

A Spiritual Perspective

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[0 : 00] It would be great if you could keep your Bibles open at James chapter 5. As great a read as 1 Kings 18 is, it's a terrific read, isn't it?

But we're going to be finishing off our James series in a moment, but how about I pray for us? Let's pray. Heavenly Father, we do thank you for your word. We thank you that it speaks truths, truths that encourage us and equip us for a lifetime of service to you.

And Father, we pray, though, that you would help us to understand those truths, and particularly this passage in James tonight, so that we might truly grasp what it is that you would have us understand.

We pray these things in Jesus' name. Amen. Well, it was about 4 a.m. when my wife Michelle went into labour with our third child. We rang some good friends who had kindly agreed to come over and look after the other two children while we rushed to hospital.

When we arrived at the hospital, Michelle's labour pains were pretty close together, which means baby is coming any moment. So I pulled into the car park and parked the car, but I realised I hadn't quite parked between the lines of the car park.

[1 : 14] And so as Michelle was about to bolt out of the car, well, bolt, waddle out of the car, with the baby on the way, I said, hang on a second, just let me straighten up the car. Michelle gave me one of those looks as if to say, you're kidding, it's 4 a.m. in the morning, there's no other cars around.

But she didn't say anything, she graciously closed the door and I straightened up the car. And our daughter Megan was born just half an hour later. Now upon reflection, perhaps I'd missed the bigger picture and forgotten what was more important at the time.

Perhaps my approach to parking needed a better perspective. Well, as we come to the final passage in James tonight, we'll hear James again encourage his readers to approach life with a spiritual perspective, with God's wisdom.

Now it has been some time since we've looked at James here at 6 p.m. We had to stop because of the Food for Soul festival and then we went to Genesis. But James is very much about living out the word, living with heavenly wisdom or living with a spiritual perspective.

They're all different ways of saying the same thing. And he wants them to do this particularly when facing suffering. You see, James starts and ends his letter with the topic of suffering.

[2 : 35] So if you just flip back to chapter 1 verse 2, chapter 1 verse 2, remember that? He says, chapter 1 verse 2, consider it pure joy, my brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that testing of your faith develops perseverance and so on.

And so it's all about suffering in chapter 1. And then here, back in chapter 5, he's talking about suffering again. So chapter 5 verse 10, Brothers, as an example of patience in the face of suffering, take the prophets who spoke in the name of the Lord and so on.

You see, this issue of suffering kind of bookends the letter, if you like. But James wants his readers not merely to listen to the word, but to do what it says.

That's his big theme, to live it out, to practice a spiritual perspective, even in times of suffering. And so as James begins to conclude, he urges his readers to have this spiritual perspective in all of life, which brings us to point 1 in verse 13.

He says, Is any one of you in trouble or literally suffering? He should pray. Is anyone happy? Let him sing songs of praise. Here, James seems to cover all of life, doesn't he?

[3 : 52] He moves from one end of life with trouble and suffering to the other end of life, happiness or cheerfulness. And no matter what situation we're in, we're to have a spiritual perspective.

If we are suffering or in trouble, we are to pray to God, he says. Or if we're at the other end, if we're happy and cheerful, then we sing praises to God, he says. We are to endure or enjoy life with God in mind, you see.

But it is sometimes easier said than done, isn't it? When it comes to trouble, we might turn to prayer quick enough. But often when we pray, it is hard to hand it entirely over to God, to trust him completely when he seems to be taking his sweet time.

Sometimes we can be like James' readers who are double-minded. And we saw this in chapter 1. And so just turn again there, back to chapter 1, verse 5. He says, If any of you lacks wisdom, he should ask God who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to him.

But when he asks, he must believe and not doubt, because he who doubts is like a wave of the sea blown and tossed by the wind. That man should not think he will receive anything from the Lord.

[5 : 11] He is a double-minded man, unstable in all he does. You see, when we pray or ask God, that's what prayer is, by the way, asking God, we are to do so trusting in him completely.

Whether it's for wisdom, as it is in chapter 1, or whether it's for help, when we're in trouble, as in here in chapter 5. But if we pray about our trouble and then doubt that God is working for our good, or let this trouble consume us, as such that we doubt God's goodness and look for help elsewhere, then we are being double-minded.

Now, I'm not suggesting that we are, you know, if we are in trouble, then we should do nothing about it. No, no, we should seek whatever help we can, you know, whether it's medical help in the doctors or whatever it is, because God often provides through very ordinary means.

