

Repeat Prescription for Spiritual Health amid Trials & Suffering: ii. Keep Looking Up in Prayer

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[0 : 00] Well, let's turn now to our readings for this evening, and we're in the latter parts of the letter of James, so please turn in your Bibles.

If you don't have a Bible with you, we have plenty of visitor Bibles scattered around, so do please grab a Bible. The welcome team have Bibles ready to hand out, so do please take a Bible if you need. And we're in James chapter 5, page 1013 in the visitor Bible.

And we're reading there, we're going to begin at verse 12 and read through to the end of chapter 5. So James 5 and verse 12. But above all, my brothers, do not swear either by heaven or by earth or by any other oath, but let your yes be yes, and your no be no.

So that you may not fall under condemnation. Is anyone among you suffering? Let him pray. Is anyone cheerful?

[1 : 11] 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 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, 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 a soul from death and will cover a multitude of sins.

Amen. May God bless his word to us tonight. Amen. Well, do turn with me, if you would, to James and chapter five.

[2 : 31] And let's hope my voice will hold out. I was already feeling rather crooky yesterday. I made the mistake of spending the afternoon at Murrayfield Stadium. I thought I was safe and we were going to get thrashed, but as it was, I enjoyed the game far, far more than my good friend Edward Lobb.

But there we are. I wouldn't want to mention that in his presence. Well, James chapter five. And our passage this evening may very well be the best known part of James's letter to many.

But also, I think, perhaps the most misunderstood and misused. And I think it shows us very clearly the danger of plucking verses in the Bible out of context and imposing a meaning on them that is, in fact, quite foreign to the author's purpose.

And by that, I mean taking, for example, verses 14 and 15 here as a general template for dealing with all sickness in the Christian church. But if we do that, of course, we land ourselves with very big problems.

Because verse 15 is unequivocal. It promises certain healing. And if we take that as physical healing of all sickness, then I think we have to admit, don't we, that it is not what we or many other Christians experience.

[4 : 00] So we have to ask what the problem is then. Is it inadequate faith? And if so, on whose part? A person seeking healing or the leaders who are praying? Or is it perhaps a failure in procedure?

Is it not the right kind of oil? The right kind of anointing? And so on it goes. And that difference between experience and what is written here seems to make some people feel then that God no

longer does heal.

And therefore, this is something that was only ever for a time. The time of the apostles. And we should never pray for these things now or expect these things. I don't think the New Testament teaches that.

Or, on the other hand, others, to avoid disappointment for themselves or for others, will perhaps try to convince themselves that they have been healed. When, in fact, they haven't. Or perhaps that they soon will be healed if they haven't been quite yet.

But as we know, that also very often ends with real disappointment, disillusion, even resentment against God. Other egregious uses of this passage are to justify, for example, the Roman Catholic Church's sacrament of extreme unction, where the claim is that a priest may absolve a dying person of their sin by anointing them with holy oil.

[5 : 32] But, of course, that's the very opposite of what is being viewed here, which is restoration, not death. It's also used, actually, to justify the role of priestly confession.

But, again, if you read this passage, the only confessing of sin being done is to one another in verse 16, not even to the elders and certainly not to any priests. They're not mentioned here at all, nor are they anywhere else in the New Testament.

But in the light of all that, we can be thankful, I think, that we come to this passage having been immersed in James' letter for many weeks. And we know what James' great concerns are.

We know what he's writing to these people about. His whole letter is a call to repentance, a call to spiritual restoration for churches that he knew and which he knew were wandering away very badly from the true Christian faith and from true Christian love, wandering into dangerous self-deception. He began, didn't he, in chapter 1, warning about the danger of the deception of a so-called faith, which is, in fact, just worthless religion. Because far from being visible in humble obedience to God and in love for God, manifested in love and care for God's people, it is, in fact, just indistinguishable, James says, from the behavior of the world around.

