

How to Live a Good/Godly Life:
Prayer that makes a Difference
Kings 18:41-46 and James 5:13-20

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Kings 18:41-46

⁴¹And Elijah said to Ahab, "Go, eat and drink, for there is the sound of a heavy rain." ⁴²So Ahab went off to eat and drink, but Elijah climbed to the top of Carmel, bent down to the ground and put his face between his knees.

⁴³"Go and look toward the sea," he told his servant. And he went up and looked. "There is nothing there," he said. Seven times Elijah said, "Go back." ⁴⁴The seventh time the servant reported, "A cloud as small as a man's hand is rising from the sea."

So Elijah said, "Go and tell Ahab, 'Hitch up your chariot and go down before the rain stops you.'"

⁴⁵Meanwhile, the sky grew black with clouds, the wind rose, a heavy rain started falling and Ahab rode off to Jezreel. ⁴⁶The power of the LORD came on Elijah and, tucking his cloak into his belt, he ran ahead of Ahab all the way to Jezreel.

JAMES 5:11-20

¹³Is anyone among you in trouble? Let them pray. Is anyone happy? Let them sing songs of praise. ¹⁴Is 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. ¹⁵And 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. ¹⁶Therefore confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous person is powerful and effective.

¹⁷Elijah was a human being, even as we are. He prayed earnestly that it would not rain, and it did not rain on the land for three and a half years. ¹⁸Again he prayed, and the heavens gave rain, and the earth produced its crops.

¹⁹My brothers and sisters, if one of you should wander from the truth and someone should bring that person back, ²⁰remember this: Whoever turns a sinner from the error of their way will save them from death and cover over a multitude of sins.

PRAY

We've all "been there, done that"...At one time or another we've all

...been in trouble

...been happy

...been sick

We've all sinned and need forgiveness.

AND, we've all prayed!

The question is - did our prayer make any difference at all?

James says we are to pray when we encounter trouble. I read about a fishing boat that was taking on water during a storm. The Captain shouted to his crew: "Anyone here know how to pray??"

A mate stepped forward: "Aye, Captain, I know how to pray."

"Good!" The captain replied. "You pray while the rest of us put on life jackets. We're one short!"

What about the time we were in trouble. We prayed, but things got worse before they got better? Same thing when we or a loved one were ill. Or we know we blew it, we asked forgiveness from God, but we still had to live with the consequences of our poor decisions. What about that?

Here James is tying together some threads that were present at the very beginning of his letter. In chapter 1 he writes:

⁵If any of you lacks wisdom, you should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to you. ⁶But when you ask, you must believe and not doubt, because the one who doubts is like a wave of the sea, blown and tossed by the wind. ⁷That person should not expect to receive anything from the Lord. ⁸Such a person is double-minded and unstable in all they do.

4:10, 15

¹⁰Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will lift you up...¹⁵Instead, you ought to say, "If it is the Lord's will, we will live and do this or that."

The issue of suffering—of persecution—of persevering in the face of adversity, is also a theme in James' writing. Here he combines the two—if you are in trouble, however you define it—Pray! The Greek word used here/translated "trouble" means to "suffer misfortune". As noted in chapter 1, James isn't advocating

removal of the “trouble” as much as praying for strength to endure it and persevere through it.

First as a camper and later as a camp counselor I learned the “Bear Hunt” song/chant along with the motions. We’ll pretend that this is a responsive reading (LOL) so follow my lead please: [Words in () are an echo.]

Let’s go on a bear hunt (Let’s go on a bear hunt)
All right (all right) Let’s go! (Let’s go!)
We're going to catch a big one, (We're going to catch a big one,)
I'm not scared (I'm not scared)

Now on this “hunt” we encounter various obstacles:
Long wavy grass ---Deep cold river—Thick oozy mud—deep dark forest—swirling
whirling snowstorm, narrow gloomy cave—where we come nose to nose with a
great BIG BEAR—and
We hightail it back home, retreating in the reverse, through all the motions and
sounds, till we arrive safely back at home!

As each obstacle is encountered, the lyrics repeat the following refrain, so please repeat after me:

Can’t go over it! (Can’t go over it!)
Can’t go under it! (Can’t go under it!)
Can’t go ‘round it! (Can’t go ‘round it!)
Gotta go through it! (Gotta go through it!)

