

James 5:13-18  
The Power of Righteous Praying - 1

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## **Introduction**

Last week we looked at:

Eisegesis where one reads into Scripture  
their own views and beliefs

And

Exegeses where one allows Scripture to  
speak as written to change one's views and  
belief.

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## Introduction

The passage raises several 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

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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### 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

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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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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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The sick 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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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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The anointing with oil in the name of the Lord done by the elders is not a reference to some symbolic ceremony. The word "anoint" here is not the proper word for anointing in a ceremonial fashion. Rather it means to "rub" as is done in applying a medical ointment.

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It may well have been that the elders literally rubbed oil on believers who had suffered physical injuries to their bodies from the persecution (Luke 10:34).

Medical science was certainly in a primitive state and there were few trustworthy doctors. It would have been a gracious, kind act on the part of the elders to rub oil on the wounds of those who had been beaten.

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The elders' ministry of intercession and restoration is to be done in the name of the Lord. Any truly biblical encouragement must be consistent with who God is (which is what His name represents). To do something in the name of Christ is to do what He would have done in the situation; to pray in the name of Christ is to ask what He would want; to minister in the name of Christ is to serve others on His behalf (cf. John 14:13-14).

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The result of the elders' comfort and ministry of intercession is that their "prayer of faith will save (restore) the sick". Again, the word sick does not refer to physical illness but to the spiritually weak, defeated believers. The idea here is that the elders' prayers will deliver weak, defeated believers from their spiritual weakness and restore them to spiritual wholeness. Those prayers, of course, are but a channel for God's power; it is the Lord who will raise up the weak. "Raise up" can also mean "to awaken" or "to arouse."

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If sin has contributed to or resulted from the spiritual weakness and defeat of a fallen believer, that sin will be forgiven him when he cries out to God for forgiveness. The elders can encourage him to confess, help him discern his sins, and join their prayers for his.

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## Prayer and Fellowship

James 5:16a

Confess *your* trespasses to one another, and pray for one another, that you may be healed.

James turns his attention from the sins of believers who have been defeated in the spiritual battle to the congregation. He exhorts them to continually confess their sins to one another. Sin is most dangerous to a believer when they are isolated from the body. Sin seeks to remain private and secret. God wants it exposed and dealt with in the loving fellowship of believers. James calls for mutual honesty and confession as believers pray for each other.

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Maintaining open, sharing, and praying relationships with other Christians will help keep believers from bottoming out in their spiritual lives. Such relationships help give the spiritual strength that provides victory over sin. And they also provide Godly pressure to confess and forsake sins before they become overwhelming to the point of total spiritual defeat.

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The purpose for the mutual prayer that James called for is that believers may be healed. Again "healed" does not necessarily refer to physical healing. In Matthew 13:15 it symbolized God's forgiveness of Israel's sins (cf. John 12:40; Acts 28:27). The writer of Hebrews 12:12-13 uses it to speak of spiritual restoration. Peter used it to describe the healing from sin Christ purchased for believers on the cross (1 Pet. 2:24). James uses it here to refer to God's forgiveness, making the repentant believer spiritually whole again.

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## Prayer and Power

James 5:16b-18

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.

Encouraging both elders and Christians to this kind of intercession for those in spiritual weakness, James reminds them that such prayer is effective. Effective translates the Greek word from which we get our English word "energy". The prayer of a righteous man can accomplish much. Weak prayers come from weak people; strong prayers come from strong people. The energetic prayers of a righteous man are a potent force in calling down the power of God for restoring weak, struggling believers to spiritual health.

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To demonstrate the power of righteous prayer James turns to one of the most popular Old Testament figures. Elijah, he reminds his readers, though a prophet and man of God, was a man with a nature like ours.

The Bible records that he was hungry (1 Kings 17:11), afraid (1 Kings 19:3), and depressed (1 Kings 19:3, 9-14). Yet when he prayed earnestly incredible things happened: It did not rain on the earth for three years and six months. Then he prayed again, and the sky poured rain and the earth produced its fruit. Elijah's prayers both created and ended a devastating three-and-one-half-year drought (Luke 4:25). While 1 Kings 17 records the drought, James gives its duration and links it to the prayers of Elijah.

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The story of Elijah and the drought would certainly be a strange illustration if James had physical illness and healing in view throughout this passage. Certainly there are numerous clear biblical illustrations of healing he could have drawn from. But the picture of rain pouring down on parched ground perfectly illustrates God's outpouring of spiritual blessings on the dry and parched souls of struggling believers. And He does both in response to the righteous prayers of godly people.

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### **So What ...**

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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### **So What ...**

Just as Elijah prayed for the refreshing of Israel, so we are to pray for one another. Too often our prayers, like the many interpretations of this passage, rotate around physical healing. Our earthly bodies will pass away. They are here but for a moment in time. The soul is eternal. Let us focus our prayers also on the eternal. As lives are changed one-by-one, we can impact our community for Christ!

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