

“The Prayer of Faith”

James 5:12-20

Rev. Dustin Largent

August 10, 2025

Introduction and the Challenge of James 5:14

We're going to finish up today in the book of James, so I'm going to ask you to turn in your Bible to James chapter 5. I want to read a passage—this is a really misunderstood passage, so we'll do what we can.

Here's what it says in verse 14:

“Is 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. 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.”

—James 5:14–15

That passage bothers me. It's always bothered me since I've been a Christian. I never quite understood it exactly. It seemed to me like there was something missing in the passage because it didn't add up for me.

First of all, I'm reading the book of James, and what's been happening? We just got done talking about the wicked rich oppressing people, and then I have to be patient in that—patient when they're doing that—and I need to be able to overcome giving up at the end, before Jesus comes to get me or before I die. And then, out of nowhere: “Oh, and by the way, if you're sick, all you've got to do is call the elders of the church.” Maybe I'm a little sensitive to this because I'm an elder and have been for a long time. Call the elders of the church—they'll come over, take some oil, put a little oil on you, and pray for you—and you won't be sick anymore.

Is that true? Because I've got some questions.

Wrestling with the Text and Personal Experience

So, like—first of all—what kind of sickness? Because I've gone and prayed for people, and they've not been healed. I've prayed for people, and they've not been healed. I've had people come to the elders, and they prayed for them, and they didn't get healed. So, like—what did we do wrong? Did the elders do something wrong? Did they just mess up the whole deal? Maybe they didn't have enough faith?

Is it just for cancer? What about a toenail—like an ingrown toenail? I pray for that? Are we supposed to come with any sickness that we've got? Like, got the sniffles and think, “Oh, you know what, I better call the elders,” and so the phone's ringing off the hook because everybody in the church is like, “Oh, I got a hangnail.” What are we supposed to do with that?

And why don't we, instead of calling the elders, call somebody that has the gift of healing? If we're going to talk about healing, why not a person that has the gift of praying over people and they are healed? Why are you asking some elder to do that who doesn't—like, I never understood. I'm just telling you what my frustration with the passage has been.

Why didn't they get healed when the elders prayed for them? Did the elders not have enough faith? Maybe that's what it was. They didn't trust God enough. Well, if that's the case, then why are we calling the elders? Why aren't we calling people who have the gift of faith to come and be the ones that pray? Right?

So, what's this deal with the oil? Like, what oil is this? It just says "oil." Is that olive oil? Is that 5W-30? What are we using here to do this? And what does the oil have to do with getting us healed?

And in fact, the fact that the elders are praying for the sick—is that an indication that there is nobody else that's supposed to be praying for the sick? So, there's been a whole lot of issues with this whole deal.

A Story of Healing and Misunderstanding

I'll tell you a story. When I was 18—I had just turned 18—I was a freshman in college, and I got really, really sick one night. I had actually been running, and when I got back from my run, I felt horrible. It was one of those "both ends" kind of sicknesses. I'll just leave it at that. I was freezing cold—just shivering cold—and I'm in my bed, laying there, and I can't stop shivering, but I'm roasting to death. It's that kind of sick.

I had a roommate—he was a great, great roommate—and my roommate spoke in tongues. Now, I don't speak in tongues, but my roommate did. And then my friend Brandon—who spoke here not too long ago about India, if you remember him—he came into my room. Just as he comes in, I'm into this big garbage can. My roommate, man, he's the best. Every time I would throw up, he'd take the bag, throw it in the garbage, and come back and put a new one in. I was miserable, man. I was in bad shape, and I didn't know what to do. There were no elders around like the passage says—no elders. The eldest person there was 19 years old. So, who's the elder?

But they said, "Well, we should pray for him," and they pulled out this passage and said, "It says that we should anoint him with oil and pray a prayer of faith." So, Brandon said, "Well, I've got some oil downstairs," because he was a big popcorn eater—butter flavored. So he goes and gets some butter-flavored Orville Redenbacher and comes into my dorm room. I'm laying there, and I can hardly even hear him, but all of a sudden I feel this huge amount of butter-flavored popcorn oil just on my head. It's dripping down into my bed, and I'm shivering like this.

Then my roommate starts speaking in tongues, and my friend Brandon starts praying in English. They both prayed, and it couldn't have been more than 20 seconds—and just everything went away. No more shivers, no more heat, no more shaking. I just fell asleep, just like that. And I woke up the next morning like nothing had ever happened. I mean, I slept hard—slept hard.

