

Longing for Restoration

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[0 : 00] Well, our passage this evening is James chapter 5. You might like to put a finger in James chapter 5. You'll find that on page 1013 in the Blue Bibles. But before that, we're going to read from 1 Kings chapter 17 and 18.

That's page 299. I'm just going to read the introductory verse in chapter 17 and then we'll be into chapter 18.

17.1 Now, Elijah the Tishbite of Tishbe in Gilead said to Ahab, who's the king of Israel, As the Lord, the God of Israel lives, before whom I stand, there shall be neither dew nor rain these years except by my word.

Turn over, please, to chapter 18 and verse 20. There's a long story in between. We'll deal with some of that a little later on. But the climax of the story is an encounter between Elijah the prophet and the prophets of Baal.

The worship of Baal is something that King Ahab introduced into Israel. And they have a big head-to-head on Mount Carmel. And we'll pick the story up at verse 20.

[1 : 32] Ahab sent to all the people of Israel and gathered the prophets together at Mount Carmel. And Elijah came near to all the people and said, How long will you go limping between two different opinions?

If the Lord is God, follow him. But if Baal, then follow him. And the people did not answer him a word. Then Elijah said to the people, I, even I only, am left a prophet of the Lord.

But Baal's prophets are 450 men. Let two bulls be given to us. And let them choose one bull for themselves. And cut it in pieces and lay it on the wood.

But put no fire to it. And I will prepare the other bull. And lay it on the wood. And put no fire to it. And you call upon the name of your God. And I will call upon the name of the Lord.

And the God who answers by fire, He is God. And all the people answered, It's well spoken. Then Elijah said to the prophets of Baal, Choose for yourselves one bull.

[2 : 31] And prepare it first. For you are many. And call upon the name of your God. But put no fire to it. And they took the bull that was given them. And they prepared it. And called upon the name of Baal from morning until noon.

Saying, O Baal, answer us. But there was no voice. And no one answered. And they limped around the altar that they made. And at noon Elijah mocked them.

Saying, Cry aloud. No, for he is a God. Either he's musing. Or he's relieving himself. Or he's on a journey. Or perhaps he's asleep and must be wakened. And they cried aloud.

And cut themselves after their custom with swords and lances. Until the blood gushed out upon them. And as midday passed. They raved on until the time of the offering of the oblation. But there was no voice.

No one answered. No one paid attention. Then Elijah said to all the people. Come near to me. And all the people came near to him.

[3 : 27] And he repaired the altar of the Lord that had been thrown down. He took twelve stones according to the number of the tribes of the sons of Jacob. To whom the word of the Lord came saying, Israel shall be your name.

And with the stones he built an altar in the name of the Lord. And he made a trench about the altar as great as would contain two seers of seed. And he put the wood in order and cut the bull in pieces and laid it on the wood.

And he said, fill four jars with water and pour it on the burnt offering and on the wood. And he said, do it a second time. And they did it a second time.

And he said, do it a third time. And they did it a third time. And the water ran round the altar and filled the trench also with water. And at the time of the offering of the oblation, Elijah the prophet came near and said, O Lord God of Abraham, Isaac and Israel, let it be known this day that you are God in Israel.

And that I'm your servant. And I've done all these things at your word. Answer me, O Lord, answer me. That this people may know that you, O Lord, are God.

[4 : 36] And that you have turned their hearts back. Then the fire of the Lord fell and consumed the burnt offering. And the wood and the stones and the dust and licked up the water that was in the trench.

And when all the people saw it, they fell on their faces and said, The Lord, he is God. The Lord, he is God. And Elijah said to them, seize the prophets of Baal.

Let not one of them escape. And they seized them. And Elijah brought them down to the brook Kishon and slaughtered them there. And Elijah said to Ahab, go up, eat and drink, for there's a sound of the rushing of rain.

So Ahab went up to eat and to drink. And Elijah went up to the top of Mount Carmel. And he bowed himself down on the earth and put his face between his knees. And he said to his servant, go up now, look towards the sea.

And he went up and looked and said, there's nothing. And he said, go again, seven times. And at the seventh time, he said, behold, a little cloud, like a man's hand, is rising from the sea.

