

Closing Prayers

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[0 : 00] This is our last sermon in James. If you're visiting today, there's this New Testament letter, the book of James. We've been having ten weeks in it, and this is the last week. And I don't know how you've been, if you have been here for the series, I don't know how you've been feeling, what you've expected from the book. James is very practical, right?

It's a lot about, you know, how we should live. But that is exactly the problem, isn't it? Because we don't live as we should. James has been pointing out how we haven't responded well to trials, how we've been showing favoritism, how we contain our tongue and what it shows about our hearts. He's shown us our conflicts and what it reveals about our idolatry. And, you know, it's been very convicting, very discouraging. Maybe, you know, as it's like when you're my age and you go to the doctor for a health checkup, and, okay, well, there's your heart rate and your cholesterol and your blood sugar levels, and it's very discouraging.

Well, I don't know how you feel. How often Sundays feel like that for you? That you feel, yeah, beaten up, that you feel, man, I'm not where I should be. Well, what do we do in that case? I mean, the doctor, he will give you a long list of things you should cut out, things you should do, exercise. But how about Dr. James? What does he recommend? Well, I think this is a great passage.

[1 : 22] This is just what we need. And so why don't I pray? And then Angeline is going to come up and read the passage. Why don't we pray together? Our Father, thank you.

We can come to you. Thank you that you speak to us. You speak to us in our need, in our brokenness, in our struggles. You give us the grace we need. Father, please speak to us now, to each one of our hearts, no matter where we're at, no matter how long we've been Christian, no matter how long we've been with you, please speak to each of our hearts today with words of life, of grace.

In Jesus' name. Amen. Angeline. Good morning, church.

The reading today is taken from James chapter 5. Starting in verse 13, we read, Is anyone among you suffering?

Let him pray. Is anyone cheerful? Let him sing praise. 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.

[2 : 46] 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.

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.

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.

Then he prayed again, and heaven gave rain, and the earth bore its fruit. My brothers and sisters, if any among you wanders from the truth, and someone brings him back, let him know that whoever brings back a sinner from his wanderings will save his soul from death, and will cover a multitude of sins.

This is the word of God. Great. Thanks so much, Angeline.

[4 : 17] Well, let's keep that passage open as we're going to look at it. It's a short passage, but yeah, as I've been studying it, I think it's great. But what is it really about? Because my guess is it's a passage that raises some questions.

I've been an elder for over ten years at three different churches. No one's ever asked me to come and anoint someone with oil. What do we do with this? Actually, the problem is this is one of the hardest passages in the New Testament to interpret, because it's a bit ambiguous.

That's why I first want to spend some time, okay, what is this passage actually about? And then when we have confidence in that, then I can really preach it to you. Because on the surface, well, it seems kind of simple, right?

You know, after last week, the call to endure patiently until Jesus comes. Well, how do you respond? Well, if is anyone among you suffering, let him pray.

Is anyone cheerful? Let him sing praise. But then is anyone among you sick? Let him call for the elders of the church. Let him pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord.

[5 : 22] And the prayer of faith will save the one who is sick, and the Lord will raise him up. And if he's committed sins, he will be forgiven. Now, it sounds a lot like instructions for healing, right?

If you're sick, well, what do you do? You call the elders, and they will do this, and they will pray for you, and you will be healed. You'll be saved from your sickness, right? Raised up out of your bed. That's how it really reads. The only thing is that the language is rather ambiguous. It says saving. Now, what does it mean by saving?

Does it mean healing? Or does it mean, well, saving on the last day? The words can mean both, right? Raising. Does he mean raised from your bed that you get up again because you're no longer sick?

Or does he mean the Lord will raise you on the last day? You can be sure of that. It can be either, right? The problem is the word sick as well. The problem is the word doesn't necessarily mean sick.

[6 : 21] It just means weak. And the kind of the context determines what kind of weakness. You know, sometimes it's physical weakness. It's sickness, right? Jesus goes around healing.

Yeah, and they are sick people. But other times in the Bible, the same word is just weak, right? Admonish the idol. Encourage the faint heart that helped the weak. The spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak.

So what does it actually mean in this case? If the passage would read like this, let me put it on the screen, something like this. Is anyone among you weak?

Let him call for the elders of the church. Let them pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord. And the prayer of faith will save the one who is weak. And the Lord will raise him.

And if he has committed sins, he will be forgiven. This sounds maybe a bit different. This sounds like someone who, well, you know, James has written this very strong letter about our sin.

