

James 5:13-18  
The Power of Righteous Praying

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## **Introduction**

This passage has been a battleground for centuries. Various groups have used these verses as a proof text to justify their particular beliefs. Roman Catholics find in it biblical support for the sacrament of extreme unction. Some faith healers have used it to teach that ALL sick Christians are guaranteed healing through prayer. Still others see in it a command for anointing sick people with oil.

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## **Introduction**

The passage raises a number of difficult interpretive questions. What kind of suffering does James have in view in verse 13? What type of sickness is in view in verse 14? Why are the prayers of the elders different from those of other believers (vs. 14-15)? What is the anointing with oil described in verse 14? Does the prayer of faith (vs. 15) always restore the sick? How does sickness relate to sin (vs. 15)? What type of healing is in view in verse 16? Why does James insert an illustration about rain (vs. 17-18) into the middle of a discussion of healing?

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## **Introduction**

The answer to these questions and a proper interpretation of the passage lies in understanding it in its **CONTEXT!** One cannot properly interpret a passage of Scripture apart from its context. The context provides the flow of thought in which a verse or passage exists.

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## **Introduction**

James wrote his epistle to Jewish believers who had been forced to flee from Judea by the persecution recorded in Acts 8:1-4. In 1:1 he referred to them as “the twelve tribes which are scattered abroad.” Being both Jewish and Christians, they faced hostility from the pagan culture in which they lived. Knowing that, James opened his epistle with an exhortation to patiently endure trials (1:2ff.).

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## **Introduction**

In chapter 5 he returned to that theme. The first six verses described the persecution his poor readers were suffering at the hands of the wicked rich. Some suffering even to the point of death (vs. 6). Verses 7-11 call for patient endurance of trials and persecution. James encouraged those about to collapse under the weight of their afflictions to prop up their hearts and continue in their endurance.

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## **Introduction**

In view of the overall context of the epistle, particularly chapter 5, it is not surprising that James mentions suffering in 5:13. He calls on those who are suffering the persecution discussed in 5:1-11 to pray, since prayer taps the source of spiritual endurance. It would have been surprising if, in a letter to struggling, persecuted believers, James had neglected to mention prayer.

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## **Introduction**

A strong commitment to prayer is a prerequisite to enduring suffering and affliction. The theme of verses 13-18, then, is prayer, and it is mentioned in every one of these verses. James's challenge to prayer touches the prayer life of the entire church. Individual believers are called to pray in verse 13, the elders in verses 14-15, and the congregation in verse 16.

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## **Introduction**

As the context and the content of this section make clear, the subject is not physical illness or healing. Instead, its concern is with healing spiritual weakness, weariness, exhaustion, and spiritual depression through prayer, as well as dealing with the suffering and sin that accompanies it.

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## **Introduction**

To insert a discussion here on physical healing would be out of place. Nothing in the preceding or following context would prepare James's readers for that. But a section on how to help the casualties of persecution through prayer fits perfectly into the flow of James's thought. Specifically, James discusses the relationship of prayer to comfort, restoration, fellowship, and power.

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## James 5:13-18

Is anyone among you suffering? Let him pray. Is anyone cheerful? Let him sing psalms. <sup>14</sup> Is anyone among you sick? Let him call for the elders of the church, and let them pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord. <sup>15</sup> And the prayer of faith will save the sick, and the Lord will raise him up. And if he has committed sins, he will be forgiven. <sup>16</sup> Confess *your* trespasses to one another, and pray for one another, that you may be healed. The effective, fervent prayer of a righteous man avails much. <sup>17</sup> Elijah was a man with a nature like ours, and he prayed earnestly that it would not rain; and it did not rain on the land for three years and six months. <sup>18</sup> And he prayed again, and the heaven gave rain, and the earth produced its fruit.

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## Prayer and Comfort

James 5:13

Is anyone among you suffering? Let him pray. Is anyone cheerful? Let him sing psalms.

The first object of James's care here are "suffering" believers. "Suffering" is the verb form of the word translated "suffering" in verse 10. It does not refer to physical illness, but enduring evil treatment by people. This term is used only two other times in the Bible - in 2 Tim. 2:9; 4:5. James is not addressing those suffering from physical disease, but those being persecuted, and abused.