[5 : 36] And he said, go up, say to Ahab, prepare your chariot and go down, lest the rain stop you. And in a little while, when the heavens grew black with clouds and wind, and there was a great rain, and Ahab rode and went to Jezreel.

And the hand of the Lord was on Elijah. And he gathered up his garments and ran before Ahab to the entrance of Jezreel. Now, over to James chapter 5. Verse 13.

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.

And the prayer of faith will save the one who's sick, and the Lord will raise him up. And if he's committed sins, he'll 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.

[6 : 57] 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, if anyone among you wanders from the truth, and someone brings him back, let him know that whoever brings back a sinner from his wanderer will save his soul from death and will cover a multitude of sins.

This is the word of the Lord, and we praise him for it. Please turn in your Bibles to James chapter 5. Now, we've come to the end of this letter, and to perhaps the best-known passage in the letter. Best known because it's a difficult passage.

It's a passage that causes real difficulty and genuine pain for a range of different people in different situations. It's a passage surrounded with anxieties.

Why? Well, basically, because it seems in a fairly unqualified way to promise physical healing to the Christian who is ill and prays to be healed.

[8 : 12] The heart of it is verse 15. The prayer of faith will save the sick. The Lord will raise him up.

Now, it is possible that the word saved here implies being saved on the last day. And it is possible that the being raised up refers to being raised up on the last day.

Because the word here translated save is often used both of eternal salvation and of physical healing. However, in verse 16, where it says, Pray for one another that you may be healed.

The word for healing here means physical healing, the kind of stuff you go to the doctor for. It seems then that this passage is talking about being made physically well in the present age if you pray.

And that opens the door to a whole stack of questions and some real difficulties. Why, for example, why do we need the elders to come and pray for the sick?

[9 : 17] Are they special? Do some people have better access to God than others? Can't the sick person pray for themselves? Can't their friends and relatives pray? Why anoint them with oil?

Does that matter? What kind of oil? What kind of anointing? Does that matter? What's the link with sins and confession in verse 15? Are we supposed to view our sicknesses as being linked with our particular sins?

If so, how and when? How sick do I need to be before I call the elders? Does this apply only to big sicknesses or to little ones as well?

Are some just not worth bothering the elders with? And so on and so on and so on. The questions spill out. Perhaps biggest of all is verse 15. The prayer of faith will save the sick.

Now, of course, there are many sincere believers who've prayed themselves and had their friends pray and had their church leaders pray, and they have not got better, but they've got worse and died.

[10:29] So what becomes of this promise in verse 15? The prayer of faith will save the sick. Why is the sick not healed? Now, no real believer is comfortable laying the blame for lack of healing at God's door because God always keeps his promises.

So the failure of healing must lie elsewhere. Perhaps the prayer wasn't a proper prayer of faith.

Maybe the sick person didn't have enough faith for themselves. Yet many sick people have been very confident that God would and could heal them, and they haven't been healed.

Maybe the elders didn't have enough faith. Maybe the problem is theirs. Maybe there was a failure to confess sins. And in such circumstances, often people rummage around in their past lives looking for the unconfessed sin, the one thing that acts as a blockage to God working.

You see, if it can't be God's fault, the blame must lie with us if people are not healed. Verse 15 is a great trial to many people.

It seems such an unqualified promise. Get the guys in to pray, you'll get better. But of course, what that can do is add layers of additional guilt to somebody's illness because their faith hasn't been adequate for the moment.

[11:50] Or sometimes people just pretend that in fact they have got better when actually there's been no change in their illness at all. There are many examples of that. Now, these problems are fairly obvious with a few moments thought.

And if you've ever had to deal with someone who's been told that James 5.15 means that you'll get better if you have proper faith, you'll know just how devastating it can be when that doesn't happen. The problems in making sense of this verse are obvious and painfully difficult. But let me say there are other problems too. Here's one. Why does James leave a bit about healing to the end of his letter?

He would have thought that was quite an important subject. Why leave it to last? Another question. What on earth has this got to do with the rest of the letter?