[7 : 19] And here is someone who feels, man, I'm a mess. I'm really far from God. My life is really not what it should be. And, you know, please pray for me. And it's about spiritual restoration, right?

So I hope you can see that actually this passage is a bit ambiguous. It's a bit difficult. And, of course, we have our biases. Now, some of you here, maybe miraculous healing is really important to you.

And you think, well, this passage, it should be about that, right? Because that's really important. And others of us, well, we think differently. But I do want to say, okay, this is how I'm going to preach it.

This is what I think it means, what I'm pretty sure it means. I think this is about seeking spiritual restoration. What James is writing at this end of the letter is about us kind of coming back to God, being restored, healed, forgiven, saved.

Not miraculous healing. And that's what I'm going to preach. Now, let me just give you a few reasons why I'm going to take it like that so that we say, okay, even if you disagree with me, okay, I can see where you're coming from. Okay, I'll listen.

[8 : 25] All right? So first of all, I think physical healing, it doesn't fit the context. All right? We've had this letter. And then suddenly the last paragraph, here's four steps for miraculous healing, right?

If you're sick, do this, this, and this. That seems, where does that come from? It seems completely random. Why suddenly that? Well, it's actually, if this is about restoring the sinner, that's, you know, we've seen that a lot, right?

James has been telling us, you know, to watch out for sin, and he's been pointing out our sin. And those last two verses, who know whoever brings back a sinner from his wandering, and it's something to do with sin is much more likely, right?

But I think also, if healing doesn't fit with the absolute promise, because these are wonderful promises, right, that the prayer of faith will save the one who is sick, and the Lord will raise him up.

It's like a real guarantee. I'm not sure if with physical healing we can make those same guarantees. There's people in the New Testament who don't get healed, right? Clearly, this isn't a kind of foolproof four-step procedure to healing, because we all know that that doesn't work.

[9 : 33] But at the same time, spiritual, you know, if you repent, will you get forgiven? Yes, 100%. I can preach this, absolutely, if it's spiritual. Thirdly, I think it doesn't fit James' message.

Because James' message hasn't been about an easy four steps, right? We heard it last week. His big call is to endure. At the start and the end of the letter, he says the same thing.

1 verse 12, blessed is the one who remains steadfast under trial, right? And then 5 verse 11, last week, behold, we consider those blessed who remain steadfast.

It's like brackets. This is what James is saying. Hey, let's endure these trials. Let's be patient and keep going. But then healing would really stand out, right?

Are you poor? Hey, just be patient. Endure. Are you being oppressed? Be patient. Endure it. Are you having marriage trouble? Be patient.

[10 : 34] Endure it. Are you sick? Oh, well, just call the elders and do these four steps and you'll be healed. But that doesn't seem to fit. His call is to endure patiently. But in that, James wants us to thrive.

He wants us to, you know, have firm faith in God's grace. And finally, you know, the example of Elijah. It's a really weird example, right? Because Elijah, he did actually healings.

Why doesn't he say, hey, you've heard about Elijah and he healed the widow's son, right? So you pray for healing. But he doesn't tell that. He said, does this thing about the rain?

And if you know the story, what was that about? Well, Israel had turned away from the Lord. They were worshiping Baal. And so what Elijah prayed that God would discipline them with a drought. And then when they turned back, there was rain again. So it is about spiritual restoration, that miracle. So for all those reasons, I think this is about, yeah, spiritual restoration.

[11 : 34] I'm not denying God can heal miraculously. He can. He's God. But that's just not what this passage is about. Okay? This is about healing. And, you know, come and talk to me afterwards if you want to know more.

But these are my reasons for thinking, okay, this is, we're talking about something spiritual. Seeking spiritual restoration. And now I know maybe for some of you that feels disappointing.

You know, I was sick a few weeks ago. That was minor. But some of you, maybe you were really struggling with something. And you wish there was just a silver bullet. There was something that just could heal me and get rid of this sickness.

And I feel for you. Yeah, that's, I'm sorry that this passage is not about that. Although at the same time, any healing in this life is only temporary, right? Because we'll all still die.

Look at what this passage is actually saying. Look at the glorious truths. The prayer of faith will save the one who is sick. You can be saved forever.

[12 : 36] The Lord will raise him. You're going to be raised from the dead forever. If he has committed sins, he will be forgiven. You know, isn't forgiveness of sins so much better long term than physical healing, right?