James 5:10

My brethren, take the prophets, who spoke in the name of the Lord, as an example of **suffering** and patience.

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## Prayer and Comfort

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James states that the antidote to their suffering is to pray. Prayer is essential to enduring affliction. God alone is the ultimate source of comfort (2 Cor. 1:3-4; 1 Pet. 5:7). The Greek tense of the verb “pray”, could be translated “let him keep on praying.” When life is difficult, when believers are weak in faith, weary with persecution, and crushed by affliction, they must continually plead with God to comfort them.

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## Prayer and Comfort

James 5:13

Is anyone among you suffering? Let him pray. Is anyone cheerful? Let him sing psalms.

Those who manage to maintain a “cheerful” attitude in their suffering are to “sing psalms”. “Cheerful” describes those “well in spirit” or having a “joyful attitude”. It has nothing to do with those who are physically well.

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## Prayer and Comfort

James 5:13

Is anyone among you suffering? Let him pray. Is anyone cheerful? Let him sing psalms.

The suffering and the happy, the wounded, broken spirits and the whole, rejoicing spirits are both to pray. The one is to plead with God for comfort, the other is to sing praises to God for comfort given. Praise and prayer are closely related; praise is a form of prayer (Phil. 4:6; Col. 4:2). Both are essential for the spiritual strength of those undergoing persecution.

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## Prayer and Restoration

James 5:14-15

Is anyone among you sick? Let him call for the elders of the church, and let them pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord. <sup>15</sup>And the prayer of faith will save the sick, and the Lord will raise him up. And if he has committed sins, he will be forgiven.

Here is the most misunderstood and disputed portion of this passage. At first glance it appears to be teaching that sick believers can expect physical healing through the prayers of the elders. But such an interpretation is out of harmony with the context. And as noted in the previous point, the suffering James has in view is evil treatment, not physical illness.

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Though the word translated “sick” can carry the meaning of illness, it can also refer to emotional or spiritual weakness (Acts 20:35; Rom. 4:19; 8:3; 14:1-2; 1 Cor. 8:11-12; 2 Cor. 11:21, 29; 12:10; 13:3-4, 9). Translating “sick” as “weak” (which is the predominant usage in the epistles) allows us to view this verse in a different light. James is moving beyond the suffering believers in verse 13 to those who have become weak by their suffering.

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That help, James says, is to be found in the “elders of the church”. They are the spiritually strong, the spiritually mature, the spiritually victorious. Weak, defeated believers are to go to them and draw on their strength. They are to “call” (which means “to call alongside”) the elders to come and pray for them.

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It is the same thought that the apostle Paul expressed in Galatians 6:1: “Brethren, if a man is overtaken in any trespass, you who are spiritual restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness, considering yourself lest you also be tempted.” The wounded, exhausted, broken sheep are to go to their shepherds, who will intercede for them and ask God for renewed spiritual strength on their behalf.

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The weak are those who have been defeated in the spiritual battle, who have lost the ability to endure their suffering. They are the fallen spiritual warriors, the exhausted, weary, depressed, defeated Christians. They have tried to draw on God’s power through prayer, but have lost motivation, even falling into sinful actions and attitudes. Having hit bottom, they are not able to pray effectively on their own. In that condition, the spiritually weak need the help of the spiritually strong (cf. 1 Thes. 5:14).

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## **Prayer and Restoration**

James 5:14-15

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This is an important ministry of the church's pastors and elders. The apostles acknowledged its priority when they said, "We will devote ourselves to prayer and to the ministry of the word" (Acts 6:4). But in today's church, weak, struggling believers are often handed over to so-called expert professional counselors who often have little power in prayer. Those who have been defeated in the spiritual battle do not need to hear opinions of human wisdom; they need to be strengthened by the power of God through prayer.

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## **So What ...**

We will continue this passage next week.

I am not saying that we should not pray for the physically ill or that they should not come to church leadership.

Many have put so much focus on the physical healing, that the spiritually wounded have been ignored.

Look around you and see the hurting. Build a list and pray for them every day.

If you are hurting, turn to God in prayer. He will hear you and lift you up!

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