Now, of course, if you view this letter as a rather random collection of useful practical sayings for Christians in any circumstance, then I suppose it's not a surprise to find another rather random bit at the end.

[12:55] But I've been suggesting to you over the last few weeks that this letter is a good deal more joined up than that. So what's this bit doing here at the end? Let me raise another question.

Look at verse 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.

Then he prayed again. And heaven gave rain and the earth bore its fruit. Question. Why does James use this example from the life of Elijah to illustrate the power of prayer for healing?

Keep a finger in James 5. I do want a finger in James 5 because in a few moments we want a rapid flip back to James 5. So keep a finger in James 5. And let's turn to 1 Kings 17.

The prayer that James mentions from Elijah's life is a prayer not about healing, but about rain. Elijah is introduced for the first time in 17.1.

[14:09] Elijah the Tishbite of Tishbe in Gilead said to Ahab, As the Lord, the God of Israel lives before whom I stand, there shall be neither dew nor rain these years except by my word.

Now we're not told here about his prayer that it wouldn't rain. Here we're told about his words, presumably to the nation of Israel and to the king, that it's not going to rain anymore.

Why is it not going to rain? Well, because the kings of Israel have been dreadfully disobedient to God, especially King Ahab, who with his wife Jezebel, the dangerous daughter of the king of Sidon, has introduced the worship of the god Baal to the nation of Israel.

And God's judgment comes on them through drought. The rain does not return in the story until the very end of chapter 18 after the confrontation on Mount Carmel.

Interestingly, we're not told in chapter 18 that Elijah prays for rain either. He does pray, but not for rain. We'll look at his prayer in a moment.

[15:18] Now, here's the biggest surprise. If you wanted an example from the life of Elijah about a prayer of faith which would heal the sick, you would never choose this one.

Why? Well, because there's a far better one. Look at chapter 17, verse 17. Elijah is in Zarephath staying in the house of a widow, and the widow's son grows ill and he dies.

And Elijah cries out to God, 17:21, O Lord my God, let this child's life come into him again.

And the Lord listened to the voice of Elijah, and the life of the child came into him again, and he revived. Now, here's the puzzle. Right next door to one another, we have two stories.

One, an incident with rain that doesn't even mention Elijah praying for rain. The other, a prayer for healing that involves the dead coming back to life.

[16:23] If you were trying to illustrate prayer for healing, which one would you choose? It's a no-brainer, isn't it? You'd choose the widow's son. It's obvious. Why choose rain when you've got such another good one?

So why on earth does James choose the Mount Carmel prayer, not the healing of the widow's son prayer? Isn't that a surprising thing? Now, with that surprise firmly in mind, let's look at the example he does choose.

By chapter 18, verse 2, there is a severe famine in Samaria. That's the capital of Israel, because the rain has not been raining for a long time.

Elijah is told to go and show himself to Ahab the king, and that encounter leads to another one between Elijah and the prophets of Baal and Mount Carmel. The confrontation on Mount Carmel involves, well, a test of strength, really.

Kind of, if this is not too crass a way to put it, divine arm wrestling. Who's going to win? Two altars are set up. Two sacrifices are made.

[17:32] And the challenge is that the God who really is God needs to light the sacrificial fire. And that is a challenge that Baal ought to be right at home with. For he is the God of storm and rain and fertility.

You might expect him to be able to deliver a lightning bolt or something like that. He's playing on home turf. But Baal cannot deliver.

Nothing happens despite the frantic entreaties of his prophets. And then we get to Elijah's bit of the story. Listen to the words that Elijah speaks. And if you've been with us so far in James, see if it rings any bells for you.

Look at chapter 18, verse 20. Ahab sent to all the people of Israel and gathered the prophets together at Mount Carmel.

And Elijah came near to all the people and said, How long will you go limping between two different opinions? If the Lord is God, follow him.

[18:35] If Baal, then follow him. Ring any bells? Limping between two opinions? Divided loyalty? Two minds?

Ring any bells? That's what James has been talking about all the way through his letter from beginning to end. The double-minded thing. Let's look further on in the episode. Let's look at verse 36.

