

James 5:13-20 Prayer & Suffering

The theme of James is *Proven Character Through Testing*.

A brief overview:

The right attitude toward trials – 1:2-12

Understand rewards – 1:12, 2:12-13, 3:1, 5:7-9

The right attitude toward God – 1:13-18

The right behavior during trials:

Quick to hear – 1:21-2:26

Slow to speak – 3:1-18

Slow to anger – 4:1-5:6

The reasons for trials:

Life in a fallen world – 5:7-9

A life of faithfulness – 5:10

Spiritual warfare – 5:11-12

Un-confessed sin – 5:13-20

Verse 13

Verse 12 warned about an improper response to trials and suffering. This verse gives a proper response – prayer. For those experiencing blessing their response should be praise!

Verse 14

This section deals with a final reason for suffering. Sometimes physical sickness is the result of un-confessed sin in the life of a believer.

Is anyone among you sick – The rest of this passage gives a strong hint that this sickness is connected to a spiritual condition. Note the parallel passages in 1 Corinthians 11:29-32 and 1 John 5:16-17.

Let him call for the elders – Notice that it is the one who is sick who calls the elders to pray for them. There is no hint here of some person standing up and encouraging people to come forth and be healed.

Let them pray over him – Elders are charged with keeping spiritual watch over the members of their flock (Hebrews 13:17). This is another hint that there is a spiritual issue involved.

Anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord - Oil was valued in that day for its therapeutic qualities (Luke 10:34). There are also two words for anointing in the New Testament. One, *chriein*, speaks of ceremonial anointing and is only used five times. The other, *aleiphein*, which is used here, refers to medicinal anointing and could be literally translated ‘to rub with oil’. Pray is the verb while anointing is a participle. The Greek text implies that the anointing takes place first, then prayer. The anointing is a secondary action and may speak of the elders providing necessary medical help or it may be symbolic of dependence on the Lord for healing. The emphasis of the paragon is prayer!

Verse 15

The prayer offered in faith – This is not emphasizing the amount of our faith. The focus is the person and promise of God. It also must be in conformity with God’s will (1 John 5:14-15).

Will restore the one who is sick – The word restore is *sozo*, the same word used in verse 20 that is translated *save*.

If he has committed sins, they will be forgiven him – 1 John 1:9 is clearly in view here. No human has the power to forgive sins. We can forgive people for sinning against us (Ephesians 4:32) but only God can forgive the sin.

Verse 16

Confess your sins (faults) to one another – In context, this seems to apply to the attitude these believers were expressing against each other (2:1, 4, 4:1, 11, 16-17, 5:9). This is not a call for all believers to publicly confess all their sins. As a general rule, never confess sin beyond the circle of that sin’s influence. Sometimes public sin calls for public confession but generally confession is only to those we have wronged (Matthew 5:23-24 with 18:15-17).

That you may be healed – This can refer to physical healing and/or spiritual restoration.

The effective prayer of a righteous man... - Literally, ‘a spiritually energetic prayer’. Only a righteous person is in position to avail himself of the power of God.

Verses 17-18 The example of Elijah

Elijah as a man with a nature like ours – Elijah was not a spiritual superman whose prayer life could never be reproduced. He is an example to us of the power of God that is available through prayer.

He prayed earnestly – Literally, ‘with prayer he prayed’. This is a reference to the spiritually energetic prayer of verse 16.

That it might not rain... - The story is in 1 Kings 17-18. In Deuteronomy 11:13-17 God warns that He will shut up the heavens if Israel worships idols. In 1 Kings 16:32-33 we see Ahab provoking God because of idol worship. The effective prayer of Elijah was based soundly on Scripture! The prayer of Elijah turned the nation of Israel from the error of idol worship back to God.

Verses 19-20 The application

My brethren if any among you strays – Clearly a picture of many of the believers that James is addressing.

The error of his way – Literally ‘*path*’. Note Jeremiah 7:23 & Deuteronomy 3:33.

Save his soul from death – Physical death as in verse 15.

Cover a multitude of sins – The restored sinner’s sins are now out of sight because of the pardon he has received. Through the involvement of a brother he is now both physically well and spiritually clean!