[6 : 50] In fact, it's even often worse. And the behavior of these churches, he's already shown us, is the very antithesis of the royal law of the household of God, where love for God, of course, is manifest, as he says in chapter 2, verse 8, in loving your neighbor as yourself.

No, but instead of that, they are full of worldly favoritism. Chapter 2. Of tongue-lashing and cursing one another. We saw that in chapter 3. Chapter 4 speaks about fighting and quarreling and slandering one another, haughtily condemning one another, whilst arrogantly chasing after the same ambitions in life and work as the godless world.

And these fractured relationships among one another in the church are betraying something far more serious. And the root problem, James says, is a deepening fracture in their relationship with God himself.

Their hearts are far from him. Or at least that's true of many of them. They doubt God's goodness. Chapter 1, verse 6. They blame him for leading themselves into temptations and into sin.

And as we saw last time in the first half of chapter 5, they're impatient with God, they're grumbling with one another, and they're trying to manipulate God through religious oaths.

[8 : 13] That's what verse 12 is speaking about. Trying to get God to change their own circumstances. Getting God to dance to their tune. And they desperately are in need of healing.

Healing in their relationships with God and with one another. They need to be turned from their divided hearts and turned back to wholehearted love for God, not just lip service.

And therefore, humble love for one another. True faith, faith like Abraham's, the friend of God, is shown in life. But they're showing themselves instead as friends of the world.

And therefore, enemies of God. That's true. They face trials of many times, as James says. As will all true Christians at times in their lives. But these trials, James says, are meant by God to produce steadfast faith.

The clear faith, the complete faith, the mature faith that leads to the crown of life. But instead, what they have done is they've allowed trials to become temptations that lead them away from God.

[9 : 15] That's what James warns them about in chapter 1. They've been lured by the sin in their own hearts. And the end of that road, he says, is death.

Separation from God. And James' whole aim in writing is to save them from that. It's to bring them back from that calamitous road that will end only in eternal loss. And as he comes to the end of his letter then, he issues this urgent call to prayer and to action.

To heed his warning. And to join him in trying to address the most important issue of all, which is the true healing of their relationship with God and with one another.

Look at verses 19 and 20 at the very end here. It sums up James' purpose. And he tells them what their urgent priority must be. Saving souls from death.

Covering the multitude of sins by doing what? Bringing back the wanderers. Those who have been badly deceived. Who are deceiving their hearts. Who are being false to the truth.

[10:21] False to the only true faith that will ever be able to save their souls. The word wandering that he uses there in verses 19 and 20. It's the same word he used all through chapter 1.

Translated there deceived. Deceiving. Wandering away in sin. The way that leads not to life and the crown of life, but the way that leads to death and utter disaster.

And that is the sickness, the chief sickness that James is concerned with all through the letter. And there is none more deadly. But there is a cure. He said back in chapter 4, verse 6, God gives grace. He gives more grace even than our sin. And his grace is sufficient to heal the sickest, the most divided heart. But you must respond, both individually and corporately.

Humble yourselves, he says, before the Lord, and he will exalt you. But not just in word. You have to do it in real, living, doing faith.

[11:26] Real, penitent faith. Visible. Tangible. In changed behavior. In changed attitudes to one another. A repudiation of all the thinking of the world round about.

Especially the wealth, the gain, the self-indulgence that is so corrupting. And we saw last time in verses 7 to 11 that James gives great encouragement. Keep looking forward with patience, he says.

Knowing what? Well, verse 11, God's purpose is gracious. It is compassionate. And we know that, don't we? Even better than the prophets of old. Those like Job.

Who were counted blessed by God because they did prevail. That's great encouragement, isn't there? But he also warns. The judge is standing at the door. So be careful.

Be careful lest you fall into judgment. Be careful lest you should be condemned. Those warnings there in verse 9 and in verse 12, they're not empty words, are they? They're real. People do wander away.

[12:30] You may be wandering away. But there is a way back. And we are to turn people back. That's what verses 19 and 20 here are urging. But we're to do that knowing that it is only God who can ever save a soul from sin and death.