But we are to depend on God in prayer. That is to trust him completely throughout the whole process. And can I say, I've been encouraged by people particularly at HTD who have not been double-minded, as some are here tonight.

They have faced and are facing terrible times of trouble, yet have completely trusted in God throughout. I won't name names, but people here have encouraged me and many others through your steadfast trust and prayerful dependence.

[6 : 36] And in the end, even if our suffering does not go away, we know that our situation is still not hopeless. In fact, even if our trouble ends in death, it is still never without hope.

I've mentioned to you before, I think, our friends Richard and Bronwyn Chin. Richard is the National Director of AFES here in Australia. And many of you who are involved with AFES work and university work will know that his wife Bronwyn passed away last year at Easter time.

He was a family in trouble, in suffering. And they prayerfully, though, depended on God, such that even when she passed, Richard wrote these words on the next slide.

And so on the next slide, he wrote, We are grateful that today is Easter Sunday, the day we remember that Jesus rose from the dead to rule with all authority and conquer death, the last enemy.

And so through broken hearts, we cry hallelujah. We will grieve for a while yet, but never ever as people without real hope. Thank you so much for praying for us.

[7 : 43] See, here are people who are not having a pity party as though there is no plan in life or hope beyond death. No, no, they continue to trust God throughout the horrible ordeal. They still grieved and, in fact, are still grieving and rightly so, but not as a people without hope. And so we are to view life even when we are in trouble from a spiritual perspective, you see.

We are to pray to God and trust in him who is at work even in our pain, who can work to help us and who will bring us from this life into the next.

Of course, we may not be in danger of doubting God through times of trouble. Perhaps our danger is on the other side. You know, during times of happiness, we forget God.

Well, James says, in times of happiness, don't forget God. Sing praises to him instead. James has already reminded us in chapter 1, verse 17, that every good and perfect gift is from above, from God the Father.

[8 : 50] And so, while we are to trust in God in times of trouble, we are also to praise God in times of joy, for everything good comes from him. See what James is saying?

We are to either endure or enjoy life with God in mind. That is, we are to have a spiritual perspective in all of life, both ends and everything in between.

But we are also to have a spiritual perspective when it comes to sickness in particular, which is point 2 on your outlines and verse 14. He says, Is any one of you sick?

He should call the elders of the church to pray over him and anoint him with oil in the name of the Lord. And the prayer offered in faith will make the sick person well. The Lord will raise him up. If he has sinned, he will be forgiven.

Therefore, confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous man is powerful and effective. Now, these verses are often used to support the Roman Catholic practice of the last rites.

[9 : 53] I don't know if you're familiar with that. It's where they assume a person is about to die and so the family calls the priest in. They pray over the person and anoint them with oil so that they will go to heaven.

But notice in James, the assumption is that the sick person will get better, not die. So it's not kind of affirming the Roman Catholic practice. On the other hand, these verses are also used to support the Pentecostal practice of someone with the gift of healing to come to the house and perform a miracle.

Something like you might see on early morning TV with Benny Hinn. But notice again, they're calling for the elders rather than someone with the gift of healing. And there is an emphasis on forgiveness here, not just healing.

So while there is nothing wrong with having a reformed healing service where we pray for people, it's not really what James is talking about here. So what is James talking about here?

Well, I think he is talking about a serious sickness that is due to a specific sin. Now we need to remember that all suffering and sickness is caused by sin in general.

[11 : 02] That is, because we live in a sinful and fallen world, there will be disasters and sickness and persecution and suffering. But the situation here seems to be a serious sickness caused by a particular sin.

You see, on the next slide, verse 15 literally says this, the prayer of faith will save the one who is sick. Now the word save could mean, you know, physically save, but every other time James uses this word save, he means spiritually saved, the way we would talk about it.

So verse 15, you have this physically sick person being spiritually saved, you see. So I take it the situation we have here is some sort of suffering, physical suffering, because of a spiritual sin.

We see this elsewhere in the Bible. The classic example is 1 Corinthians 11. So on the next slide, the Corinthians were sinning when it came to the Lord's Supper, so Paul writes this, he says, for anyone who eats and drinks without discerning the body, eats and drinks judgment on himself.

That is why many of you are weak and ill and some have died. Here, some of the Corinthians were sick and had actually died because of their sin in mistreating one another when it came to the Lord's Supper.

