

A Prescription Called Prayer

James 5:13-20

Pastor Jarrett Stephens

Illus. Migraines - I have since high school struggled with migraines. They are debilitating and have been a real “thorn in my flesh” since I can remember. I get everything that comes with them...the aura...nausea...and it wasn't until a few years back that I found a medicine that works.

I of course went to the neurologist, and they performed some scans. They did see that I had a brain so that was a positive. They found nothing else wrong with me though. I knew what my triggers were:

- Stress – that’s a wonderful trigger to have as a pastor – NO stress with this job!
- Change in eating patterns – that will trigger a migraine.
- Too much chocolate or sun – that’s something that we’ve kind of tracked as trigger, so I have to be careful there.

Other than watching out for those triggers, the doctor gave me a prescription and said, “take this when you feel them coming on, and it should be able to help you out!”

And for the most part it has been very helpful. I never leave home without my meds because they really have helped me. It’s amazing how a simple prescription, with the right amount of medicine, taken exactly how it has been prescribed, helps me when a headache is on the horizon.

Well, today we come to the conclusion of this letter from James, the pastor of the Jerusalem Church, that was written to his congregation that due to persecution had been dispersed far and wide.

We’ve spent 13 weeks walking through this letter and we end our time today talking about the importance of prayer in the life of a believer.

I’m calling the message: **A Prescription Called Prayer**

Just like me going to the Doctor to get a prescription for my headaches, James is going to give a prescription for what to do when our heart aches.

This passage flows straight out of last weeks. I really encourage you to go online or to our app if you missed any messages and catch up. The context is one where believers are hurting:

- they’re in a trial...
- they’re experiencing hardship...

- they're walking through great difficulty and pain...

James has encouraged them to be patient in this (v. 7) – God is working in them, on them, and he has a plan and purpose that he will fulfill. He challenges them to stand firm and not give up (v. 8) – this is what we talked about all last week.

He continues with his encouragement and challenge to this people he loves and the entire thrust of this section of scripture we are looking at today is a call to prayer - THIS above all is the prescription you need to get you through tough times.

James 5:13-20 – “¹³ Is anyone among you suffering? Let him pray. Is anyone cheerful? Let him sing praise. ¹⁴ 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. ¹⁵ 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. ¹⁶ Therefore, confess your sins to one another and pray for one another, that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous person has great power as it is working. ¹⁷ 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. ¹⁸ Then he prayed again, and heaven gave rain, and the earth bore its fruit. ¹⁹ My brothers, if anyone among you wanders from the truth and someone brings him back, ²⁰ let him know that whoever brings back a sinner from his wandering will save his soul from death and will cover a multitude of sins.”

I brought one of my prescriptions with me and there is a lot of information on this little label here. Using my uber-creative juices, I want to sort of use what's on this as a model concerning the prescription called prayer.

First, I want to define or answer the question: **What is prayer?**

Before any doctor prescribes medicine to you, he tells you what it is you're taking. James has twice mentioned prayer already in his letter. He mentioned it in:

- **James 1:5a – “If any of you lack wisdom, let him ask God...”**

- **James 4:2b – “...you do not have because you do not ask...”**

When he speaks of “asking” – this is what is described as prayer. In this passage we're looking at today eight times in eight verses, the word prayer or a form of the word pray is used.

Now, James knew something about prayer. Evidently, he had listened to his brother, Jesus teaching on prayer. No doubt he had seen him praying growing up and I think it left an indelible imprint upon his life.

Eusebius served as the Bishop of Caesarea Maritima in the early 300's. He's known as the “Father of Christian History”. He wrote this about James – gives us some insight into who he was!

Eusebius - “His knees grew hard like a camel because of his constant worship of God, kneeling and asking forgiveness for the people.”

How would you like that as a nickname? “Camel Knees” because you spent so much time in prayer?

Author and Pastor **Kent Hughes** gave some additional insight into this. He wrote: **“Just like a laborer’s hands testify to his occupation, or a runner’s feet to his training, James calloused knees testified to a life of serious prayer.”**

Illus. Liberty – this past week I had the privilege to speak to the staff of Liberty University at their monthly staff chapel. And in thinking about prayer, I was reminded of a doctoral class I took at Liberty. It was a week-long intensive in West Palm Beach, Florida and the entire week was on prayer. That’s all we did was study prayer for a week!