But he does. And he will. In answer to his people's prayers. And so that is James' urgent call in these verses. Just as he began the letter in chapter 1 calling us to ask God who gives generously without reserve.

So here his repeat prescription at the end of the letter is exactly the same. Keep looking up to God in prayer. Sin is real, he's saying. But God is forgiving.

So come back to him. And bring others back to him. God will forgive. And God will restore. He will hear the prayer of faith.

He will save. Even from the deadliest sickness of sin. Now you can see in these verses the chief focus is on prayer. It's mentioned in every single verse.

[13:38] And sin is mentioned repeatedly in verse 15 and verse 16 and verses 19 and 20. And the chief need and the result is for a restoration of the faith that saves.

For a healing of the divided heart that only leads to condemnation and judgment. Back to a wholehearted trust in God which alone can save and will save from death and will cover a multitude of sins.

Now that's James' real concern here and all through the letter. Turning people back from sin to real faith by the true grace of God which can only be received in the empty hands of faith.

Can only be received by those who humble themselves before God and before one another. And that's why the chief command in the passage is there in verse 16. Look, therefore, confess your sins to one another.

Pray for one another. Well, to be people who keep ourselves and others from wandering and who restore one another from the wandering where we become weak where we've been lured by sin we need to be those people who are always looking up to God in prayer.

[14:49] We need to know that it's from God alone that every good and perfect gift comes including that of restoration and true healing. It only comes from above. So we need to understand

and heed what James teaches here about prayer about pervasive prayer about penitent prayer and about powerful prayer.

So look first at verse 13 where James' command for every eventuality in life is for pervasive prayer. all of life in trials and in triumph is to be lived, he says, in real and living relationship to God if we're going to be kept from dangerous wandering into self-deception into friendship with the world.

Now the heading in the Bibles there makes it less obvious but verse 13 is closely connected to verse 12 by way of contrast. In verse 12 James says above all don't make oaths don't try and manipulate God by the way of religious oaths to try and get God to dance to your tune to do things that you want Him to do changing your circumstances as you think best.

That's to do what what James warns against in chapter 1 verse 26 it's to allow your unbridled tongue to deceive you into worthless religion. No, trust God he says. Keep looking forward in faith trusting His promise eagerly longing for His coming and keep looking up humbly trusting God as your sovereign provider in everything.

Oaths like that you see expose unbelief in the heart that wants to manipulate God but prayer is quite different. Prayer expresses true faith it trusts God in all things at all times.

[16 : 35] So if anyone's suffering He says let Him pray. It's a repeat prescription of chapter 1 verse 5. Ask God who gives generously without reproach.

He gives the wisdom the strength that you need in times of trial to let steadfastness in trial work mature and complete faith in you. It's not prayer to remove suffering but it's prayer to remain steadfast in suffering and under trial so that you stand the test so that you will receive the crown of life.

It's prayer to live in line with what the Bible is telling us is the normal Christian life. It was very striking last week when I was in India hearing about very real trials very real suffering and persecution among many of the believers there many of the pastors there but their prayer was not Lord please take all these things away.

They were praying Lord help us to stand firm help us to not abandon our calling. That's what James is telling us to pray for here. I wonder if that is our prayer usually amid suffering.

But that's the prayer James envisages. We consider those blessed who remained steadfast he said. So if anyone is suffering let him pray that he may remain steadfast like the saints of old.

[18 : 03] And likewise he says pray if you're not currently suffering but if you're cheerful if you're encouraged is what the word means sing praise pray thankfully to God don't forget God in the good times.

If suffering makes us resent God well ease and comfort can make us easily forget God can't they? So Moses warned Israel about as they were about to enter the promised land the land of bounty do you remember?

When you eat and you're full take care lest you forget the Lord. It's so easy to do that isn't it? When life is good when business is good when our bank accounts are healthy it's so easy to have that presumptuous spirit that James flagged up at the end of chapter 4 which he said in fact was just arrogance planning and thinking we can do what we like.

