

Text: James 5:13-20

Readings Ps 27 & Heb 12:1-17

Closing Hymn: What a friend we have in Jesus.

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.^[b] 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.

Main Point

Prayer: The Powerful Response in Suffering

Introduction (300)

Hook

Burned on the stake?

If you were suddenly imprisoned and the next day it was announced that you would be burned alive, what would be your initial response?

I can imagine a sense of dread, fear of the pain, sorrow of not seeing my family, anger at the injustice, panic at who will care for my family, and many more such emotions.

These would be my initial response, but is it a Godly one? Is it a response driven by faith?

All suffering

Now Christians are not burned at the stake in New Zealand (yet). But we all face different kinds of suffering.

What is your response in suffering?

In this passage, we see James ask that question. In response to suffering his appeal to us is that we must pray.

Prayer is our Powerful Response in Suffering. This is the thought James want to leave us with as he concludes his letter.

In the midst of suffering we must pray.

Outline

We are going to see this thought developed in three points

1. Prayer of Worship in Suffering (v13)
2. Prayer when Weak in Suffering (14-18)
3. Prayer for the Wonderer in Suffering (19-20)

Part 1 – Prayer of Worship in Suffering

Interpretive challenges

Now before we begin with our first point, I want to highlight an interpretive decision that must be made as we study this text.

There are two general ways we could read this text, with good men advocating for both sides.

The decision pivots on the word we have translated as “*sick*” in verse 14.

The Greek word used is “*astheneo*” and literally translated would be “to be weak”.

In the NT this word for weak is applied to all sorts of different situations. It can refer spiritual condition or physical illness.

This is where an interpretive decision has to be made.

Does “To be weak” in verse 15 refer to a physical illness, or does it refer to those who are spiritually weak?

Physically weak

This is tricky to decide, and good men stand on both sides.

If James is referring to a physical weakness, the theme of this passage is the reality that God can and does heal the sick when it is his will. The timing may not be what we hope, but God can still heal miraculously. And

God works powerfully through the prayer of Elders and the church members to do these things, and sickness becomes an opportunity to confess sin that may exist

All these themes are true and biblical and worth pondering on, but is **this** what **this** text is about?

Spiritual weakness

The other way of interpreting “to be weak” is to understand it as “spiritually weak”.

With this interpretation the theme of this passage is all about the one who is exhausted, weary and losing faith in the face of suffering.

It deals with the question of what should a person do who has lost the ability to endure in suffering. From which we see the role of faith, sin, the elders and the church.

All these themes are also true and biblical, but is **this** what **this** text is about?

And so we have to make an interpretive decision, all the while holding it lightly.

Spiritual weakness my view

Now if you have not guessed from the title or the outline, I take the view that James is talking of spiritual weakness in the face of suffering in this passage.

As we will see, the context of the letter, flow of the passage, James’s overarching theology of suffering point this way. James has already taught us to endure the trial by faith, he has made no mention of removing the trial by faith.

But as said before, many good men take the other view. One day we will all know for sure, but for now I seek to be faithful to the text and context.

Context

So let us remind ourselves of the context of this passage.

As we know well by now, James has written his letter to Christians who are far from home, facing all sorts of trials.

James writes to encourage them as they face these trials.

James addressed this in chapter 1 and in chapter 5.

In the verses leading up to this passage, James encourages these suffering Christians to be patient in suffering like the prophets who suffered and remained steadfast through the trials.

Response in suffering main point

Then we come to our passage. Look at verse 13.

¹³ Is anyone among you suffering?

James knows the resounding answer is “YES!” Times are hard. People are oppressing us. Yes, we are suffering.

And what ought to be the right response?

Let him pray.

When suffering hits, turn to God in prayer.

Application – Our suffering

When that phone call comes in and you are told your son has been in an accident, turn to God in prayer.

When the doctor's report comes in and the cancer results are positive, turn to God in prayer.

When your farm is parched and there is still no rain on the forecast, turn to God in prayer.

¹³ Is anyone among you suffering? Let him pray.

Option 1 - Cheerful in suffering

And from that point, James anticipates two responses can happen.

Look at the second half of verse 13

Is anyone cheerful? Let him sing praise.

Now we could read this as a contrasting **situation** to those who are suffering. At first glance we could see verse 13 saying that in bad situations we should pray and in good situations we should also pray and remember God. And that is true, but not what this verse is saying

Look closely at the second half of verse 13.

James says “*Is anyone cheerful?*” Cheerful is literally translated as “Peace of mind”. This is talking of a state of mind, not a situation.

So the flow of verse 13 is not contrasting two situations.

There is only one situation. Which is suffering. Then there is a contrast of responses.

1. One response is peace of mind (end of verse 13).
2. The other response is weakness in verse 14.

Response in Joy

The end of verse 13 tells us the ultimate godly response in suffering. Suffering is hard. Suffering is painful. It forces us to fall on our knees and depend on God in prayer. And when we look to God and trust him, it is possible to have peace of mind in the midst of suffering. And that peace of mind is expressed in songs of praise.