[12 : 29] sin is serious. And boy, were some of James' readers sinful. I mean, just look back at chapter 4, verse 1. In your Bibles, chapter 4, verse 1, it says, what causes fights and quarrels among you?

Don't they come from your desires that battle within you? You want something, but don't get it. And so you kill and covet, but you cannot have what you want. You quarrel and fight. You do not have because you do not ask God.

And when you do ask, you do not receive because you ask with wrong motives, that you may spend what you get on your pleasures. You adulterous people, don't you know that friendship with the world is hatred towards God?

So some of James' readers weren't particularly godly, were they? And so James is saying back here in chapter 5, friends, look at your sickness from a spiritual perspective. Could it be you are sick because of your sin?

See verse 14 again? Is anyone sick? Because given your behaviour, friends, I can imagine that some of you might be. If so, let them call from the elders, says James of the church, to pray over them in the name of the Lord.

[13 : 38] Anoint them with oil. Oil was just a symbol of consecration, that the person was sorry for sin and turning back to God. And so verse 15, the prayer offered in faith will save the sick person.

the Lord will raise them up, and if they have sinned, they will be forgiven. You see, James is not talking about sickness in general, but particular sickness as judgment for sin, for a particular sin.

And this is actually backed up by the Elijah example he gives in verses 17 and 18. You see verse 17 there? Elijah was a man just like us. He prayed earnestly that it would not rain, and it did not rain on the land for three and a half years.

again he prayed, and the heavens gave rain, and the earth produced its crops. Now at first glance, it appears to suggest that with prayer we can do anything, even make it stop raining.

But again, we need to remember the context of Elijah, which is why we had that first reading. You see, the physical drought was actually judgment on the people for their spiritual sin.

[14 : 51] we heard it, as I said, from that first reading, where the people of Israel were wavering between two gods. They were being double-minded like James' readers. Some were following Baal, some were following the Lord.

And so on the next slide, remember this is what Elijah said. He says, how long will you waver between two opinions? If the Lord is God, follow him, but if Baal is God, follow him.

See, they were being double-minded, just like James' readers were. And it was because of their double-mindedness that this drought came on the land. But then they have this big, you know, the big barbecue off between Elijah and the prophets of Baal.

And so on the next slide, we read, when all the people saw what had happened, you know, that Elijah won with ease, you notice that the fire licked up the offering, the stones, the soil.

It's clear. When all the people saw that, they fell prostrate and cried, the Lord, he is God, the Lord, he is God. And it's at that point, when they repent, that Elijah prays and God sends the rain.

[16 : 02] You see, the physical drought was due to a spiritual sin. And so when the people repent, that's when the rain comes. In fact, the Jews would have known this because they would have known what God said in 1 Kings chapter 8, a few chapters earlier.

And so again, this is what Solomon prays at the temple. He says, when the heavens are shut up and there is no rain, why? Because your people have sinned against you. And when they pray toward this place, the temple, and confess your name and turn from their sin because you have afflicted them, then hear from heaven and forgive the sin of your servants, your people Israel.

Teach them the right way to live and send rain on the land. You see, that's what's happening in 1 Kings 18 with Elijah.

Physical judgment because of a spiritual sin. And that's why James chooses this example because that's what's happening in his congregation, among his readers who are being double minded.

If James wanted to talk about the power of prayer for everything, then he would have chosen a different Elijah story. One chapter earlier, 1 Kings 17, Elijah prays for a boy who had died and immediately the boys raised to life.

[17 : 20] Now, if I wanted to talk about the power of prayer to heal every physical ailment, I would have chosen that story. But James doesn't choose that story because he's talking about a specific physical judgment for a specific sin.

That's what's in view here in chapter 5, and that's the context in which James makes that famous statement in verse 16, the prayer of a righteous man is powerful and effective. You see, the effective prayer is the prayer for forgiveness, which brings healing caused by sin.

It's a prayer to save sinners who repent rather than to heal every type of sickness in general. Of course, we are to pray for those who are sick. Don't get me wrong. It is right and good to do that.

And God can and has answered those prayers. Indeed, there are people at our church who can attest to that. But God does not always answer those prayers with a yes, does he?

But the prayer he does always answer with a yes are the prayers for forgiveness, the prayers offered in faith, the prayers of the righteous who trust God for forgiveness.

[18 : 28] These prayers are always powerful and effective for those who repent, you see. I remember I was teaching at a Christian school and one of my colleagues was watching her own sister die of cancer.