Here's the prayer. The prayer that isn't a prayer for healing or for rain. Verse 36. At the time of the offering of the oblation, Elijah the prophet came near and said, O Lord, God of Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, let it be known this day that you are God in Israel, and that I'm your servant, and that I've done all these things at your word.

Answer me, O Lord, answer me, that this people may know that you, O Lord, are God, and that you have turned their hearts back.

Now, back to James chapter 5, verse 19. My brothers, if anyone among you wanders from the truth and someone brings him back, 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.

[20:04] Elijah's prayer is a prayer that the people of Israel would be brought back from being double-minded about God by God.

And James, at the end of his letter, is talking about precisely the same thing. The letter has been about double-mindedness. It closes with a note of bringing people back, and the example that's used is Elijah on Mount Carmel, and the bringing back to God prayer.

Two minds bringing back from wandering. That's what James has been about, and that's why the rain example is used from the life of Elijah, rather than the healing example.

So let me suggest that far from being a random, bolted-on bit about healing, we are still on the same theme that's been dominating this letter all the way through, the theme of double-mindedness, and the need to be brought back to single-minded loyalty to God.

So, question, what is this section doing here then? Well, all the way through this letter, we've come across the issue of whether this is a general letter, written to all Christians everywhere, warning about the possibility of double-mindedness, or whether this is a particular letter, written to a group of Christians behaving badly towards one another, warning them about the urgent need for repentance, because they are behaving in a double-minded way.

[21 : 36] I have leaned towards the latter, and the single passage that most pushes me in this direction is this one. If verse 15, the prayer of faith will save the sick, if that's written to a general Christian readership, it seems to cause huge problems.

Basically, why isn't this prayer answered them quite a lot of the time? But if it's written to a group of Christians behaving particularly badly to one another, another possibility emerges that fits this passage, I think, very well indeed.

In general, the Bible does not encourage us to draw big solid lines between our illnesses and our own particular sins.

Illness, in general, is part of the fallen human condition in general. We are not encouraged by the Scriptures to say, when we meet our friend who's fallen ill, Aha!

Fallen ill, have you? You must have been specially sinful last week. But what if sometimes, when God's people behave particularly badly to one another, sometimes, he visits them in judgment, and they fall ill.

[23 : 02] Now, there is another situation in the New Testament which is definitely like that. And I'd like to turn you, please, to 1 Corinthians chapter 11, page 958.

The situation here is the church family meal. 1 Corinthians chapter 11. The church family meal at which the Lord's death is being remembered with bread and wine.

What happens at the meal? Well, verse 27, we're told that people eat the bread and drink the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner.

And the nature of that unworthiness has already been spelled out by Paul. At the meal, some people arrive early, probably the more wealthy, and they eat all the food.

Verse 21. In eating, each one goes ahead with his own meal. One goes hungry, another gets drunk. When the others arrive later, probably the more lowly, those poorer or slaves who have to work longer, there's no food left for them.

[24 : 06] Some eat loads, some get none. Now, 1 Corinthians is a letter in which some of the Christians, particularly, probably, some of the richer Christians, treat others of the Christians with real disdain and carelessness and malice and unkindness.

1 Corinthians, like James, is a letter full of Christians behaving badly towards one another, especially, as in James, in how they speak to one another.

There are significant socioeconomic factors driving that in 1 Corinthians, as there are in James. Remember the rich, poor thing that's been running through James. Paul says, verse 29, anyone who eats and drinks without discerning the body, which in context means anyone who eats and drinks with that kind of disdain for his brothers, eats and drinks judgment on himself.

That is why many of you are weak and ill and some have died. Says Paul, God is judging you for the dreadful way you've behaved towards one another.

Now, for what it's worth, I think that is precisely what's happening in James chapter 5. Just as judgment fell on Israel in Ahab's time in the form of drought, just as judgment fell on the Corinthian church in the form of sickness and even death of a number of people, so among the people that James is writing to, the same appears to be happening.

[25 : 51] And let me say that so much of James chapter 5 fits with that kind of picture. Much better, I think, than if this is a general letter.