Well folks--whether we go looking for a bear, or if we go looking for trouble, or if trouble comes looking for us—*we wish we could go over/under/around it, but the truth of it is: we gotta go through it.*

This is exactly what James is saying.

Now there are different kinds of “trouble” in which we might find ourselves. As we’ve noted before, the original recipients of James’ letter were scattered geographically, and were experiencing persecution.

When you're under fire for your faith, you want and need to be with others who share your belief! But they are spread out around the Mediterranean Sea. They don't have email, cell phones, Instagram, Facebook, or Twitter so they can stay connected with each other. But even better? They have prayer! Prayer is a vital connection with God!

In our situation we are blessed to have a faith community who will pray for and with us when we are going through troubles. This is good news – we are not alone!

The second kind of prayer James encourages is Praise! When things are going “good to great”, do you and I simply take that for granted?

James would hope not! We are to praise God! Why? Because God is the giver of all good gifts! It's interesting that the word he uses [euthymeo] means more than superficial happiness that is dependent on the circumstances. Disneyland claims to be “the happiest place on earth”, you know, but *who lives in Disneyland??* It's a nice place to visit, but I for one, would not want to live there!!

James is referring to a “deep rooted contentment of the heart”. Now that, is a substantive definition of happiness, isn't it?

When we find ourselves blessed, (I don't believe in luck! I believe in divine appointments and interventions!) what should we do? Give credit where credit is due: Give God praise!!

James now shifts his focus to prayers for healing. The word here translated “sick” has a wide range of meanings [in Greek] having to do with any kind of weakness. For instance, the apostle Paul used this same word to signify what he called his “thorn in the flesh” (2 Corinthians 12:7-10). This ailment, whatever it was, kept Paul humble and he claimed that this weakness allowed Christ's power to be evident in him. In this context, James' emphasis indicates physical illness.

I saw a cartoon this week. The man in a hospital bed, looks miserable. He has several limbs in traction. A visitor--whom I am guessing is the Clerk of Session—visits. She says: “I have good news, Pastor! The session has voted to pray for your recovery...the vote was 5 to 4.”

None of us are exempt from physical illness. Some illnesses are a passing irritation, others are life-changing. When the situation is serious, James encourages us to call the elders to come, to anoint the sick one with oil and to pray in faith for healing.

Why anoint with oil? There is nothing magic about anointing with oil, although it was believed to have some medicinal qualities. But think about it...in order to anoint with oil, one person must touch another. Implicit in this anointing is “laying on of hands”.

Jesus himself often touched the people he healed (Mark 6:5) and his disciples followed his example (Acts 9:17). Touch forms a human connection, however there is no doubt that healing comes from God alone.

James says the prayer “offered in faith will make the sick person well.” The elders who come to pray are a representation of the faith community.

A brief word here – during Lent which begins on Wednesday –the messages will be focusing on prayer. We have many questions about prayer don’t we, including this one: Why are some prayers of healing “answered” and some are not? Why do some people get better and others get worse, and some die?

Let me suggest that there are different types of healing that may be needed. Depending on the person and the situation, the need might be for emotional healing, or the healing of a relationship as over against physical healing. So when we pray for healing, God may have one kind in mind while we have another!

My father had been diagnosed and successfully treated for lung cancer in his early 80s. He had several good years, cancer free. Then it came back. His doctor at the time suggested that hospice be called.

Instead of calling hospice, my dad called me and insisted that my sister and I visit him as soon as possible. While this seems natural under the circumstances, it was out of the ordinary. My parents divorced when I was five; my father had visitation but did not visit us regularly. Suffice it to say, he was an absentee father during my childhood and youth. Only as young adults and at our initiative did we

forge any kind of relationship. It was far from a normal father-daughter relationship. For him to call and request a meeting was unusual.

The visit was arranged. From the moment he opened the door, he was a man on a mission. He wasted no time. He cut to the chase. He needed to unload. Apologize. Confess. "I don't know what I was thinking all those years...what a waste. I am so very sorry...I cannot reclaim lost time...forgive me."