That's what Jesus said, you know? The paralyzed man, well, your sins are forgiven. It's much bigger. And that's a wonderful way to finish, right? Again, as I said, this is a challenging letter. James has been really convicting. We need a faith that works. And you're a bunch of double-minded sinners. And you should mourn and weep. That's James' language so far, right? But that's not how he ends.

He ends with grace. James' heart is for restoration and forgiveness. And that's not just James' heart. That's God's heart. God wants us to come back to him.

He wants us to be restored and forgiven. And that grace is how we finish this letter. And I think that's wonderful. And, you know, James just explains how we can have it. You know, God is willing, but what should we do?

[13 : 33] What steps do we take to be restored and to come back to God? And the key, yeah, is prayer, right? It's the power of prayer. If you're struggling, if you've seen your sin, if you're convicted, pray.

Pray for each other. So this passage is really basically like the end of our service, right? If you've been here before, what do we do at the end of the service? Hey, if God has spoken to you and you feel you need prayer, come over here and there's some people who love to pray for you.

That's basically what he's saying, right? Hey, if God has spoken to you and you need prayer, call the elders and they'll come and pray for you. They'd love to. That's the idea. So what is the structure of this passage?

As you can see, there's a few things, right? So first there is a more serious case of someone, you know, feeling weak and calling the elders. Then verse 16, more informal, right?

Confess your sins to one another and pray for one another that you may be healed. I'm going to take those two kind of together because they're both the same thing, right? They start with someone, you know, asking for prayer.

[14 : 37] And then there's a third situation, kind of verses 19 and 20 of someone, well, they're not yet convinced they have a problem and you should pursue them. So those three sections, but I'll take the first two together.

And what is then the first essential step before prayer? Well, first, I'll confess to one another.

Confess to one another. Before asking for help, I guess you start with admitting that you need help, right?

You wouldn't ask for help if you don't admit you need help. That's clear in the second case, right?

Verse 16, confess your sins to one another and pray for one another. You pray in light of those sins.

But also in the first case, right? Why would you call the elders to come and pray for you?

Presumably you're admitting that there's something wrong. You're admitting that you need help, right? You ask the elders to come.

Oh, okay. Well, what do you want prayer for? Oh, nothing. I'm fine. Of course not. Right? You're admitting, man, I'm in a bad place. I really need prayer. I'm really far from God. So that first step in coming back to God is confessing, admitting your problem, admitting your need of him.

[15 : 43] And if you don't admit it, you won't get help. What's interesting is James' focus here on community. Now, of course, you can just confess straight to Jesus. That's wonderful, right?

You can just confess your sin and admit your need and pray. And yet James thinks it's great to, you know, do that as a community with others. I mean, why confess to others?

Why not just on your own? I mean, maybe it's just your feeling, right? Because the thing is God isn't physically here. And you confess, but you, in a way, you don't get any response, right?

You don't get any physical, you don't see someone's face or anything like that. And then just talking to someone else physically, actually, that can be really good for your heart.

Also, it really shows you're serious, right? If you're in a bad place, talking to someone else, well, you're really opening up. I mean, confessing to God, I think it's very easy.

[16 : 39] Because God already knows. And he's not going to tell anyone. And so if I mess up again, then, hey, it's actually not too bad, right? But if I talk to someone else and I take the risk that they might tell others or those kind of things, right?

In a way, I'm showing I'm being serious. I really want to change. I really need help. And that's why I'm coming to you. That is, yeah, it's a sign of real repentance, of really wanting to change.

That's why it's so good to confess to each other. Now, that sounds scary, being vulnerable. But James assumes that people will love you, that they will help you, right?

I mean, it doesn't say, call the elders and they will scold you and rebuke you and beat you over the head and help you sort yourself out. That's not what it says, right? They will anoint you and pray for you.

And God will save you, right? This is about, they meet you with grace. They assure you. And that is the kind of community James wants. A church where people can confess their sins to each other.

[17 : 38] And so certainly not a church where people just come to the Sunday service and leave and have no relationships. Clearly this assumes real intimate relationships. Now, of course, that's very hard to do with 200 people.

But, yeah, hopefully there are people here that you can be safe with, be honest with, where you know you won't be condemned but receive the help that you need. And do you feel like that here at Watermark?

Are we not just a gospel preaching church but, as people say, a gospel culture church that you can feel the gospel and grace in our relationships?

Is there someone you can really, we asked that in the survey a few weeks, months ago, right? Is there someone you can really open up to? Someone you can really share with and who will love you?