This is what James has been teaching us from the start. Remember James 1:2

*² Count it all joy, my brothers,^[b] when you meet trials of various kinds, ³ for you know that the testing of your **faith** produces steadfastness.*

Illustration - Jesus in the storm – Possible to have peace

This is what Jesus taught his disciples too.

Remember the account of Jesus calming the sea? That account was not ultimately about calming the sea, it was ultimately about Jesus teaching his disciples to trust God.

We read the account in Mark 4. And do you remember the rebuke Jesus gave them?

In Mark 4:40 we read:

⁴⁰ He said to them, “Why are you so afraid? Have you still no faith?”

Jesus rebukes them for their lack of faith. They were about to drown but Jesus rebukes them for their lack of faith.

And what was Jesus' example to us in the midst of the storm? He was asleep. He was at peace. He had joy in the trial. His heart was not troubled in the midst of the storm.

Application - Possible for you to have peace in the storm

Friends, this verse is telling us it is possible to be at peace in the midst of suffering. You too can have such peace. You too can sleep in the midst of the storm you are facing. That peace is found in Prayer.

We serve the same powerful God.

We must trust Him.

If you do trust Him, then let that peace and joy be expressed in songs of joy.

That peace and joy is there because of who God is, and he is worthy of our praise.

Link

But what to do when there is no peace? When there is no joy.

And to be fair, that is most of us.

Before the storm hits, we like to think we would trust God and have joy, but when suffering comes, we instinctively become fearful, weary, anxious, depressed and downcast.

So what are we to do?

James knows peace of heart is not our normal instinct, and so he kindly and graciously gives help here.

Which brings us to our second section

Part 2 – Prayer when Weak in Suffering

Exposition

Response when weak

In verse 14 we see the alternative and more common response in suffering.

As I said before the word “sick” in verse 14 literally is translated as “weak”, and in this context and flow of thought, I take it to be weak in faith.

So verse 14 says:

¹⁴ Is anyone among you sick(/weak)

(In other words, not at peace in the midst of your suffering)

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.

Elders expected to be strong in faith

It makes sense to call on the Elders when your faith is weak. The elders have been appointed (hopefully) because of their spiritual maturity. They have more time to spend in the Word and strengthen their faith. God has made it their role is to encourage the downcast and spur the church on in the Faith.

Anoint with oil

The phrase about anointing with oil has its own interpretative challenge.

It could be purely symbolic. Simply a poetic way to say the elders will remind the believer that they have been

“anointed” or set-apart by God and hence strengthen their faith.

Or it could also be referring to elders rubbing oil into the wounds of people who had been beaten for the faith.

Making a point that Elders should not neglect the practical way of helping, even as they prioritise the spiritual.

You take your pick, I lean towards the second one.

Results of prayer

But regardless which view of the oil you hold, the elders are called and they pray for this believer who is struggling in the faith. And verse 15 gives us confidence in the results.

¹⁵ And the prayer of faith will save the one who is sick, and the Lord will raise him up.

Just briefly, we have a word “sick” here. This word is actually a different Greek word to verse 14. This one is “Kamano”. Literally “grow weary”. And it is used only one other time in the NT in Hebrews 12:3 where it is clearly talking of a weary faith in the midst of suffering and persecution. So verse 15 should read

¹⁵ And the prayer of faith will save/ (or restore) the one who ~~is sick~~ (has grown weary), and the Lord will raise him up.

Yes the elders pray, but God is the one who raises them up. Through the means of believers praying, God restores his people to a position of strength. He strengthens their faith. We have confidence in prayer.

Sin in the suffering

And James is not naïve. He knows that when suffering hits us and our faith is weakened, we are tempted to sin.

- Some turn to alcohol to drown their sorrow.
- Some turn to porn to distract them.
- Some start to slander others to make themselves feel better.
- Some become angry and bitter

Temptation to sin is all the stronger in the midst of suffering and when our faith is weak.

So James says:

*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.*

If you have committed sins, confess them and he is faithful to forgive.

And notice that now the whole church is involved. “confess your sins to **one another** and pray for **one another**”. Let the one who is strong encourage the one who is weak. The whole church has a role to play, not just the elders.

Just to be clear, the word “heal” here is also used in Heb 12:13 and 1 Peter 2:24 to denote God extending forgiveness to the repentant sinner. This fits perfectly in this sentence, too.

If you confess your sins God is faithful to forgive you and restore that broken relationship with your

heavenly father. And prayer of the people of the church is a **powerful** means to achieve this restoration.

Practical point one – You call the elders

I just want to point out two practical things here.

Firstly, it is the one who is weak who is to call for the Elders. This is important. Those of us on the eldership, Nick, Alfie Ren and myself, we all want to pray with you in the midst of your suffering.

