

Introduction:

- A. **Turn to James 5.** For three months we've been learning from James how Christians can not only survive but thrive under pressure. Pressure forces Christians to face the faults in our character and lay hold of Christ's grace. Pressures force us to learn how to trust God. Under pressure we gradually mature. Pressure is our spiritual friend, and that's why James tells us to rejoice when pressures come. ☺
- B. In Jas 5:7-11 we're told over and over that when we're under pressure we must be patient. *Be patient until the Lord's coming. Be patient and stand firm.* Be patient like the prophets and persevere like Job. We have no promise of quick relief so we must be patient
- C. But James says next that Christian patience is always hand in hand with a partner—prayer. In vv.13-18 the word *pray* appears in every verse. **Prayer is James' last word for Christians under pressure.** How do Christians under pressure find joy in our trials? **Patience and prayer.** Patience and prayer. Patience and prayer.
- D. James gives us a beautiful, simple admonition in **v.13... In short, turn everything we experience toward God in prayer.** When we suffer, James has taught us to pray for wisdom, for mercy, for love. When we're happy, sing. *Actually* sing. *"Well, I don't like to sing."* Sing anyway! The Bible says to. **Singing is how Christians pray our gladness.**

I want to focus on what comes next: **vv.14-15...** *Illus.:* Thirty-one years ago I was the Asst. Pastor at North Suburban Church in Deerfield. Our senior pastor had moved so I was the day-to-day guy. One of our seminary students, Bill, called. He was young and fit but he'd developed a painful and debilitating illness. A duct in his system wasn't opening and closing properly. He couldn't lie down and he couldn't sleep. Without sleep he was having serious trouble functioning. When he called he said, *"I'm wondering if the deacons [we had no elders] would come and pray for me like it says in James 5."* I had never heard of anyone doing that and I

didn't even really know *how* to do it. But I called the deacons and on a November Sunday afternoon we went to Bill and Carol's apartment. We read these verses and tried to do what the Bible says. I'd put some olive oil in a little container and since no one had ever told me what to do, I just dipped my finger in it and made a cross sign on Bill's forehead, and we prayed that God would heal him. The next day he was still sick. And the day after, and the day after that. Late in that week he went into the hospital for two days of scheduled tests. But once he got there the problem didn't occur. There was nothing to test. Not then. Not *since* then.

I. WHEN SICKNESS THREATENS OUR HEALTH AND FAITH WE CAN CALL THE ELDERS TO PRAY FOR US (5:14-15)

- A. How sick do you have to be? James seems to be talking about someone who is really hurting; someone reduced to a sense of helplessness. My sense is that this is especially for times when our sickness of mind or body has wormed its way deep into our very souls.
- B. “Let them call the elders of the church.” Notice, *you* take the first step. You call. Our elders do this. You're not bothering us if you ask. This is our privilege and responsibility as the shepherds of this flock. We take this seriously. Sometimes, when people can get to church, we meet in my office after the service. Other times we go to a home or hospital.
- C. “To pray over them and anoint them with oil in the name of the Lord.” Anointing with oil is a biblical symbol of setting someone apart to God, and it is a symbol of the Holy Spirit's anointing. Our custom is to ask the person we're meeting with to tell us about what they're suffering and how this has affected them. Then we gather around them, dab oil on their forehead, place our hands upon them, and we each pray for God to heal in Jesus' name. Our prayers *together* build faith and lay hold of our privileges in Christ for the sick person. It usually takes less than half an hour.
- D. **V.15**, *“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.”* The Greek word translated *make well* is often translated elsewhere as *save*. In fact, it is

in v.20 – “*will save them from death.*” **Do you see how this language, in another context, would sound like the gospel? Prayer of faith, save, raise up, sins forgiven.** James does that on purpose. **Because praying for physical or mental healing draws on gospel realities.**

Sometimes a sick heart infects the body and other times a sick body or mind infects the heart. In either case we need God’s healing. David wrote in Ps. 32 how when he was guilty and he tried to hide his sin his “*bones wasted away... my strength was sapped as in the heat of summer.*” In Ps 6 when he was under terrible pressure from enemies David prayed, “*Have mercy on me, Lord, for I am faint; heal me, LORD, for my bones are in agony.*” Whether we’re sick from the effects of guilt, the pains of this world, or from a terrible disease of mind or body, **our suffering is multiplied by the turmoil in our heart.** The worry, fear, and confusion; wondering if we are praying wrong or if this is God’s punishment for something we’ve done. Why God isn’t answering? Sometimes pain fogs our spiritual senses.

