly so. We often do not know what to ask either for ourselves or for others whether through lack of wisdom to know what is right or knowledge to know what is needed.

And we are glad to fall back on that great plea, Lord bless. The word bless is conscious shorthand for Lord, I do not know what to ask, but you know what is needed.

Nowhere is a spirit of jaunty confidence more misplaced than in the sick room. It is no time for unconditional predictions of what the Lord will do.

precious in the sight of every affliction. Sorry, precious in his sight is every affliction of his people. Psalm 56, 8. Not just their death.

[28 : 08] Psalm 116, 15. And he keeps secrets to himself. In ordinary common or garden matters, we find that we are too often misled by our convictions of what the Lord will or will not do.

prayer is a commitment to the will of God.

And all true prayer exercises its truest faith in patiently waiting to see what he has determined to do. The unqualified statement that the prayer of faith will save the sick stands alongside many similar affirmations regarding prayer.

In fact, it is the standard way in which the Bible makes its prayer promises. We think, for example, of Matthew 18, 19. If two of you agree on earth about anything they ask, it will be done for them by my Father in heaven.

Or John 14, 13. Whatever you ask in my name, I will do it. Such promises are intended to bring us with confidence into the place of prayer.

[29 : 29] They speak to us of a God who can do all things, who is so generous that he will withhold nothing from us that is good and whose ears are open to our every word.

But the one thing the promises do not encourage or allow is that we should come into the place of prayer with a stubborn insistence that we have got it right and that our will must be done.

In the prayer of faith, our faith is not in the promises. Our faith is not that the promises will be fulfilled just like that.

It is the faith which rests trustfully in the will of a sovereign, faithful, and loving God. Neither the sick person nor any of the elders is there to insist that this, that his or her will be done, but to put the sick one within the total, eternal security of the unchangeable and unchangeably gracious will of God.

And finally, to say thy will be done does not impose a restriction on what we ask.

[30 : 55] Rather, it lifts all earthly restrictions. And we must say that this is, if anything, more important in the case of a sick person than in almost any other case.

The disposing of the welfare of the child of God cannot be left with greater confidence anywhere else than in the Father's hands, nor can any solution of the plight be more fitting, beneficial, and glorious than that which he has in mind.

Those are wise words, brothers and sisters. Those are faith-building words. I want to read the very last sentence. The disposing of the welfare of the child of God cannot be left with greater confidence anywhere else than in the Father's hands, nor can any solution of the plight be more fitting, beneficial, and glorious than that which he has in mind.

The worst outcome that we see from these kinds of situations where a person is direly sick is that the person dies.

some could languish for a very long time and just be unwell and for years, for decades. And then for some, the onset of that sickness, it ends rather quickly and it ends in death.

[32 : 47] But for the child of God, for the one who has lived for Christ, for the one who truly believes for me to live is Christ and to die is gain.

For that one, is death a loss? Death, then, brothers and sisters, is the kindness of the Lord to bring a child home, one who has suffered, one who has languished in our fallen world and it is the kindness of the Lord to bring such a one home to glory.

But I think this is so essential for us to hear that we can dispose the welfare of any of God's children in his loving hands and say, Lord, you do what is best.

Because he's a good father, he won't be swayed or guided one way, the other by what we say. In the latter part of verse 15, James tells us, and if he has committed any sins, he will be forgiven.

And so here, James makes a potential connection between sickness and sin, sin, and he's not making the point that all sickness is the result of sin because he says if he has committed any sins, it will be forgiven him.

[34 : 33] sin. And that is a reality that sometimes there is a connection between sin and our sickness.

And one of the things that obviously should be happening for one who is direly sick is that time of communion with God makes the heart very tender and open to God and certainly more open to conviction and the confession of sin.

But notice in verse 16 that James makes it clear that prayer is not just the right or the responsibility of the elders. He makes the point that the church, we are to pray for one another that healing might come.

And here James seems to be connecting healing and the confession of sin and prayer.

And again, it's no doubt that God oftentimes will use his discipline to humble us, to confess our sins, to confess our sins to one another.

[35 : 53] Because sadly sometimes we are unwilling to otherwise confess our sins. But what James is not doing is James is not encouraging us to engage in a practice that some engage in, and that is to go and confess their sins to whomever.

James is not calling us to do that. He's calling us to confess sin, yes, but he's not calling us to confess sin in some random, capricious kind of way.

We are to confess all of our sins to God, and we are to confess our specific sins to those against whom we have sinned. And so, for example, if I sin against Alexei, going and confessing that to David that I sinned against Alexei is not what I'm being called to do here.

I'm called to confess my sins, so I confess and acknowledge it to Alexei, and I may talk with David if I'm finding this is a besetting sin, and I need help, and I need support, and prayer, and accountability with this.

Well, yes, that's an appropriate thing to do. But we confess sins to God, and we confess our sins to those against whom we have sinned.

[37 : 21] God, and we have sinned. James continues in verse 16, he says, the prayer of a righteous person has great power as it is working.