No all good gifts come from where? From above from the father of lights he says in chapter 1 but a spirit of thankfulness will keep us God oriented so that such blessings won't harm us.

If God blesses you with material gains if you're constantly thanking him for it that'll help you won't it to steward it rightly. You'll be reminded that it came from God and that you're to use it for God you're to use it like God who gives generously to all without reproach.

[19 : 21] You won't be nearly as easily able to exploit it will you for yourself to expend it all on your own luxury on your own self-indulgence the very things that James condemns if you're singing and thankful to God for these things.

And similarly with every encouragement every joy in your life if you're constantly thanking God for your marriage for your children for your friends for the job that you love whatever it is in life that gives you cheer that gives you encouragement if you're constantly thanking God for them then these things won't easily become your idols will they?

They won't own you they won't define you because you'll remember they're the gift of God and that's how we'll be kept from wandering away from being captured by the deceitfulness of sin of worldly gain prayer in all the circumstances of life it means that we relate everything upwards to God in a glad acceptance of his will that is humbling ourselves before the Lord isn't it?

It's buying to his sovereignty even in suffering it's honoring his sufficiency even amid joy and gain and happiness through all the changing scenes of life in suffering and in joy the praises of my God shall still my heart and tongue employ is what we sang pervasive prayer a living real relationship with God that is the great preventative medicine for all spiritual ills that will stop our faith withering that will stop us wandering from the truth into the dangerous ways of the world and into that path that James says ends in sin and in death but alas as we've seen repeatedly through this letter the churches James writes to are in no position yet for mere preventative medicine are they he's unearthed the deep rooted pathology in their hearts many of their hearts already are dangerously divided he calls them in chapter 4 adulterous people they've embraced the world and made themselves enemies of God and the symptoms of that are very visible and audible and tangible in the grievously bad behavior that's going on between members of the church and their fellowship is not marked by peaceable gentle mercy and fruitfulness remember chapter 3 it's full of jealousy selfish ambition quarrels and fights and more there really is evidence of what he calls here in verse 20 a multitude of sins and so long before these

Christians are ready for mere preventative treatment there needs to be very penetrating and really very painful remedial treatment and James has already told them that their healing can only come from God himself but he's promised hasn't he that God does give grace more than sufficient grace but not to the proud only to the humble only to those who will submit themselves to God that's the only way he says to drive away the demonic influence that has been allowed to take hold humble yourselves before the Lord and he will exalt you he said in chapter 4 verse 10 and again you see at the close of the letter comes the same promise the Lord will save he will raise up he will bring healing but there's also the same command you must seek his grace the only way that it can be found through humble faith the humble faith that is expressed in penitent prayer and that's the clear focus in verses 14 to 16 where James turns from this general preventative for all spiritual ills to the very urgent and specific need that there is among these churches which was for deeply penitent prayer and what

[23 : 31] James is emphasizing is just what he's insisted all through the letter that you can't have right relationships with God vertically if we don't have right relationships horizontally with our brothers and sisters in Christ and so all of life must be lived in right relationship with one another if churches are going to be brought back from the kind of damaging weakness of worldly behavior which is manifest in all manner of ills both personally and corporately therefore he says in verse 16 which is the dominant imperative in the whole passage he's commanding them all confess your sins to one another and pray for one another that you may be healed and I said sin manifests in all manner of ills in a church fellowship and James has certainly shown that already in spade but I use that word ill deliberately in that ambiguous sense because we face that issue right here with what it means to be ill what it means to be sick in verses 14 and 15 what is this ill what is this sickness that

James is speaking about well the word in verse 14 means weak it's where we get our word asthenia weakness myasthenia muscle weakness and so on and it is often used in the gospels to describe physical sickness but it's also used there to mean spiritual weakness Jesus says to the disciples in Gethsemane remember when they aren't able to keep praying with him as he asked them to he said the spirit is willing but the flesh is weak asthenia in in Jude Jude Jude Jude Jude Jude in that great story of Samson, where Delilah is trying to work out what will destroy the strength of the mighty Samson and what will again make him weak.