In answer to many prayers offered over many years, the healing the three of us experienced that day was relational. We experienced the healing of reconciliation.

This is what James has in mind when he links confession of sin and healing. My dad confessed his failures as a father and received the forgiveness of his daughters. The relationships were healed. His cancer? He found a new doctor and a new treatment. He lived another two years.

In the ancient world and mind-set, sin and illness were connected.

Sin and illness may be connected, or they may not be.

On one occasion Jesus and his disciples encountered "a man who had been blind from birth. His disciples asked him, "why was this man born blind? Was it because of his own sins or his parents' sins?" "It was not because of his sins or his parents' sins," Jesus answered. "This happened so the power of God could be seen in him. (John 9:1-3) Jesus did give the man sight!

Today we know that there are a variety of "causes" of illness: there are viral and bacterial causes. Other contributing factors may be environmental, genetic, stress - related or addictive in nature. The connection between sin/illness may or may not be causative. No matter, we are to pray for healing!

In any case, James encourages prayer for healing as well as confession. Confession is not only "good for the soul" but as demonstrated; it can be good for the body as well. King David in Psalm 32 describes how unconfessed sin impacted his physical body: ³When I refused to confess my sin, my body wasted away, and I groaned all day long. ⁴Day and night your hand of discipline was heavy on me. My strength evaporated like water in the summer heat.

When reading the rest of the Psalm one feels the relief he experienced once he confessed his sin and his guilt was completely removed.

James encourages prayer in trouble, prayer in joy and gratitude, prayer when sick, prayer for healing, prayer of confession. Prayer is always in season!

Finally, James concludes his letter with a couple of verses that seem out of place: ¹ *My brothers and sisters, if one of you should wander from the truth and someone should bring that person back,* ²⁰ *remember this: Whoever turns a sinner from the error of their way will save them from death and cover over a multitude of sins.*

These verses don't seem to fit but I would argue that they do, for this reason: I imagine each one of us could name someone who used to be a part of this fellowship and has "wandered" away. Perhaps we even have someone in our own family who grew up in a Christian home but now is quite disconnected from church/Christ/faith/spirituality.

John was such a person. He grew up in a Christian home, but once he hit college he began to move into other circles. He launched his career, married, and when he and his wife started their family, he felt the need to return to church. The road was still bumpy, life had its challenges but at that point his faith became not weaker but stronger than ever. He told me: "I'm confident that I am where I am today because of the faithful prayers of my mother and grandmother. I'm only sorry my grandmother did not live to see her prayers answered." "Are you kidding?" I told him, "Of course she's going to see her prayers answered! She'll see you in heaven!"

It is so important to pray for those who may have lost their way, for God is the God of the lost and found. God can bring people back to himself through the prayers and influence of those who love them. Only God "saves" but uses us and our prayers to accomplish God's divine purpose in the world!

James summarizes his letter with verse 16:

"The prayer of a righteous person is powerful and effective."

"Righteous" does not mean perfect. "Righteous" means one who is rightly related to God, to others, to self. Right relationships enhance our prayers. Why?

Because if we are in a right relationship with God and with others we will be praying in concert with, in harmony with God's desires. Our hearts and wills will be in tune with God's. When these are in alignment, there is immense power! Prayer unleashes the power of God in the world. When we are in right relationships, we will pray "right" prayers, and God will act!

Elijah is the role model for this kind of prayer, and his story is in I Kings 17 & 18. Now King Ahab had done some things to "provoke the anger of the Lord" (16:33) by marrying Jezebel and worshipping Baal, and erecting an altar for Baal worship. So, as part of God's judgement, Elijah prayed that there would be a drought, and it did not rain for 3 years and 6 months. When he prayed a second time (the scripture read for us this morning), God answered and sent rain!

Elijah is upheld as an example for us as one who "was a human being like we are". He was just a guy...a guy who believed and obeyed God. A guy who was in a right relationship with God.

An ordinary person who prayed to an extraordinary God—and God heard and responded.

Are you in trouble? Happy? Hurting? Need Healing? Need to confess? Need forgiveness?

May we pray at all times and not lose heart, for the prayers of ordinary people, who trust in an extraordinary God, will be powerful and effective!

Amen? Amen.

[PRAY]