My professor, **Elmer Towns** gave a definition of prayer on the first day of the class that I have never forgotten. He said: **“Prayer is relationship.”**

In its simplest form this is what prayer is. Just as breathing gives life to the human – it’s natural, you don’t think about it...it’s just what the body does.

For the Christian, this is prayer. It’s relationship. And any relationship involves communication. We talk and we listen. THIS is prayer. It’s what is referred to in the Old Testament as “calling upon the name of the Lord.”

We first see this in **Gen. 4:26b** (after Cain killed Abel) – **“...At that time people began to call upon the name of the Lord.”**

They began to practice what we call prayer. It’s old school and kind of cheesy, but it’s good. Someone once said that God’s phone number is:

Jeremiah 33:3 – **“Call to me and I will answer you, and will tell you great and hidden things that you have not known.”**

Just think about this! God, who created me and you...the heavens and the earth - all we have and see...he INVITES us into a relationship with him that is maintained and grows and becomes more intimate through prayer – through calling upon his name.

This is what is prescribed to the believer facing hardship and heartache – It’s a prescription called prayer.

Now, let’s look at: **How often should we pray?**

On my prescription...on most prescriptions it will say something like: “take 1-2 tablets by mouth every day at bedtime.” Or it may say something like: “take 1 tablet by mouth daily for 5 days” or “take 1 tablet when symptoms occur”.

James does this same thing with prayer. He doesn't just give the prescription, he tells you exactly when you need to take it!

James 5:13 – “Is anyone among you suffering? Let him pray. Is anyone cheerful? Let him sing praise.”

James covers the gamut of life right here. From suffering which we could characterize as low times in life to being “cheerful” which we could characterize as the good times in life – James says, this is WHEN you are to pray.

The phrase “let him pray” is in the present tense. We could read it like this” “Let him keep on praying”. It's this idea of a continual calling upon the Lord.

James is simply referencing back to what his brother taught. Jesus taught about parable in a parable in Luke's gospel. He begins it like this:

Luke 18:1 – “And he told them a parable to the effect that they ought to always pray and not lose heart.”

Paul put it like this several places in his New Testament letters:

- **1 Thess. 5:17 – “pray without ceasing...”**
- **Eph. 6:18a – “praying at all times in the Spirit, with all prayer and supplication...”**

Like me with my migraine pills, never leaving home without my meds, this is how we are to be with prayer! We take prayer with us wherever we go!

In bad times, we pray. In good times, we sing praise – which is simply prayers put to a melody! Either way, you are staying connected to God – ALL of the time. There is not a moment you are NOT calling upon the name of the Lord!

And SOMETIMES...life brings such a mixture of sorrow and joy that you can't help but do BOTH at the same time!

illus. Paul and Silas – Acts 16, Paul and Silas are in prison. I'd say that's a time of suffering. But you can chain a man's hands and feet and still not chain his heart! They are suffering for the Lord, but there was joy in it!

And so, there is this strange mix – and this is often where the Christian lives, isn't it? We live right in the middle of suffering and cheer. We can go through the fire and at the same time be

rejoicing God is with is...working in us...using us to display his glory and help further his mission.

This was Paul and Silas and so you know what the scripture says they were doing while in prison?

Acts 16:25a – “**About midnight Paul and Silas were praying** (times of suffering) **and singing hymns to God** (praising God because his name was being glorified)...”

Think about how different this advice James gives us is here. It comes off last week’s message. When we are in down times in life, we don’t grumble and complain. We don’t get negative and irreverent.

What do we do? We pray! We sing praises! Listen to this: Prayer and patience go hand in hand. We will not exercise patience - what is emphasized and talked about in (v. 7-12) if we are not praying – what is emphasized and talked about in (v. 13-20).

Now, looking at my prescription here, there are some warnings or helpful suggestions given as it relates to the prescriptions offered up. I’ll read some of them to you:

- “May make you drowsy”
- “May lower your ability to fight off infections”
- “Use care when operating a vehicle”
- “Take with food or milk”
- “Do not take with other medicines”

You have all these warnings...all this helpful information right here on the label. Well, James is going to give us some helpful information to be aware of as we pray. I see three specifically in this passage of scripture.

1. Pray with others

We read this in: **James 5:14, 16** – “**Is anyone among you sick? Let him call the elders of the church, and let them pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord...Therefore, confess your sins to one another and pray for one another, that you may be healed.**”

Now, we’re going to camp out here for a while because reading a passage of scripture like this can no doubt bring up some additional questions. We’ll answer them (what place does oil have, what does it mean to confess our sins to others) – but don’t miss the BIG picture of what these verses are teaching and that is: we should PRAY WITH OTHERS.

There is great power in what is called intercessory prayer. This is where we pray WITH and FOR one another. There is a noticeable shift in this passage of scripture that goes from personal prayer to corporate prayer.

Personal prayer is important and it is powerful – NO QUESTION. Because of Jesus and his sacrifice, we have the ability to approach his throne with boldness the scripture says and we can bring our requests and make our petitions before God.

There are times though when we are “sick”. This word can also be translated as “weak”. In some cases it refers to physical illness. Let me give you an example:

Luke 4:40 – “Now when the sun was setting, all those who had any who were sick with various diseases brought them to him, and he laid his hands on every one of them and healed them.”

This was physical illness. **Acts 9:37a – “In those days she (Dorcas) became ill (a reference to physical sickness – same word) and died...”**

These are just two instances where this word “sick” can mean physical illness. Let me show you where the exact same word is translated as “weak”.

Rom. 14:1a – “As for the one who is weak in faith, welcome him...”

1 Cor. 8:12 – (The weaker brother argument – not going to do anything to make my brother stumble) “Thus sinning against your brothers, and wounding their conscience when it is weak, you sin against Christ.”

So, context determines how we translate this word. I think our versions get it right here in referring to it as sickness. I remind you though sickness CAN refer to something like cancer and the flu as much as it CAN refer to depression and mental anguish.

In other words, these translations (sick and weak) are not that far apart! And James says, here: “When you are sick...when you are weak...when a situation has risen:

- you got that phone call from a doctor that has sent your mind wondering...
- you are going through that breakup of a relationship that has you spun out...

Hey, look, isn't it true? Physical sickness often makes us weak spiritually. We get physically sick...we get in the downward funnel of depression and it's hard to believe...it's hard to have faith.

James, writes, “if this is the case, let me give you some helpful advice – start praying with others!”

While your personal prayers are helpful and beneficial, James is saying when you are sick...when you are weak, you may need something more. And his admonition is to start with the those who have spiritual authority inside the church.

He writes, “call for the elders of the church and let them pray over him...”

Notice: it is the responsibility of the one who is sick to call the elders to request them to come and pray! Just a point of clarity here.

Illus. Hospital visits – Our church does an incredible job of visiting those in our church who are in the hospital. Our staff visits...our deacons visit...our life group leaders visit. This is something we are committed to! We visit those who are sick and we pray with them...minister to them.

HOWEVER, we can only visit those that we know about! This is why it's important in a big church like this to be in a Life Group. Because this is where most of the personal ministry of this church takes place – it's within the context of a life group!

I make this point here because if you were in the hospital and maybe are thinking, “Well, no one came to see me.” The question I would ask is did we know about it? Did you tell anyone?

I know some people who get sick and don't want anyone to know...they don't want people to pity them...they don't want to put people out...they don't want to be reminded they are sick! Some just want their privacy and I understand that.

The point I'm making is when you were sick and in the hospital – if we knew about it and didn't make it, that's on us! We NEVER want people in need to slip through the cracks. Forgive us on not getting by there.

I am highlighting this here though because the onus is not on the elders here to GO and pray for everyone who is sick, but instead for those who are sick to let the elders know so we CAN come and pray.

I've walked into a room before to pray and the person sick sees me and says, “Am I that sick?” The preacher has to come!

Look, there is something powerful when we pray together. It's a picture of those friends carrying their friend to Jesus in Mark 2. The paralyzed man couldn't get to Jesus on his own, so he called his friends to help him. And together they got to Jesus!

That's the picture here...you are paralyzed by what is happening to you. The fear...the discouragement...the chemo and radiation rounds. You are praying, but you need something more – you need to pray with others!

And then look at what he adds: **James 5:14** – “**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.**”

“Anoint with oil” – what is James talking about here? A few ideas and I think all of them have merit.

1. Oil could be used in reference to medicinal purposes – I could give a number of scripture references for this, probably the best and most well-known is in the parable of the Good Samaritan (tell story)

Luke 10:34a – “He went to him and bound up his wounds, pouring on oil and wine...”

Just a word here. God heals through prayer. He also can heal through medicine. James has already told his congregation in (1:17) that every good and perfect gift is from above. Doctors, medicine, surgeries can be the means through which God heals his children who are hurting – they are gifts from above.

2. I won't stay here long, but I think closely followed to this whole idea of oil is the ministry of helps and service in the church.

We have ministries in our church like the CMC, DivorceCare, ReEngage, Debt Elimination courses – other programs and classes that are under the authority of the church. I don't think it's too much of a stretch to say in some ways that “elders anointing with oil” – (i.e. bringing relief) could be certain ministries taking place under our auspices that help those who are sick physically or weak spiritually

Illus. Center of Hope (addictions and brokenness of all kinds)

3. Oil could be in reference to the idea of being set apart by the Holy Spirit

When we look at people who were anointed with oil in the Old Testament, this is what it was symbolic of – they were being consecrated for God's service.

- Aaron and his sons...they were anointed with oil when they were set aside to serve as priests unto God...
- David was anointed with oil when he was ordained by Samuel to be the next King of Israel...
- The scripture repeats throughout the New Testament that Jesus was “anointed BY the Holy Spirit.”...

So, when the elders gather and anoint someone with oil...and we do this WHEN called upon. There is NOTHING magical about the oil...just as there is NOTHING magical about the water in baptism!

It is an outward symbol of a spiritual reality! When we anoint someone who is sick with oil, it is symbolizing that this person is being set apart by the Holy Spirit and totally and completely entrusted to him – and this is key!

We anoint with oil (v. 14b) – “in the name of Jesus”. THIS is what is MOST important. We’ll work this out in just a moment a little bit more in depth.

Before we do this though, in talking about praying with one another, confession is also involved in this. This is:

James 5:16 – “Therefore confess your sins to one another and pray for one another, that you may be healed.”

Confession is good for the soul. AND it’s good for you physically. Listen to the Psalmist describe his life when he wasn’t confessing his sins.

Psalm 32:3-5 – “For when I kept silent, my bones wasted away through my groaning all day long.⁴ For day and night your hand was heavy upon me; my strength was dried up as by the heat of summer. ⁵I acknowledged my sin to you, and I did not cover my iniquity; I said, “I will confess my transgressions to the Lord,” and you forgave the iniquity of my sin.”

Now, not all physical sickness is due to sin, but some of it is! We just took the Lord’s Supper today. Paul warned not to take the Lord’s Supper presumptuously and causally in:

1 Cor. 11:27-30 – “Whoever, therefore, eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty concerning the body and blood of the Lord. Let a person examine himself, then, and so eat of the bread and drink of the cup. For anyone who eats and drinks without discerning the body eats and drinks judgment on himself. That is why many of you are weak and ill, and some have died.”

You may be sick because of choices you make...or you may be sick because of an attack from Satan like Job or a thorn given to you by God, like Paul experienced. Ultimately, ALL sickness is a result of the Fall.

Regardless of why you are sick, what’s important is that we NOT waste our sickness. And the way that we do not waste our sickness is we draw close to God in prayer...we call upon God! We know confession to God restores fellowship with him.

1 John 1:9 – “If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness.”

All of our sin is ultimately against God, and we need to confess our sin to him. However, we see the power of corporate confession here as well!

This doesn’t mean you have to air your dirty laundry out to everyone. Here is a helpful, general rule for confession:

- private sin = private confession (between you and God)
- personal sin = personal confession (between you and

someone else)

- public sin = public confession

Confession of sin has the potential to break the power of sin. There is something very beautiful about taking that which is dark in your life and bringing it to light. There is healing in confession of sin.

Listen, our walk with the Lord is personal but it's never private. This is what (v. 19-20) are hinting at. We don't have time to look at it in detail, but what James is saying is we have a responsibility toward one another. We confess our sins and we make sure that those who are wandering from the faith are brought back. We are in this together!

So, the info on the label James shares with us is to pray with others and within this we see "anointing with oil and confessing our sins"

2. Pray with faith

James 5:15 – “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.”

It's helpful when we pray, to pray with faith. James has already wrote that we should pray and not doubt. Remember?

James 1:6-8 – “But let him ask in faith, with no doubting, for the one who doubts is like a wave of the sea that is driven and tossed by the wind. For that person must not suppose that he will receive anything from the Lord; he is a double-minded man, unstable in all his ways.”

Praying in faith aligns with praying “in his name”.

Now, THIS is very important: Praying in faith is NOT praying and believing in a certain, specific outcome. Praying in faith...praying in his name is praying, believing in and trusting God.

We mentioned this last week. God works in mysterious ways. We can be confident he is working his plan and purposes. Like Job, nothing happens to us that he hasn't signed off on – God can be trusted!

And to pray in faith is to pray KNOWING this...believing this!

We are honest with God. We tell him what we want...what we desire...but praying in faith...praying in his name is praying, “God this is what I want, but I trust you. I want what you desire and what brings you glory MORE than anything else – THIS is the prayer of faith!

Now, a word about healing here. We read James here in (v. 15) and it says, “if we pray the prayer of faith the Lord will raise him up. If we confess our sins (v. 16) “that you may be healed”.

We read this and it sounds like if I do exactly as I’m prescribed then I’m going to get what I want! The answer I want...the healing I want....

Well, this is NOT to be read as some divine guarantee. Just think about it. If everyone was healed every time, we prayed there would be no death! Paul, the greatest missionary to ever live prayed and asked God to heal him of a “thorn in the flesh” and God said, “how about I just give you grace and my presence in your life to deal with it?”

He didn’t get the answer he wanted. And if you pray with faith and don’t get the answer you want, that doesn’t mean that you lacked faith – that’s bad theology and don’t let anyone ever convince you of that – if you would have just had more faith!

The Bible says we need “mustard seed” faith – healing is NOT contingent on the amount of faith you have! Healing is contingent on the purposes and plans of God. NOT everyone is going to be healed physically of their diseases. Some do, and some do not.

This is NOT a series of verses that teach if you just follow the right formula, you’ll get the right outcome as you define “right”.

Praying in faith and anointing people in the name of Jesus means we are under his authority. It means, “God we want what you want because your name and your renown mean more to us than anything else in life – EVEN our personal desires. We have faith in you – WORK you will!”

R.A. Torrey – “Nothing lies beyond the reach of prayer except that which lies outside the will of God.”

So, prayer is the prescription. We should take it ALL the time. Helpful information: We should pray with others. Pray in faith.

3. Pray with fervency

James 5:16b-18 – “The prayer of a righteous person (positional c/f Rom.3:23-24 – justification- legally declared righteous...but it’s also practical...not perfect, but progressive!) **has great power as it is working.** (James gives us an example) **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.”**

How should we pray? FERVENTLY. Some of your Bible’s translate this word in (v. 17) as “earnestly”. It signifies intensity. It literally could read “he prayed with prayer”.

Do the words intensity or fervently describe your prayer life? James gives the example of Elijah and is quick to include that he “had a nature like ours...”

Elijah might have been a prophet, but he was NOT super-human! I love the truth of **Rom. 15:4** – **“For whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction, that through endurance and through the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope.”**

One of the reasons we are to read our Bible is to be encouraged!

- We see men standing strong in their faith, so can we!
- We see people making decisions by faith, so can we!
- We see men and women trusting God in the face of the impossible, so can we!

Elijah prayed earnestly, so can we! We don't have to be beaten down by life. We can walk in victory...we can live in victory...but to do this, we have to make our minds up that we are going never going to stop taking this prescription called prayer.

Let's pray.

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