In the prophets in the Old Testament, it's regularly used to mean spiritual weakness and wandering away rebelliously from God and from God's path of faith, stumbling in sinfulness.

My people have forgotten me. They make offerings to false gods. They make them stumble in their ways, weak in their ways. Jeremiah 18, verse 15, and many others like it.

And in the New Testament epistles, it's always translated, as far as I can see, as weak. Paul talks in Romans 14 about those who are weak in faith. Romans 5, he famously says that Christ died for us while we were still weak, sinners, enemies.

[26 : 08] That's the word in verse 14. In verse 15, the word translated sick in ESV is a different word. It means weary. The only other place in the New Testament that it's used is in Hebrews 12 and verse 3 where the apostle is urging believers not to grow weary or faint-hearted in their struggle against sin.

And I think Hebrews 12 is a very helpful cross-reference here because it's a very similar context about the painful disciplines that will yield eventually the peaceable fruit of righteousness in those

who have been trained by it, says the writer.

Very much in line with James' teaching here about the work of trials in our lives. And in Hebrews 12, verse 13, it urges, make straight paths for your feet so that what is lame may be healed.

And that's the same word for healing that's used here in verse 16 through confession and through prayer. If we focus on the healing outcome that's envisaged here in our verses in James, we need to ask what is the chief aim?

Well, verse 15, the prayer of faith will save the one who is sick or weary in the struggle against sin. Again, in the New Testament epistles, that word save always means to save spiritually, to save a soul.

[27 : 31] 1 Corinthians 9, verse 22, Paul famously says that in order to win people for Christ to the weak, to the sick, verse 14, same word, I have become weak, that I may win the weak, that by all means I may save some, win them.

He's talking about saving souls. It's true in the Gospels. It can sometimes be used for physical healings by Jesus. But even there, it's often very deliberately ambiguous because, of course, Christ's physical healings go hand in hand so often with His forgiveness for sins.

In Luke chapter 7, Jesus says to the sinful woman, your faith has saved you. Go in peace. There was nothing physically wrong with her that she was saved from. Later on in that chapter, He uses exactly the same expression to the woman with the bleeding who was physically suffering.

Your faith has saved you. And so in verse 15 here, the outcome of them being saved and raised up and forgiven is what's in view if sin is involved.

And it seems to echo what James has already enjoined in chapter 4, verse 10. For those who do humble themselves, humble yourself, and the Lord will exalt you, raise you up.

[28 : 49] And again, the word for healing in verse 16 suggests these things. It can mean physical healing, but it's very commonly used throughout the New Testament to mean spiritual healing.

Jesus Himself uses that word when He quotes from Isaiah 6 in Matthew 13, verse 15 about God healing His people's wayward hearts. It's the word Peter uses, quoting Isaiah chapter 53 in 1 Peter 2, verse 24, where He says, by His wounds you have been healed and returned to the shepherd and the overseer of your souls.

He's talking about salvation. And so in the context here, as the scholar Craig Blomberg says, it seems to refer to restored spiritual well-being due to confession and forgiveness.

So just as easily, and I think rather better, we could read these verses this way. Verse 14, Is anyone among you weak and wandering away? Well, 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 for consecration.

And the prayer of faith will save the one weary and the Lord will raise him up and if he's committed sins, he will be forgiven. Therefore, confess your sins to one another and pray for one another that you may be restored.

[30 : 12] That makes sense, I think, of the strong connection here with sin. Look at the flow of verses 15 and 16. It clearly connects whatever the weakness and sickness is with unconfessed sin and the need for confession, the need for forgiveness.

That's the context of the whole letter. It's very much the context here in chapter 5. James has repeatedly spoken, hasn't he, of God's judgment. He's warned those within the church to take care so that you may not be judged, verse 9.