Why, verse 16, why do they need to confess their sins to one another? Surely, God is the one whose sins need to be confessed to. Why do they need to confess to one another? Well, because they've sinned grossly against one another. Confession needs to be made. Why do the elders need to be involved? Well, my guess is that some here have behaved so badly, have so put themselves at odds with the congregation as a whole, that there are things that need to be put right between the individual and the whole church, not just one or two. And also, they need to be received back by the whole church when they turn around from that. Why, verse 14, why anointing with oil? Well, perhaps because in the Bible, anointing with oil is often associated with being consecrated to God's service. It's a symbol of wholehearted dedication, of single-minded devotion to God. [27 : 05] In Elijah's day, judgment fell in the form of drought because of the people's double-mindedness, no rain, severe famine.

God used Elijah's prayers to bring the people back. When the people returned to God, judgment was mercifully lifted and the rain came again. Among James' hearers, judgment has fallen because of their mistreatment of one another. And he encourages prayer and action that will bring people back, verse 19. And in that situation, when people do repent and are brought back, the prayer of faith will heal the sick. The judgment will be lifted. I think that's what this passage is doing here. It's carrying on the same theme. He anticipates that judgment is already falling. He's already alluded to that, I think, back in verse 9. [28 : 07] Don't grumble against one another, brothers, so that you may not be judged. Behold, the judge is standing at the door. The judge has his handle on the door handle. His hand on the door handle.

Maybe the door has begun to open. Now, let me draw some conclusions from this. We're at the end of this letter. Let me say three or four things in conclusion in this passage and on the letter. You cannot read this letter and be in any doubt at all that God takes it very seriously indeed when his people behave towards one another with pride, indifference, and malice. And, 1 Corinthians 11, this is not the only place in the New Testament where God visits that kind of behavior with sickness.

We behave disgracefully to one another at our peril. The Lord knows. We set ourselves against God when we do that. Two, it is not the norm that we are to draw clear causal lines between our sickness and our particular sins. [29 : 32] I wonder if you remember the episode of Jesus healing the man born blind. His disciples asked him, was it this man's sin or his parents that caused him to be like this? Jesus says, no, neither of those.

We looked last week at the example of Job. His friends do the same as Jesus' disciples did. They say, Job, the reason all this bad stuff is happening to you must be that you're a secret sinner of a serious sort.

But of course that isn't the case with Job and it's not generally the case in life. However, it is possible for God, the sovereign Lord, to visit the sinful with temporal judgments such as sickness, especially when his people behave maliciously towards one another. For myself, I know now that having read this letter, if I fall unexpectedly and seriously ill, I will now ask myself the question, have I been involved in gross misbehavior towards my brothers and sisters?

Is there something big and obvious in my relationship with my brothers and sisters that I need to repent of? We're not talking about minor things here. The sins in this letter are pretty gross really. [30 : 51] It's a question worth asking. And if there is, then confession of such sins against one another and repentance towards God and one another is something to be sought urgently.

I think I would be particularly careful if I and a bunch of people who all have something in common with me fall ill at once. Now, it could just be that we shared the same curry. But both in James and one Corinthians, there seem to be significant numbers of people unwell. And there has been big congregational disruption here. It's a question worth asking. Third, I'll say this as gently as I can. It is not God's will that we all be delivered of all of our sicknesses in this present age.

It is not God's will. If it were God's will, we would all be delivered, but we are not. And in the end, unless the Lord Jesus comes first, every single one of us in the room will get sick and die.

[32 : 11] verse 15 is not, I think, a blanket promise for everyone who is ill. It's a promise to a particular situation, I think, to people facing a particular judgment.

Now, this is perhaps not quite such a big thing amongst evangelicals in this age as it was back in the 1980s when I was converted. In the 1980s when I was converted, I met people regularly who told me that if you were a proper Christian, you need never be ill.

It is, of course, the right thing to pray in every circumstance about everything. And it is absolutely fine to pray for healing. But, God has given us no blanket promise that he will heal all our sicknesses in this age.

And so, if we pray and he doesn't, it is not his failure of faithfulness, neither is it your failure of faith that you have not been made well.