I hope there is someone like that. And if you're afraid, maybe try it and see what a, hopefully what a wonderful community of grace we are. And so if you're here and, yeah, you feel like what I've described and you feel that, you know, your life is a mess and you're far from God, well, don't pretend you're okay.

[18 : 46] Don't just say you're fine. Come and ask for help and ask for healing and restoration. Could be the elders. Could be someone at the front. Could be just someone you know in the church. Confess and ask for help.

But that's only the first step, right? If someone comes to you, what do you do? Well, pray for one another, right? All this passage is about prayer, right? If anyone's suffering, let him pray and the elders will pray and pray for one another.

And, you know, the prayer of Elijah was so powerful and pray, right? It's all prayer. They want, you want to come back to God. But of course, you know, in prayer, you bring someone to God.

You bring them back to God, right? Simple but powerful prayer. And what kind of prayer? A big thing is just assurance. So much of this is assuring, like the anointing with oil.

It's not a kind of medicine thing. Why anointing? Anointing in the Bible is about being set apart, right? Kings were set apart and priests were set apart. And so it's like a sign, a symbol that, hey, you belong to Christ.

[19 : 51] You've been set apart by Christ through the Spirit. He's set you apart. He's anointed you. You belong to him and he won't let you go. But all these verses, so reassuring, you know, the prayer of faith will save you.

The Lord will raise you. If you've committed sins, you'll be forgiven, right? It's so reassuring. You'll be healed, right? No matter how far from God you are, you will be forgiven.

No matter what you've done, you can be restored. No matter what a mess you've made of your life, God will have you back. That assurance. And it's so beautiful, again, to pray that for each other.

And you can pray and God will give you a wonderful feeling of peace. But, you know, sometimes you feel so far from God that, you know, you don't feel it, right? You really don't really believe that God would actually have you back.

And then to have another human being say that and pray that for you, that can be so reassuring. I think that's so powerful about doing this together. And, of course, not just assurance.

[20 : 51] And, of course, also change, right? Restoration, coming back to God, praying for someone's heart, that it would be revived, for, you know, a new love for Jesus that will help them overcome their sin and their struggles.

And then turn away from bad habits. And that's a real miracle. Spiritual healing deep in the heart that no doctor can do. And all that has to do is with the power of prayer, right?

Verse 16, the prayer of a righteous person has great power as it is working. Your prayer has enormous power. And look at Elijah. He was a man just like us, as the NIV says, right?

He has a nature like ours. Elijah, he got tired and hungry and depressed and scared. He was just a human being. And yet he got amazing answers to prayer. And God is the same.

He can still give you amazing answers to prayer. When you pray like this, when you're, yeah, praying for people who went astray like Elijah did. Of course, we should think of this in the right way.

[21 : 51] It can sound a bit like prayer is like a force. And, you know, God, we need to kind of turn God around. We need to nag him until he answers. Of course, that's not what it is, right? Why is prayer powerful?

Partly because God is willing. I love this saying by an archbishop from the 19th century, Richard Trench. What is prayer? Prayer is not overcoming God's reluctance, but laying hold of his willingness.

And, you know, why can we pray for forgiveness? Because God is so willing. It's not that God needs to be persuaded, right? Like children do with their parents or try, right? God's promise of grace.

God loves to restore sinners. He yearns over us. He wants to give us more grace. And so if we pray for restoration, of course. I mean, even Elijah's story, if you read it, God was really in that.

God had promised in the law that, you know, when people turn away from him, he would send a drought to turn them back to him. And so that's what Elijah prayed for. Even the day that he went to show, kind of for the showdown with the prophets, that started with God saying, hey, it's time.

[23 : 00] Go to Ahab. I'm going to send rain, right? God was in it. And he laid hold of God's willingness and prayed. And what lies behind us is God's grace. God loves us.

And when we turn back, he freely restores us. You know, it's so loving and willing that you almost wonder, why do I even need to pray? Why doesn't God just, you know, restore straight away without prayer?

Well, ultimately, we need to remember it is about a relationship, right? God is relational. He's a person. James has talked about friendship with God. And he's talked about turning away from him is like adultery, right?

That's relationship. And relationships are not automatic. They are two-way, right? They involve communication and decisions and choices.

And so, yeah, God, he wants us to really actually turn back to him. But when we do, he is so willing to forgive and restore. And so pray.

[23 : 57] Pray boldly and confidently and freely because God is willing. I mean, the big question is almost not just whether God is willing. Are we willing?