So we call the elders because they are wise in the God’s Word, because they love you for Jesus’ sake, they are your shepherds, and they believe that God can and will heal what is most desperately diseased or dysfunctional within you by the power of Jesus.

- E. “The prayer offered in faith.” **What is it that the elders are believing?** Often when the elders are praying for someone who is sick I don’t know if they’ll get well or not. So should I sit that one out? No. I don’t think God is necessarily expecting me to ‘know’ that this person will get well physically. (Remember, James is writing to people about the spiritual *benefits* of trials; not how to make them go away.) **When the elders pray for someone we are really praying that the benefits of God’s salvation would be fully realized within this brother or sister so that their heart is well,** so that “it is well with their soul.” To use the language of Ps. 103, we pray that their soul knows forgiveness, healing and redemption; that they will know again that their soul is crowned with love and

compassion and satisfied with good things. *Then* we pray for the healing of body or mind as well.

Illus.: Once a young mom came to our elders for prayer because she had been in a car accident. Her neck hurt terribly and wasn't getting better. When she met with the elders they asked her to tell them about what she was feeling. She told about the accident and how grateful she was that her children, strapped in their car seats, hadn't been hurt. I don't know how he thought of this, but one of the elders asked her if she felt guilty at all because her kids had been at risk, even though the accident wasn't her fault. The answer was clear on her face even before she spoke. "Oh, yes!" she said. She was wracked with guilt even though she hadn't done anything wrong. So when we prayed, we not only prayed for the relief of her neck pain but for relief from that guilt. And within a day or so her pain went away.

Now I've always thought that the next verse, **v.16**, was continuing to talk about this process with the elders but it clearly isn't.

"Therefore 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."

II. ALL CHRISTIANS CAN PRAY POWERFULLY AND EFFECTIVELY FOR THE HEALTH AND FAITH OF OTHERS (5:16-20)

- A. The *Therefore* means we can all pray just as the elders pray... and just as the prophet Elijah prayed.
- B. To our surprise, he says start with this: "Confess your sins to each other." We've seen again and again in this book how common and dangerous broken relationships are among Christians under pressure. So this speaks especially about our sin against one another. The brutal things we've said. Our outbursts of anger. Our quarrels and fights. Grumbling against one another. James has told us that Scripture's "royal law" is, "Love your neighbor as yourself." **When we don't love each other well our church body gets sick and our individual hearts and relationships get sick, too.** So what is the remedy?

Confess those sins to one another—especially to those we’ve sinned against—and pray for healing of all that has become diseased and damaged within and among us. **That kind of confession is not just humbling; it’s humiliating.** **Dietrich Bonhoeffer** practiced this regularly with a small group of seminarians. He wrote, “*Confession in the presence of a brother is the profoundest kind of humiliation. It hurts, it cuts a man down, it is a dreadful blow to pride.*” But James has taught us that wisdom to face life’s trials only comes with humility and this is one way we get it. **Is there someone you need to talk to?**

- C. When we do confess our sins and pray for one another—for wisdom, grace and love—the Bible says here that we will be healed. Just as when the elders pray, so here, healed hearts and relationships often bring relief to our minds and bodies. Note that it isn’t confession and prayer that heals actually. **God heals. God miraculously answers such prayers.** This isn’t just some kind of therapy. **God really, actually makes people well.** When “it is well with your soul” everything else changes.
- D. “The prayer of a righteous person is powerful and effective.” I’ve thought this was just talking about the elders, and I’ve often wondered if even *we* met this criterion. But this verse is for all of us—the *each others* of the verse before. The whole point of James is that you and I would be righteous under pressure. We don’t have to be *perfect* but we do need to be people who practice *doing* what the Bible says, especially in our relationships. And many of you do that. Then **our** prayers are “*powerful and effective.*” The elders are one example.
- E. Now James gives us another example: v.17-18... If you know anything about Elijah you know that he was *not* much like most of us. But James says when it comes to praying, “*He was a human being just like us,*” and that’s all that’s relevant to this passage. Elijah didn’t have anything going for him when he prayed that you don’t have.