And I hope that will be an encouragement to you when sickness hits you, for it will, and you'll have to deal with it. And it's right to pray, and it's fine to be prayed to made well, but God has not promised absolutely that you will be.

[33 : 38] You see, it is the return of the Lord Jesus that will change all that. And of course, that's what this passage very much looks forward to. Verse 7, be patient therefore, brothers, until the coming of the Lord.

Until he returns, we all have to deal with sickness and death, and they'll get us in the end. Don't panic when they get you. It's not a failure of your faith or God's promises.

Fourth, this is a letter written, verse 19, to bring people back from wondering from the truth. Not doctrinally, I think, but behaviorally.

That's how they've wondered. This is a letter in which God, James has asserted, chapter 4, that God's grace is greater than human rebelliousness.

God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble. How fitting then, at the end of this letter, that there should be an example from the life of Elijah of God graciously bringing his people back from double mindedness.

[34 : 53] How fitting that this should be used to illustrate the efficacy of praying for people to be brought back from double mindedness.

How fitting in a letter driven by the triumph of God's grace that the final section should be about how if people turn away from their sinfulness, even gross sinfulness, even as judgment is falling on them, they can be restored, put right with God, and received back into fellowship with those they've wronged.

How fitting that James should not be content merely that people stop behaving badly towards one another, but concerned that those who've been wronged develop what you might call gospel guts, a deep down desire to welcome back those who have wronged them when they repent.

That's the closing note of the letter, it's a wonderfully gracious note, verse 19 and 20. Brothers, if any among you wanders from the truth and someone brings him back, what a wonderful thing that is, he says.

You see, God himself is precisely like that. How has the grace of God operated towards us? Well, God has searched for those who are hostile to him.

[36 : 28] He moves towards those who run away from him. He desires the fellowship of those who have hated him. Jesus comes into the world and is called the friend of sinners.

And he has brought them back at great, the greatest personal cost. God seeks for God haters and brings them back to him.

Is that not a wonderful thing? A wonderful personal characteristic. And he loves it when his people, even if they've been wounded by one another, want the ones who have wounded them to be brought back.

James wants his readers to be like God. Not just to abandon hostilities, but to seek the bringing back of those who've wondered. That is to say, those who've behaved disgracefully towards them personally.

God wants a Godward life in his children, and he wants the whole of life, its ups and its downs, a life that whatever its circumstances is turned towards God.

[37 : 40] Look at verse 13. You're suffering? Well, pray. You're cheerful? Praise God for it. You're sick? We'll get things straightened out.

Whatever your circumstance, whatever your situation, towards God is the right way to turn. A Godward life in every circumstance.

And that brings us full circle right back to James chapter 1 verse 2. I wonder if you remember that. It seems like a long time ago, doesn't it? Can't it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds?

Suffering? Pray. Cheerful? Praise God. Under judgment and needing to repent? Well, repent. All of those things, happy times, sad times, under judgment and needing to repent times, all of those things come from the hand of a most generous and gracious Father who longs for his people to be fully devoted to him and longs for them to be right with one another.

Let's pray. Let's just have a moment or two to respond to God, to what he has said to us this evening from this passage.

[39 : 13] Let's pray together. my brothers, if anyone among you wanders from the truth and someone brings him back, 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.

Gracious Heavenly Father, we pray that you would help us in our own prayers and in our desires. So often we want to justify our wrong actions rather than turning away from them.

And so often when wronged, we want to hit back rather than wanting those who hurt to be brought back. Please would you be at work in us through the gospel of your son.

thank you that you have demonstrated such extraordinarily undeserved love toward us, running after those who are running away, wanting fellowship with those who hated you, bringing back those who crucified your son through his death.

we pray that you would give us your spirit and be at work in us and transform us into the likeness of your son.

[40 : 57] We pray for single mindedness in our response to you. We pray that you would make us especially careful for one another. Deliver us, please, from the kind of speech that builds ourself up and tears others down.

Help us rather to use all you've so generously given to us for the good of those that you've put us in fellowship with. Hear us, we pray, in Jesus' name.

Amen.