And this is an encouragement to us to pray. And if we rightly think about what James says here, we don't turn our eyes to our own righteousness.

righteousness. We turn our eyes to the one who makes righteousness for us possible, that we can be declared righteous. In truth, if we really considered ourselves and the righteousness that we actually have in and of ourselves, it would not be an encouragement to pray, it would be an encouragement to hang our heads.

But when we are in right standing with God, through the Lord Jesus Christ, we are called to pray, and James says that the prayer of a righteous person is effective when it is working.

So we are called, brothers and sisters, to live Godwardly in all of life's circumstances, praying in our sufferings and praising in our joys.

[38 : 38] But not only does James call us to Godward living, second, second, second, finally and briefly, James calls us, or he points us to an example of Godward living.

He points us to this example in verses 17 and 18. Look again at what he says. Elijah was a man with a nature like ours, and he prayed fervently that it might not rain, and for three years and six months, it did not rain on the earth.

Then he prayed again, and heaven gave rain, and the earth bore its fruit. Notice that in verses 17 and 18, James encourages us to pray by reminding us of how powerful the prayer of a righteous person is, and he seems to see our despair.

He seems to see that when we hear about righteousness, we automatically look at ourselves. And what he does is he lifts Elijah as an example, essentially saying, consider Elijah.

While you're despairing about what happened yesterday or last week or whenever it took place, he says, consider Elijah. He says, Elijah was a man just like you, the same nature.

[40 : 06] And when we consider Elijah in 1 Kings 17 and 18 and also 19, Elijah was not very consistent. He was up and down emotionally.

He had great faith when he confronted the prophets of Baal. And then he, a short time later, received a short, threatening message from Jezebel, and he ran for days, ran for his life, prayed to die.

He at times was filled with despair and depression and self-pity and fear. But he was right with God. And despite his many shortcomings, God heard him when he prayed.

When he prayed that there would not be rain, and God heard him when he prayed that the rain would also come. Elijah did not allow his, no doubt, awareness.

He had to have been aware of what it was like to be running from Jezebel, so afraid. But he still looked to God. He prayed.

[41 : 23] He reminds us that it's not about us. Ultimately, it is about God. God hears the prayers of his people, even though he said, he prayed, that he recorded in 1 Kings for us.

His prayers were brief. His prayers were simple. And I think we can be reminded that it is not the length or the extravagance of our prayers that cause us to be heard.

God hears the prayers of his people, even though they're often weak and feeble, even though they're simple and brief, and even though they come from people like us, who in and of ourselves are not worthy, he hears them.

He hears us whenever we pray. And in the end, he does what is right. He does what is best. He does according to his sovereign will in all things.

And so as we conclude this morning, brothers and sisters, I want to ask you again, how are you responding to the circumstances in which you find yourself?

[42 : 49] Are you responding in a Godward manner, whether it is suffering, whether it is cheerfulness of circumstance? And I encourage you, wherever you find yourself, embrace the privilege to be Godward.

Embrace the privilege to look to the Lord. One of the things I want to use this opportunity to encourage us in is that one of the beautiful things about praying together, when we pray together on the first Monday of the month, or we pray together on Saturday evenings, we bring our varied circumstances to those times of prayer.

Some of us are suffering, some of us are cheerful, and how wonderful it is that we are hearing and being reminded that we are to weep with those who weep, we're to rejoice with those who rejoice, and God in his wise providence will not have all of us suffering at the same time.

He will not have all of us joyful at the same time, but he has us in our various circumstances so that we may identify with one another, and that we don't identify with our situation so much because even when I may be in suffering and my brother is cheerful, I can rejoice with my brother, and my brother can rejoice with me, my brother can weep with me, enjoy with me in my suffering, and so I want to encourage us as a church, especially those of you who are not participating in our times of prayer, and in your heart you know that your circumstances allow you to do that, and for whatever reason you have not made it a priority to do it, I encourage you, let's join our hearts together, let's bring whatever circumstance we find ourselves in, and let us be Godward together.

Yes, we're called to do it individually, but let us do, let us do it together, let us come together, and let us pray, because I can tell you that those times also shape us, they shape us for how we need to live when we separate from one another, how encouraging, how strengthening it can be to hear a brother or sister lift up his or her voice to the Lord in prayer, those times can shape us and help us to be Godward, in whatever circumstance we find ourselves in.

[45 : 25] And so may the Lord help us this morning to hallow every pleasure and praise, may he help us to sanctify every pain in prayer.

Let's pray. Lord, we thank you for your word this morning. And we thank you that whatever circumstance we find ourselves in, whether it is the circumstance of suffering or the circumstance of being cheerful, we can be Godward and respond to you.

And Lord, my prayer is that would be the effect of this sermon this morning in whatever need, whatever degree it needs to be for all of us, wherever we find ourselves.

And may it be for the good of our eternal souls and for the glory of your name. We pray this in Christ's name. Amen. Let's stand for our closing song.