That's often the issue, right? Are we willing? Because if we go to those last two verses, that's a slightly different angle. Maybe someone who is not yet willing. Someone who is not yet convicted. I mean, it's great if people see their need, if they see their problem. But, you know, so often James has said in his letter, do not be deceived, right? Don't be deceived.

You know, sometimes you hear a sermon on Sunday and, you know, the Holy Spirit wants to say something to you. But actually, you think you're okay and you think you're not too bad and you think it's only temporary and it'll be fine.

Well, others can see what's really going on. In that case, James says, well, in that case, pursue one another. Pursue one another. Verse 19, 20, the picture is clear, right?

[24 : 57] My brothers and sisters, verse 19, if anyone among you wanders from the truth and someone brings him back. Has someone wandering off into sin, whether through trials or temptations, they're wandering off.

But you bring them back. Another Christian goes after them and pleads with them and talks with them and prays for them and brings them back. And a wandering Christian turns around. James says that's such a wonderful thing.

That's so great. Why? Well, verse 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.

I mean, we haven't touched upon that yet. But why is spiritual restoration so important? Why is it so important we come back to God? Well, because it will save your soul from death. Why the hassle of confessing and praying?

Well, because you need to be saved. And not just physical death, right? This is your soul being saved from eternal death. We need it. People who are wandering from the truth, they're not facing a great future.

[26 : 01] No, they need you. And so pursuing other Christians is a wonderful, loving thing, right? It's loving to save someone. And so it's loving to go after someone.

If you see someone and they're not doing well, you know, they seem to not care about their sin. They're responding badly to trials in their life. You want to go and talk to them.

That's loving. May feel nosy, but it's loving. So can I encourage us? If you see this, you know, pursue your brother or sister in love. Right?

It's sometimes really good to hear it from another person. Probably the Holy Spirit is speaking to them, but they're ignoring it, right? Maybe it's better to hear it in the flesh from some human being actually speaking to them.

Hey, I see this in your life. Can we talk about that? Of course, you do that in the right way. You do it out of love and not self-righteousness.

[26 : 55] You want to do it humbly because, well, confess your sins to one another, right? In a way, we're all sinners and we all need to stay with Jesus. We want to do it with understanding. And don't just think you know everything.

Maybe there's things going on you don't know. And so you would want to talk and, hey, can we talk? I think I see this, but please help me understand this. You know, do it with grace, but still do it, right?

And likewise, if someone talks to you, don't take that as a kind of, well, mind your own business. If someone wants to talk to you about your sin, then they're trying to save you, right? They love you. They're concerned about you. They want to save your soul from death. That's a wonderful thing. So can you receive it? They're taking a real risk in talking to you, right? So it's so easy to be deceived. Maybe they see something that I don't see because I'm full of myself. You know, it's really helpful if, you know, if we, yeah, if you point it out for someone else. And so if someone says something to me, I will try and humbly listen and reflect.

[27 : 57] And that's for all of us, right? Not just you guys out there. For me, if you see something in my life that you have questions about, please come and talk to me because I probably don't notice it and I'm in danger, right?

But, yeah, because we need to turn. We need to admit, right? It is a relationship. It's not automatic. God wants us to turn around, but we have to turn around.

And that's why you pray. That's why you plead. But if they turn, if they admit, they can always come back because that is what God wants. He wants to save you.

He wants to save me. He wants to save us. He wants to heal us and restore us and forgive us and raise us. So if we just turn and pray, that's God's heart. And it's always God's heart, right?

Not just even for Christians. Why do we have an explore course starting tomorrow? Why do we love you to invite people to death? Because God wants to save people from death, right? And if you're here and you're not a Christian, that's what God wants for you.

[28 : 54] He wants you to come back to him and be saved. Come to him. Come and talk to me afterwards. You know, Jesus loves you. He wants you back. But, yeah, that's where we're at.

And so the application, I think, is simple, right? You know, reflect where you're at. And then if you need help, ask for help. Either come to the front. You know, pray for each other.

Pray for someone with your CG. And not just today. Maybe during the week. Someone last week shared that they did something at work. They said something. They never thought they would say. Isn't it great if you can just, you know, call a friend and say, Hey, I did this.

Can you pray for me? Wouldn't that be such a wonderful thing if we can do that? And together as a community, yeah, we'll experience God's grace. Experience his forgiveness, his restoration.

And walk with him closely. And thrive in our faith. Even in the difficulties here. That is what God wants. And that's such a privilege. Prayer has such power.

[29 : 53] Such a joy. Let's be doing that together. Amen. Amen. Amen.