And I was like, "But that doesn't match the passage. There were no elders." Something's a tad askew.

Understanding the Context of James 5

It wasn't until I listened to a message by John MacArthur that I was really able to make sense of this. I think we've completely misunderstood what this passage is.

There are a couple of things we need to look at when we're interpreting a passage of Scripture, and John MacArthur reminded me of that. One of those is that you always have to take passages of Scripture in the context of the passage. So, when I looked at this passage, I asked: What does healing somebody have to

do with being persecuted and being oppressed by the rich? What does that have to do with this? Is he just doing some random housekeeping or something here with the church? I don't think so.

So, the first question we're going to ask is: Does healing exist today? Does God still heal people? I want you to hear me really clearly about this: He does. He does. Not everybody—God heals who He wants—but He does ask us to pray for the sick. Jesus prayed for the sick. His disciples prayed for the sick. The church fathers prayed for the sick. The church is supposed to pray for the sick. We're supposed to do that.

I can't tell you how many times I have prayed and seen people healed—but not because I'm an elder. I can't tell you how many times I've seen people healed because somebody that was a good friend of them came over and prayed with them, prayed with them on the phone, because we threw it on a prayer chain. Prayer makes a big difference here. But I want to dive into this: What is the context that we're looking at here?

Trials, Endurance, and the Power of Prayer

So, first of all—who's he speaking to, and what's the situation? Well, they're facing a lot of trials of many kinds. You've got a church—remember, this is the dramatic conclusion of James. We've been going through this:

“Consider it pure joy, my brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith produces perseverance.”

—James 1:2–3

So, there are two things James is trying to deal with:

1. If you're a believer, we need to help you stand firm until the very end—until you die or until Jesus comes back. Do not reject God. Do not sin. Do not leave God. Don't throw in the towel and give up on your faith just because something bad has happened to you.

You know people like that—something bad happens in their life, and all of a sudden they're done with God. A Job-like moment comes into their life, and they say, “You know what, I'm done with God.” And James is like, “No, no, no.”

2. What about people who think they're saved because they were at camp when they were little and they prayed a sinner's prayer—which isn't in the Bible, by the way—and someone said, “Oh, you're saved now,” and they said, “Okay, that's great, I'm saved.” And then they live their life however they want to, with no lordship of God in their life at all, and expect that they're saved.

James is like, “No, that's not it. You need to know the evidence of your faith. Do you have genuine faith? And if you do, how do you endure to the end?” How are we going to make it to the end?

You're getting beat up by people that are rich. You're being slandered. You're being hurt. You're going through all kinds of trials. How are you going to make it? Last time, he said you need to be patient. Patience is what's going to get you there. But if you're like me, you're thinking, “How am I going to be patient? I can't be patient. I try to be patient, but I can't be patient in my own power.” I can see why God

was patient. I can see why Jesus was patient—Jesus is God. I’m not God. I’m really, really not God. I don’t have that patience on my own.

So now, what’s going to happen in this section is he’s going to talk about what you do to be able to endure to the end. What do I practically do? How do I finish this off? How do I practically do everything that came from James 1, 2, 3, 4, and 5? How can I do that as a weak man, a weak woman? His answer is: You need to pray. I have given prayer to the church. Prayer is your secret weapon. It’s the secret weapon that’s going to allow you to endure to the end.

The Church’s Context and the Call to Prayer

They’re being oppressed by the wicked. They’re being condemned—some of them even killed—by people who are hoarding and living in opulent wealth. So, that’s the context: poor, struggling, oppressed Christians who are being encouraged to endure patiently without sinning.

Look at verse 12:

“Above all, my brothers and sisters, do not swear—not by heaven or by earth or by anything else. All you need to say is a simple ‘Yes’ or ‘No.’ Otherwise you will be condemned.”

—James 5:12

Now, when it says “swear,” that’s not like dropping an F-bomb or something like that. That’s not what it’s about. Dropping this word or that word—that’s not what he means by “swear.” Now, you shouldn’t do that either, alright? I’m not saying, “Hey everybody, go for it.” That’s not what I’m saying.

Swearing here is: “I am making an oath.” Like, “I swear to God.” You’re playing on the playground, and you tell some kid a story, and they say, “Oh, that’s a lie.” And you say, “No, no, no—I swear on my mother’s life.” “Oh, I triple-triple eternity swear.” “Oh, he must be telling the truth.”