For the judge is at the door. He's real. He's present. He will judge sin inside his church as well as outside. Make no mistake. And again, it's so clear, isn't it, from the final verses, 19 and 20.

Some are dangerously heading for that terrible end. They're in urgent need of saving, being brought back from disaster, restored to the fellowship of God and of his church.

Hence, verse 14, is any one of you like that? Well, come back. Seek restitution and restoration.

There is grace. There is healing, restoration, but only, only through truly penitent prayer, humble confession before the Lord.

[31 : 30] I think that makes sense of the role of the elders here. Why are they needed to pray and anoint? We're in verse 13, and the simple command is to pray for yourself. Well, if spiritual restoration to the church is in view, especially perhaps after serious sin and rupture, there needs to be a personal assurance and a public assurance that this is genuinely being sought and that it's being genuinely received.

And this physically enacts, doesn't it, a real humbling before the Lord. It's just as chapter 4, verse 10, enjoins. What is it that is able to save your soul?

What did James say in chapter 1, verse 21? Well, it's receiving meekly the Word of God that is able to save your soul. It's recognizing, he says there, that all your help comes down from above, from the Father of lights.

That's the faith that saves. Not the so-called faith that doesn't actually hear and do God's commands. No, the faith that receives and does.

So there is grace for forgiveness and restoration. There is more grace, James says in chapter 4, verse 6, but not for the proud, only for those who will submit to God, who will kneel before Him and receive with meekness the commanding Word of God over his life.

[32 : 58] And what could demonstrate that genuine posture of the heart more visibly both personally to the penitent sinner and publicly to the church than kneeling humbly before those who represent the teaching office of the ministry of God's Word and being prayed over from above and anointed from above with the oil of consecration set apart from God acknowledging that it is the words of God's grace received from Him from above alone into empty hands that can bring healing from our sins.

So this posture of penitence, it both symbolizes genuine repentance but it also signifies and gives assurance of real restoration. And that's necessary, isn't it?

Perhaps especially to those who have been sinned against or those who find it hard to accept that kind of restoration. No, if you humble yourself, says James, God will.

raise you up. And all must know this for themselves and for others' sake. He will be forgiven even if he's committed severe sins.

And that surely must be what James' chief concern is here. As one scholar says, these verses coming at the conclusion of all James has addressed to his readers' lives describe a healing of their relationships with God and with each other.

[34 : 28] Now that does not exclude, however, that the weakness, the weariness resulting from their relational sin may include actual physical or mental illness.

It doesn't exclude that. Paul says very plainly, doesn't he, to the Corinthian church that precisely because of the same kind of shameful behavior to one another, some of them were weak, same word as here, but also ill, bodily, and some have died.

They had brought judgment on themselves from the judge who was standing at the door and was shocked and horrified at the treatment in his church.

And that may very well have been so here among some of them so that for them not only is such penitence seeking the Lord urgently needed to save their souls, but it may also have been the only hope for their bodies also.

And that means that I think we can't dismiss that sobering thought today either. Because God still takes bitterness and jealousy and fighting and so on in his church very seriously indeed.

[35 : 38] So should we. And we all need that command there in verse 16, don't we? Humble, penitent hearts that confess sin when we wrong a brother or sister.

And prayer for one another, especially when we've been sinned against. That's the only way, says James, to prevent the consequences of sin destroying you yourself and doing great damage also to others.

And that's the New Testament's constant command. We must need it a lot. It's in so many places. Forgiving one another as Christ forgave you, Paul says to the Ephesians and to the Colossians. It's the only way, he says, for there to be harmony in the church. And we know that, don't we? It's when we pray for one another that our hearts are open to one another.

It's as we pray for someone who's wronged us that forgiving love can flow out of our hearts because our hearts are opened and not closed. And that's the only way to healing ruptured relationships.

[36 : 51] And it's the only way to healing a ruptured relationship with God Himself. What did Jesus say? Mark 11, verse 25. Wherever you stand praying, forgive if you have anything against anyone so that, so that your Father in Heaven may forgive your trespasses.