And because it was a Christian school, we would meet together as a staff team in the morning and have some devotions together. And we were meeting one morning and she was praying and praying that God would heal her sister.

And one of the staff read this passage from James chapter 5. And then she kind of got quite upset. She said, well, maybe I'm not righteous enough because God is not answering my prayers.

My sister is not being healed. And she became very disillusioned because of this verse. In fact, she said, Andrew, you're thinking you're going to Bible college next year? Maybe you're more righteous than me.

You pray. But you see, her sister was sick because of, like us, she lived in a fallen world. It was not because of a specific sin.

[19 : 30] Prayer is always powerful and effective because the God we pray to is powerful and effective. But God will answer no or not yet or yes to those prayers for general sickness.

But when it comes to asking for forgiveness, then God will always say yes. That's why James says in verse 16 they are to confess their sins to each other. And not necessarily every last detail, but certainly if they have fought and quarreled, like in chapter 4, and so are sick because of God's judgment, because of their sin, they are to confess or repent to one another so they can pray for God's forgiveness.

And that prayer is always powerful and effective for healing. Now I realise that for some of us this makes prayer seem like it's less powerful, less effective.

I mean, if we can always be, if we can only be guaranteed of a yes answer if it's about forgiveness and not guaranteed of a yes answer for sickness in general, then maybe prayer is less effective than we thought.

That is how we often think. But if we think like that, then we are not looking at prayer from a spiritual perspective. You see, which is the greater thing for God to do?

[20 : 45] To heal the physically sick or to forgive the spiritually sinful? I mean, which one costs God more? God made the world so he can fix a relatively little thing like sickness in someone.

But to heal us of the real disease called sin? Guess what that cost him? His only son. So which do you think God would see as the greater thing to do?

To heal sickness or to forgive sin? Which would the angels rejoice over more? The sick person given health or the sinner given forgiveness? You see, we think when we pray for the sick person to be made well, we are asking more of God than when we pray for forgiveness.

But it's actually the other way around. To ask God for forgiveness, it costs God so much more to give it. It's the greater request. And the great news is he always answers yes to that prayer.

Of course, because he always says yes to that prayer for forgiveness and only sometimes to the prayer of healing in general, we forget how powerful and effective that prayer of forgiveness is.

[22 : 02] And we take it for granted because God always says yes. But it is the greatest prayer. It costs God more. And so when a sick person is healed, we ought to rejoice.

It's a great answer to prayer. But when a sinner who repents is forgiven, well then we ought to rejoice all the more. For that is an extraordinary answer to prayer. For it's the more costly request.

We ought to have a spiritual perspective when it comes to sickness. And so if we are sick, then we need to ask ourselves, could this be because of my sin? Could it be God trying to get me to take sin more seriously?

But we also need to remember that more often than not, in fact, most of the time, our sickness is not because of a particular sin. We have some friends who, when they were growing up, whenever they hurt themselves or tripped over a rock or something, their mother would say, oh, well, you must have sinned, deserve that.

Very unhelpful. That's not what James is saying here. Most of the time, it's just because we live in a fallen world. That's why we suffer. But occasionally, our suffering may be the result of a specific sin in our lives.

[23 : 19] Usually it's not, but occasionally it may be. And so when we do suffer, it's worth examining ourselves and see if there is an unrepentant sin in our lives, if there's something we need to change and ask for forgiveness for.

And that prayer is powerful and effective. If we have sinned in a way that has caused sickness, then God will forgive us and heal us of that sickness, James says. But just to be clear, more often than not, our sickness is a result of living in a fallen world.

world. The question, of course, is how do we know if our sickness is due to our particular sin or if it's just part of living in a fallen world? Well, if you see a sin in your life that you refuse to repent of and you're sick, then repent of it.

And if you get better, then, yep, it was sickness because of that sin. But if you don't, then it's probably not. There's no other way to tell. It's all in retrospect. But as I say, I've said this twice already, but I want to make you hear it a third time.

Most of the time, our sickness is the result of living in a fallen world. So we are to still have a spiritual perspective that James has already given us. Do you remember chapter 5 verse 7? He says, Be patient then, brothers and sisters, until the Lord's coming.

[24 : 37] See how the farmer waits for the land to yield its valuable crop and how patient he is for the autumn and spring rains? You too be patient and stand firm because the Lord's coming is near. