

Brothers and sisters in Christ: I hate to talk about it. I really do. But it was such a big event for pretty well everyone that it's kind of hard not to. But COVID is still with us, albeit in a manner that's far less dangerous than it was a year or two ago. There are still some cases, but by and large, they're milder, less likely to result in someone being hospitalized or dying. We're almost certainly closer to the end of this thing than the beginning, which is a sigh of relief for so many people. It's at the point for many of us where there's no issue doing pretty well everything we did before March 2020 without any restrictions like masks or physical distancing.

You might remember that time near the beginning, though, because it was a time of massive uncertainty. We didn't know a lot. We knew that it had likely started in China, because that's where the majority of early cases were. We didn't know much, but one of the things that we did know about the virus is that it is more deadly when it attacks people who have a pre-existing medical condition. Things like asthma, diabetes, and heart disease all leave people at greater risk for becoming severely ill or dying. There's a danger for everyone, of course, but for those people who are more susceptible, there's greater chance that there will be greater impact if the virus should hit.

I'm struck a little by how we can see that principle play out on the stage of life. We are all susceptible to illness of the body. Most of us will pick up common colds at one point or another. Some will deal with

mild cases of flu. Others struggle every day with far more debilitating issues – things like MS, dementia, or cancer. We know more even today about other sicknesses that affect our mental state – things like depression and anxiety. What are we rooted in during those times of physical or mental weakness? Are we rooted in prayer? Have we done enough in those times of strength that we can fall back on prayer in our times of weakness? The answer to that question will have a huge impact on how we view the sufferings our bodies go through.

The big thing that James is looking to get across here with these words is that faithful praise prayer is useful in all situations. We look at verse 13: “Is anyone among you in trouble? Let them pray. Is anyone happy? Let them sing songs of praise.” James is using two very opposite situations to demonstrate the totality of his point. This is called a merismus, and it’s fairly common in the Bible. For example, if we look all the way back to Genesis 1:1, the Bible tells us that God ‘created the heavens and the earth.’ He created everything above and everything below – he created everything. In Psalm 121, we see the phrase ‘the sun will not harm you by day, nor the moon by night.’ Again, the idea is that God is your protection when it the day is at its lightest, and the night is at its darkest.

It works the same here. Praise and prayer is needed, says James, when life is at its absolute best, and they are also needed when life is at its absolute worst. We don’t stop praising because life is hard, and we

don't stop praying when life is good. And we don't stop doing both when life is somewhere in between. This verse boils down to the two words trouble and happy – because in both times of trouble and times of happiness we find temptation to remove ourselves from God's work in our lives. Times of trouble can give rise to an attitude of rebellion in our hearts against our heavenly Father. If you remember the story of Job, this was the real temptation of Job – the temptation to sin by claiming that God was unjust and worthy only of his curses. Times of happiness and ease can make us forget about the one who richly blesses us each and every day with the very air we breathe and the food we eat and drink. I think back to the story of Nebuchadnezzar, who looked over the vast kingdom that he was ruling and praised his own name, rather than the name of the Lord, and was immediately stripped of his sanity and driven into the wild, eating grass for many years, or to the church in Laodicea that John wrote to in Revelation 3, who thought of themselves as rich and happy, when they were in reality “wretched, pitiful, poor, blind, and naked.” James is aware of both these temptations, and is warning the church against them.

Let me give you an example. There's a few young families here, and I'd fit in that category. We've got two kids – our daughter Charlotte is 3, she was born in March 2020; literally the week everything shut down, and our son Quinton just turned 1 in April. Charlotte is at the point where you're basically watching her learn in real time. She's

running around like a little maniac, climbing everything like her name is Tarzan, falling off some of those things. Lots of bumps, bruises, a couple cuts, the whole deal. But by and large, she's a happy kid, she's healthy, she loves applesauce and strawberries and turkey burgers and she's growing big and strong. It's been three years of thanking the Lord for blessing us with her, for keeping her safe so far, and a year in there of giving thanks for all those blessings showing up again in Quinton, but there's a temptation there as well! There's the temptation to chalk our success up to our abilities, our good qualities, our wisdom and knowledge and patience. The temptation is there for us to take all the credit, claim that we've done this ourselves, and deny the role the Creator has played in shaping and molding us for the time when we became parents.

On the flip side, there are families who would dearly love to be able to conceive, but can't, for whatever reason. They've been trying – some for years at a time. They've gone to see doctors and specialists and everything else, but the results are always the same – they can't bear children, they can't have kids of their own. The temptation is there to wonder why God has abandoned them – to wonder why God hasn't bothered to answer their prayers for a child. Many will go down this road – and we actually have close friends who have struggled with this. Thankfully, they do have a strong faith. The circumstances are still

painful for them, but they still trust that the plans of God are better than their plans.

That's really the core message that James is trying to convey here: faithful praise and prayer is necessary in all situations, good and bad alike. Why is that? It's because it takes the focus off ourselves. It moves the conversation away from our situations and directs it towards a good and loving God who is the ultimate object of our worship.

At this point, I need to address the elephant in the room that this passage can sometimes bring up. We pray all the time for those in our churches who are sick, who are shut in, who are in the hospital. I think sometimes we're challenged to truly believe that we serve a God who can work miracles. I know it's a habit I can sometimes fall into.