Why are you doing that? Because they don’t believe you. Why? Because you’re a liar all the time. That’s why you’ve got to say that. You’ve got to make stuff up because you’re always lying all the time. You’ve been telling stories, and now nobody believes anything you’re saying. So you’re like, “Oh no, I really do mean it this time. I swear. I totally swear that I did it.”

So, he says:

“Above all, my brothers and sisters, do not swear—not by heaven or by earth or by anything else. All you need to say is a simple ‘Yes’ or ‘No.’ Otherwise you will be condemned.”

—James 5:12

Why is that? Basically, when you’re having to defend yourself against wicked men—wicked people are oppressing you as a Christian—you’re having to defend yourself against them. Don’t be like them. Don’t be like them. They’re the ones who are always swearing and saying, “Oh, I’m telling the truth, Judge. I’m telling the truth about this horrible Christian. I swear it.” Don’t be like them.

So, as you patiently suffer, live a life that doesn’t require added verification of swearing—because the only people that need to do that are those who are known liars. They have to come up with some way of giving validity to what they say.

The Role of Elders and the Power of Faithful Prayer

So, if your struggle to patiently endure has got you so weak that you are on the brink of giving up—you're wounded and beaten down and hanging on for dear life, when you can hardly pray anymore, you're so debilitated—it says: *“Call the elders.” —James 5:14*

Call your pastor. Put my name and number in your phone and call and say, “Listen, I think I’m going to give up.” I’ll be there quick. Call the shepherd. Why? It says to pray over them and anoint them with oil in the name of the Lord.

Did you know that shepherds, when they would have sheep, they’d be wandering their sheep all over, and then at night they would bring them into kind of a cleft in the rock? Then he would put rocks and stuff around to keep the sheep in there, but he would have a little gate—a little gate where they could only go through this small area.

The sheep would go through there, and when they were all built in and the sheep were there, he would start to put them in at night. As he did that, he would stop each sheep. Every sheep got a check. He’d check the skin and look around to see if there were any wounds—maybe they got a scratch, maybe something bit them, maybe they fell off something and he didn’t see it, and now they’re limping around. If he saw any of that, he would take some oil—just olive oil or something—and soothe it. Sometimes they would even take some wine, because wine has alcohol in it, and that would disinfect it. Sometimes they would do that. But they would soothe that and bring them in there.

That’s what we’re doing. We’re just trying to take care of the sheep.

“You anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows.”
—*Psalms 23:5*

Psalms 23 is talking about the Good Shepherd. “The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want.” You know that Psalm. But it says, “You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies.” What happens when I’m at a table in the presence of my enemies? I start getting beat up. But then it says, “You anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows.”

The Church’s Role in Perseverance and Restoration

So practically, what this means is that the church family is here to help each other persevere to the end through our trials and struggles. You and I all have trials and struggles, and our job as a family is to help each other get through those and stay faithful to God—so that we all cross the victory line to Jesus successfully. We want to all do that. We’re all in this together. We’re going to try this. We’re going to pray for each other when there are struggles. We’re going to pray for each other when we’re going through this—because we’re in this together. Sunrise Bible Church is in this together.

But when you get to a place where you’ve gotten beaten down—maybe you didn’t ask for prayer, maybe you haven’t been praying on your own, maybe it’s just been too much for you—then you call the elders. You call the pastor. You call somebody that can do that, and they’ll pray for you. And then what will happen?

“And the prayer offered in faith will make the sick person well.”

—James 5:15

So, you’re going to come beside somebody who has faith, and they’re going to pray for you with faith and say, “God, I trust this person in your life, and this person trusts You with their life.”

Now, why an elder? Why don’t I just call, you know, Uncle Fester? Well, because you want to come into the care of somebody who has stronger faith than you do—so that they can lift you up and encourage you. When you’re debilitated, I’m going to pray with you to heal your debilitated faith. I’m going to pray that you get lifted up and that you persevere some more.

So, we’re going to connect with God in ways that maybe you haven’t connected with God. And what happens when you start to connect with God? All of a sudden, you realize you haven’t been living as you should. You realize there have been things that maybe you haven’t been... and that’s a part of the reconciliation and part of gaining your faith back.

So, what does it say in Scripture?

“If they have sinned, they will be forgiven.”

—James 5:15

That’s part of the restoration process.