We want to hear your honest struggles and questions, and we want to help you have peace in the midst of your trial.

But we can't read your mind.

Please reach out and we can find a time to talk, pray, and point you to Christ and in God's grace he will use that means to strengthen your faith in the midst of suffering.

So please reach out.

Practical point 2 – of church soul care

The second practical point I want to make, is that soul care is the responsibility of the elders and all mature believers in the church.

We do not contract out soul care to “professionals” outside the church to try and address spiritual matters with worldly ideas or worldly means.

In the midst of suffering, you most possibly will experience fear, depression, anxiety, anger, conflict, worry and many other things. And on top of that, you may have fallen into a host of sinful behaviour in response to that.

These are matters of the soul. Matters of faith and unbelief. Matters of sin and repentance. And matters of the soul are the responsibility of the church.

So please reach out. We have a great saviour who is able to restore you and strengthen your faith in any storm. To forgive your sins and to give you peace in the midst of the suffering.

Elijah

James finishes this section with the example of Elijah. Look at verse 17 and 18.

Elijah was a man just like us. And he prayed to the same God we pray to.

Now if James wanted to make a point about healing the sick he could have used the example of Elijah raising the boy from the dead, but instead he chose the account of the drought.

This could be intending to bring to mind that just like God poured down rain on a dry land, God will also pour down spiritual restoration on a dry and parched soul of a believer who is struggling in the faith.

But I think the main point is the effectiveness of prayer. God uses prayer as a means to fulfil his will. Therefore, we must pray, and we can pray with confidence.

Link

From the beginning of the letter, James' goal has been to encourage saints in the midst of suffering.

He brings his letter to a close with a call to prayer. Prayer is the powerful response in suffering.

But before he closes off, he does one last appeal to salvation. One last appeal to evangelism, specifically in the church.

This brings us to our third and final point.

Part 3 – Prayer for the wonderer in suffering

It is almost as if James wants us to keep our suffering in perspective.

Yes it is hard and painful, but those who are **not** in Christ will face an even worse suffering.

To close the letter, In verses 19 and 20, James says

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.

Some in the church need salvation

There were some in the church who still were not followers of Christ. Some who said they believed but their actions proved otherwise.

Friends, this is true for our church as well. Let our evangelism begin in the church. Let us bring back those sinners who are wandering away.

Let us pray for them too.

Everyone is responsible

Keep in mind that everyone is responsible. Just like encouraging those weak in their faith is not just the

role of the elders, so too chasing a wondering sinner is anyone's role. James says "**someone** brings him back.

You know the Gospel. You have some knowledge of the Bible. More than you realise I warrant. And of course, if you don't know, reach out to someone who does. But each of us must own this responsibility.

High stakes

The stakes are too high for us not to all be involved. Eternity in Hell is a reality to anyone who does not know Jesus Christ as their saviour. Through your evangelistic efforts, even in the church, a person may be saved from hell and their sins covered by the blood of Christ.

Let us, at Covenant Grace, be a people who are active to bring back those wondering sinners. If they choose to keep wondering we can but pray for them.

Let our attitude mirror what Charls Spurgeon meant when he said:

"If sinners be damned, at least let them leap to Hell over our dead bodies. And if they perish, let them perish with our arms wrapped about their knees, imploring them to stay. If Hell must be filled, let it be filled in the teeth of our exertions, and let not one go unwarned and unprayed for."

Conclusion

Recap

Friends, suffering is part of this sin-sick world.

In this passage, and the whole letter, James has been encouraging us to suffer well. To face suffering in a God honouring way. To have faith.

When we trust that God is good, wise and powerful we can rejoice in the midst of suffering. We trust God in pray and we can rejoice. We can have peace in our hearts when we face trials. We can sleep in the storm.

But we are often weak. Even when we pray, our faith in God is often weak. And when our faith is weak, we are quick to fall into temptation.

So let us be quick to turn for help. To seek out those who can pray for us and point us to Christ. Let us be quick to confess our sins, knowing that he is faithful to forgive us.

And let us never let our temporary suffering blind us to the eternal suffering people will face if they never turn to Christ. Let us be active in evangelism wherever God places us: in our homes, in our churches or in our work place. Let us pray for them even if they would not listen to us.

Friends, facing suffering in a godly way is **only** possible because of faith in God.

That faith is demonstrated and cultivated by prayer.

Prayer is our Powerful Response in Suffering

John Bradford

John Bradford was an English reformer in the early fifteen-hundreds. Under the reign of Queen Mary the first, he was imprisoned.

One day, while in prison, it was announced to him that he would be burned alive.

We have a record of his response. In these words we see the response of a believer who's faith drives him to suffer well. I pray that this would be our response too.

"Lord, I thank Thee.

I have waited for this for a long time.

It is not terrible to me.

God make me worthy of such a mercy".

John Bradford

Let us pray