We had a funeral at our church in Ingersoll about a couple of weeks ago, a father of two who had passed from brain cancer. In preparing this sermon, I was sort of forced to look over the times where I had prayed for him – around the dinner table, before bed, in church, wherever it was – and I realized that the things I had prayed for were things like comfort, peace, and a sense of God's presence for him and his family - which aren't bad things! - but I hadn't really prayed for healing. I just kind of assumed that this was God's way of calling Joel home. Should we be more intentional about praying for healing?

I had another situation where I was interning at a church, doing some preaching and pastoral care, and in that time, I came across

situations I had never dealt with before. Among those was my first time doing a visit to the local hospice care facility. We had an older man in the church with brain cancer that had come back aggressively, and he was pretty quickly admitted. I visited the day he was admitted and he was clearly tired, but still alert. I came back the next week and he was almost gone – in fact, he would actually die that night. I sat with the family, tried to comfort them as best as I could, but even then, my prayers for them were more about comfort, support, and encouragement for the family, and peace and a relief from pain and suffering for Peter. Should I have been more intentional about praying for healing of the physical body?

James gives some instructions to the people he is writing to: “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.” We’ve got some stuff to unpack there.

Firstly: why anoint them with oil? There are all sorts of suggestions about the reasoning behind it, but the one that makes the most sense is that the anointing is symbolic. In the same way that anointing in the Old Testament was used to set aside kings and priests for God’s special attention, this would serve to set apart a sick person for special attention from God. We know, of course, that God knows each

of us intimately and knows our every word and thought. He knows our pasts and our futures, and yet he still asks us to bring our requests to him. The anointing is, essentially, a form of prayer. Note this, because it's important: the anointing is done in the name of the Lord: it's an acknowledgement that the answer to prayer does not depend on us, but on God. It's a similar attitude to the one Jesus took in the garden of Gethsemane – take this cup from me; yet not what I will, but what you will. It's the attitude that we express in the Lord's Prayer when we say "your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven."

The next phrase is the one that gets more people confused, however. Will every faithful prayer raise up a sick person? Will everyone in the hospital who is prayed over by the elders be able to suddenly leave, cured of all their afflictions, able to get off their hospital beds and walk home? I would say firmly to that idea that the answer is no. Frankly, that borders on heretical for the simple reason that God is not our slave, to come at our beck and call and to do our bidding. And yet there are people who preach that very message – if you just have enough faith, you can pray for whatever you want and God has to give it to you. If your family member died from cancer, or from a heart attack, or is suffering from Alzheimer's or ALS, well you just don't have enough faith so God won't answer your prayer. So many of these messages completely ignore the very next words: "if they have sinned, they will be forgiven."

Why on earth would James put that in there? Well, let's be honest – we're all going to die, unless Jesus comes back in our lifetime. That's pretty well a given. One of the consequences of our sin is that our days are numbered. There will be an end to our life here on earth, no matter how much we pray, no matter how much faith we have; so this passage can't be only talking about physical healing. Don't get me wrong: I do believe that God can and does miraculously heal. I know He doesn't do it for everyone, but I believe He does it. I don't, however, believe that this passage is talking only about physical healing.

Think back to the story of the paralyzed man in Mark chapter 2. This is the one where his four buddies can't get in with him to see Jesus, so they just hack a hole in the roof and lower their buddy down to Jesus. The passage says "WHEN HE SAW THEIR FAITH," but the first thing Jesus does isn't heal the man of his paralysis. Does anyone remember what Jesus does first?

HE FORGIVES THE MAN'S SINS.

James is being very clear about this by tying the concept of being raised up to the concept of forgiveness. There is spiritual healing that is taking place, not necessarily physical healing. I think we as a church can stand to pray more boldly for healing. But we also need to be able to say, like the Lord's prayer teaches us, YOUR will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. We do need to recognize that death on this earth is one thing, but that there is a death that is far worse and far more enduring.

And that's why I think James ends this letter the way he does. James uses the example of Elijah to encourage the people he's addressing to pray for God's will to be done, just as Elijah did in the time of Ahab. He's encouraging the people to follow in the will of the Father. But there are those who will go astray. There are those who will wander. And despite the fact that there may be nothing wrong with them physically, they are in more desperate need of prayer than those who are sick who belong to Christ. About four years ago, I stood at a graveside service because my closest friend and his wife had lost their unborn child. We were able to rejoice while we were there, because that little one was safe in the arms of Christ. For others, James lays the stakes out very clearly: the person who comes to Christ will be saved from death, and a multitude of sins will be covered over.

Christ came to us. He came because we had fallen away from him. He came because of our spiritual sickness. He is not only the Great Physician of the body, but also of the soul. He gave up his body and his blood for the forgiveness of our sins – and not only ours, but the sins of those who will yet come to know his name and believe in his work for them. I think I can say with some certainty that if I were in the hospital today, I would pray to be healed. But I would also hopefully understand that it is God's will, and not mine, that is the ultimate decider. We know that when we pray, we have the Spirit who moves in us and Christ who

died for us interceding for us before the Father. That's a beautiful picture, even in times of sickness.