That's a very challenging word, isn't it? Is, is that kind of change and restoration really ever possible in real life here on planet Earth where we live in the realities of our experience?

whether it's in individual relationships or whether it's in badly fractured church relationships? I suspect we very often think, well, no, things have just gone too far for that.

It's impossible. Certainly, having got through these chapters in James' letter, we might think that these churches, these churches are irretrievably damaged.

Hard not to think that. But James' answer is no, not so. not so then and not so today. And you see, to encourage them in prayer, both for the specific examples that he alludes to in verses 14 and 15 and also the general ongoing command in verse 16 for all, he gives a wonderful encouragement, doesn't he, about the power that is unleashed simply by humble believing prayer.

[38 : 26] Look at the end of verse 16 through to verse 18 because his focus here is on powerful prayer. The message is clear, isn't it? Restoration, even from deep and dire sin, especially relational sin, is not impossible with God.

He gives grace. And if we ask him humbly, he will heal and he will raise up and he will restore fruitfulness to our lives and to our churches.

the prayer of a righteous person has great power when it is working or perhaps better when it's exercised.

God's gracious power is able to do more than we can even ask or even imagine. That's what Paul says. But we must ask in faith.

Remember chapter 1 verse 5? We must ask in wholehearted trust. That's a righteous person's prayer. It's just a humble, penitent person responding in trusting faith to what God in his word has told us to pray for.

[39 : 34] It's a person who's received with meekness the word of God to confess their sins and to pray for others as verse 16 commands.

That's all the prayer of faith is. It's not some super prayer of spiritual Hercules. It's just humble, believing prayer for what God tells us to pray for. That's the point of his example of Elijah who was a man he says with a nature just like ours.

And he prayed for the forgiveness and for the spiritual restoration of a whole nation to turn back to God and they did. The real focus was on prayer for miraculous healing here.

I think Elisha would have been a much better example for James to choose, don't you? Elisha healed the Shunammite woman's son by the way. He was involved in healing Naaman.

Remember the Syrian general. He also saved a whole gaggle of prophets when there was death in the pot. So Elisha was a man deeply involved with physical healing all the time. But now James points us to Elijah.

[40 : 39] Elijah, the archetypal messenger of God who brings spiritual restoration. That's why at the very end of the Old Testament do you remember Malachi promises that before the Messiah comes there would be another Elijah and what would he do?

Turn the hearts of God's people in repentance lest they meet judgment to come. And of course Jesus said that is what John the Baptist did and who he was as he called people to repent and turn back to God through Jesus.

And that's why Elijah is brought in here. Elijah did actually heal as well. He healed the widow woman's son but interestingly James doesn't even mention that. All the focus is on what?

On Elijah's prayer for drought as a judgment of God on Israel's king Ahab and on the people for their desertion of the Lord under the evil influence of Ahab and his queen Jezebel.

Remember who led them away to worship the Baals. And as a result of Elijah's prayer the turning back of God's people in repentance and God restoring the land to wonderful fruitfulness.

[41 : 49] Notice by the way the language of fruitfulness that James is speaking of here. He's already talked hasn't he about a spiritual fruit of righteousness in chapter 3 verse 18. He's talked in chapter 5 verse 7 about the precious fruit that we're to keep our eyes fixed on of the harvest that's to come.

You can read the story of Elijah I think you should later on in 1st Kings 17 and 18 but you may know the story after three years of drought and judgment Elijah goes and confronts the king Ahab and says to him you have abandoned the commandments of the Lord and you followed the Baals and in turn Ahab assembles all the prophets of Baal and all the people on Mount Carmel.

It's pretty daunting for Elijah but Elijah boldly challenges them do you remember? He says to them how long will you go limping between these two different opinions?

If the Lord is God follow him but if Baal then follow him. You see exactly the divided heart that James is talking about all through this letter between the ways of the world and the true wholehearted devotion to the Lord.

And you know what happens is a great showdown amidst all the drama of the daylight bedlam on the mountain. The total failure of their God to hear or answer at all.

[43 : 10] And then Elijah remember builds an altar with stones that can't be burnt. And then on top of it he drenches it all with water just for extra emphasis. And then with his simple prayer which in fact is the only prayer that he actually speaks or we hear throughout the whole of the account the absolutely impossible happens to these double-minded rebellious people.

This man Elijah a man just like us he prays and he says this Lord let it be known that you are God in Israel answer me O Lord that this people may know that you Lord are God and that you have turned their hearts back again and the fire of God fell and all the people fell on their faces and they said the Lord he is God the Lord he is God not Baal but the Lord and with that repentance worked by the sheer grace and mercy of God but unleashed by the prayer of a man just like us with that repentance restoration came didn't it to the whole land and Elijah said to Ahab you better get going because I can hear the sound of rushing rain he was so sure wasn't he of God's compassion and God's mercy that even though there wasn't yet a cloud on the horizon he is predicting an enormous flood and then remember he gets his servant to go up and down the mountain seven times until at last he sees a tiny hand the size of a man's cloud the size of a man's hand on the horizon he says to Ahab you better get going there's flooding coming the wonderful story but you see James points it not not because

Elijah is unique or because he had sort of a manner of prayer that was so fervent and wonderful that we have to copy it's actually a very bad translation there in verse 17 it simply says praying he prayed just means he just prayed but he did so in response trusting what God had told him to pray for the turning of his people back from double minded idolatry to single minded faith and you see James is saying Elijah's God is our God and we know his purpose verse 11 is compassion and mercy so pray pray for God to restore pray for yourselves to be restored God can do it God wants to do it he will do it in answer to humble penitent prayer because that prayer has mighty power when it's exercised in faith isn't that a wonderful encouragement when we pray for God to turn people's hearts back to him it is powerful and effective and when people respond God saves he restores he brings healing to hearts and to homes the whole churches even where relationships have been soured and and strained and even severed it seems beyond repair what an encouragement to simply pray but as always in the gospel there's a warning too isn't there we must respond God is real Elijah's God James is God our God he's real he's standing at the door and he takes sin in his church very seriously and so he warns us if we lapse into weariness and into weakness in our battle against sin if we drift if we wander from the truth he warns us in that road lies disaster a multitude of sin and spiritual death so he warns us so as we finish two things for us to ponder first we have to accept that weakness and sickness may signify deeper problems of a very serious spiritual nature within a church not always the bible is very clear not all sickness not even most sickness is a direct result of sin but some is

I mentioned first Corinthians 11 clearly was there is a result of relational sin Christians behaving very badly towards one another so certainly if there is widespread sickness in a church we need to ask ourselves questions don't we and we need to ask questions even I think in our own lives if that is the case because sickness may be God's megaphone it may be the thing that forces us to examine our own hearts very deeply and if we have unconfessed sin then it's time isn't it to confess our sins in penitent prayer to seek God's forgiveness and if that is the case we may well need the help of other trusted mature and older Christians to help us we may need the help of church leaders and we can ask for it but secondly sin with or without physical sickness especially relational sin between believers it always matters it matters to God and arrogance and quarreling and bitter words within the church the Lord hates and he will chastise and therefore verse 16 the answer is the same always for all of us confess your sins to one another pray for one another so that you may be healed there is a way back he's saying always we have seen the purpose of the Lord verse 11 how he is compassionate and merciful he gives more grace from above but we receive it from above on our knees in humble trusting faith through penitent prayer that's powerful prayer prayer for ourselves prayer for our brothers and sisters it has great power says James as it's working therefore confess your sins and pray for one another that you may be healed amen well let's pray almighty

[50 : 13] God who seest that we have no power to help ourselves keep us both outwardly in our bodies and inwardly in our souls that we may be defended from all adversities which may happen to

the body and from all evil thoughts which may assault and hurt the soul through Jesus Christ our Lord amen God