Confession, Righteousness, and the Power of Community Prayer

So, you see, personal prayer is available to the church to allow you to endure with patience. The pastors and elders are going to provide the church with care—to patch up and restore the feeble and debilitated back into the war. And now you see we have another one:

“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.”

—James 5:16

So, we need to be real and honest with each other. That doesn’t mean you go into your vault and come up with the worst thing you ever did and pour it all out—everything. That’s not what this is saying. It’s saying: live in a transparent relationship with people so they know that you are struggling, they know that you are hurting—so that they can pray for you, and we can work through these things together. So, one of the reasons that you need to maintain a right relationship with God—somebody’s like, “Well, why do I have to live a righteous life?”—well, one of the reasons you have to live a righteous life is because there’s somebody else that you’re going to need to pray for because they’re struggling. And the only prayer that’s going to help them is a prayer from a righteous person.

Let’s say I decide that I’m done with all this. I’ll be the pastor, but I’m not going to live a righteous life. I’m not going to live for God. I’m just going to sin however I want and do all that. And then somebody comes to me for prayer, and I say, “Oh, I’m the pastor, so I’ll pray for you,” but it has nothing to do with my life. It has nothing to do with being a righteous person. It has nothing to do with how I live—I live completely there. It doesn’t work.

The reason why you need to be living a righteous life is because the body of Christ needs your prayers. The people in the pews next to you need you. And the prayer of a righteous man and a righteous woman is highly effective. It really is.

Elijah's Example and the Call to Restoration

He jumps down here and says:

“Elijah 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. Again he prayed, and the heavens gave rain, and the earth produced its crops.”

—James 5:17–18

So, the point here is that Elijah's prayers were effective—but he was no more special. He had no more ability than you and I have. His prayer was effective because he was a righteous person. He trusted God, who gave him righteousness, and he lived for God. He made God the Lord of his life and lived that way. Verse 19—we'll finish up. We're almost done. Two verses left in the book of James, and then we'll be James experts.

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

—James 5:19–20

What does that mean? In context, that means everything that we've just talked about. Now all of a sudden, that makes sense, doesn't it?

We're struggling. We're hurting. We're having trouble getting to the end. Some of us want to give up. And what it's saying is that if you're here, and you're living a life and praying prayers of righteousness for your fellow people—if elders are praying prayers of righteousness for the people that are here—and they come back, they're at the brink, they were going to give up, they were going to give up the faith, and they come back and say, “No, I'm not going to do that. I'm going to stay firm because the church is praying for me, and I'm encouraged now by the faith of the fellow believers that are with me.” Now, because of that, I'm going to do that. What does it say?

“Whoever turns a sinner from the error of their ways will save them from death and cover over a multitude of sins.”

—James 5:20

And that's how the book ends. There's a great victory here.

Final Encouragement and Benediction

I remember before Hugh died. I remember that Hugh was doing great—he lived a really good, faithful life. I remember sitting down with him, talking to him, and I said, “Dude, you're so close.” We knew he was going to die soon. I said, “Man, you're so close. Stay faithful.” I had nothing bad to say to him at all, but I said, “I just want to encourage you, my brother. You don't have much time left. And I know that you're in a lot of pain.”

You remember how much pain he was in? You remember how much struggle he was in? You remember how in the world he could even sit back there in the pew, in the amount of pain he was in? I don't think I could. But he was not going to give up. And I was like, "Do not give up, my friend. Stand firm until the very end." And he did. He did. Oh, my goodness, I went over a little bit.

You know what—let's stand up. Let's stand up and just say, "God, we're not going to give up." Oh God, let's pray. Pray with me as I just give you a blessing as you leave:

God, in Jesus' name, we are in this together.

As just ordinary people like Elijah—we're ordinary people like Job. And God, we are going to be—especially in the next couple of years—taking a beating for You. And we're willing to do that because of everything You've done for us: The way You've redeemed us, the way You have brought us into Your family, The reward that You have waiting for us. God, we will be patient, and we will endure to the end. But God, we need You. And so, God, we're going to use all of these prayers. We're going to use the prayers for ourselves as individuals. When we need the prayers of the elders, we're going to come to them, God, to pick us up and to patch our wounds. And God, we're going to be praying as a family for each other all the time. We're going to maintain righteousness in our lives so that our prayers will be powerful and effective.

God, we surrender all this to You. You are our God, and we are Your people. And we go out today knowing that You have already bought the victory for us. In Jesus' name, Amen.