The backstory is in 1 Kgs. 17-18. The king of Israel was Ahab. He was wicked and he'd led all God's people into sin. **To put it another way, Israel was desperately sick spiritually. And the prophet Elijah prayed that those sick, sick people of God would get well.** For that to happen, God prompted him to pray for *drought*—to pray that things would get worse. Because as C. S. Lewis put it, “*God shouts at us in our pain.*” So James says Elijah “*prayed earnestly.*” He didn't pray better than you can. His prayers didn't *mean more* to God than yours. He didn't have a pipeline to God you don't have. He just prayed his heart out, and the rains stopped. Even the dew stopped! After 3½ years, when Ahab and the people were sick of drinking dust, Elijah challenged the prophets of Baal to a duel with God, and when they were defeated and dead, the people of Israel “*fell prostrate and cried, ‘The LORD – he is God! The LORD – he is God!’*” Then Elijah prayed for rain. And, the Bible says, “*a heavy rain started falling.*” **James says you can pray like that.** “*The prayer of a righteous person is powerful and effective.*”

When we are burdened by how desperately sick at heart someone is—whether from sin or trouble or sickness—we can pray our hearts out to God just as Elijah did and God will answer and miraculously work in that person's life. Believe it and pray! **The issue isn't whether or not our prayers would work but simply if we will pray.**

- F. The last verses of James seem out of place at first: vv.19-20... Here's the link: when some believer you know is like... say, Israel under Ahab, how do you go after them? We do what Elijah did. We pray. Then, when you've prayed your heart out for them, do as God leads. If you need to go after them somehow he'll show you when and how to do that. **Do you know someone like that?** Now you know what to do.

Conclusion

Let's recap. The Christian's twin responses to trouble in life are **patience and prayer.**

If you're sick in body or mind and you are losing your spiritual moorings; your faith is faltering or you're tormented by confusion or doubt or guilt, **call the elders** to pray for you and anoint you.

Carry that prayer ministry into your own Christian relationships. **Confess sin to one another and pray for each other' healing.** When you're right with God your prayers are as powerful and effective as Elijah's.

And when someone has wandered away from the faith, **go after them**—first in prayer, and then doing as God leads.

I've seen some remarkable healings in answer to elders' prayer.

Years ago there was a young man in our church I'll call Kevin. As a child he'd been hurt and suffered a loss of oxygen to his brain and thus was mentally handicapped. He was bright in some ways and awkward in others. One thing he'd do is go over to MacDonalds and just talk to strangers about his faith in Jesus. A Christian he met there suggested he should call the elders to pray for his healing, so he called me. As you can imagine, I didn't know what to say. I walked Kevin through this passage as I usually do when someone calls. Then we met to pray for him. I don't know if anyone in the room thought Kevin would actually recover, but we prayed.

A few days later, Kevin called me. "I've been thinking," he said. "I think God wants me to be like this because when I talk to people about Jesus they listen to me." And in that way, Kevin was healed.

One evening a few years ago Cathy called me. When I first met her, some 20 years earlier, she was recovering from a divorce and trying to set her life right with the Lord. She told me about her profoundly mentally handicapped son, Nicholas. He was in a care facility near her and she would visit him every week.

When Nicholas was eight or nine years old Cathy came to me with an unusual request. She asked if the elders of our church would anoint and pray for Nicholas in keeping with James 5:14-16. Cathy said she wasn't thinking that God might heal all Nicholas's disabilities but she simply felt that God wanted her to have the elders pray for him. She didn't know

why. So one Sunday she brought him to church in a wheelchair and after the service we met in my office, anointed Nicholas with oil, and prayed for him.

When Cathy called me that night all those years later Nicholas was now 25 years old. Every week for 25 years Cathy had visited him. In all those visits Nicholas never communicated with her except for laughing sometimes as she entered the room. It seemed that nothing ever changed.

Cathy had just had her annual consultation with the team of professionals who care for Nicholas. In the course of that meeting the speech therapist said, "I think Nicholas is making some progress. We've been using green and red cards for "yes" and "no." He is learning to point at the right card in answer to some questions. Would you like to see?"

"Of course," Cathy replied, her heart pounding. So they went to Nicholas's room.

The therapist held up the green and red cards, and asked, "Nicholas, is your mom with us today?" And Nicholas pointed at the green card. Cathy could hardly believe it. Other questions convinced her that it wasn't an accident; he really understood.

She called me in tears to tell me her good news. "All these years I'd visit him," she said, "and I never knew if he even knew who I was. And now I know. He knows I'm his mother. And he is excited to see me." Then Cathy asked, "Do you remember when the elders prayed for Nicholas? This is God's answer." Guess what I think about now when someone asks our elders to pray for them? *[Pastoral Graces, pp.141-142]*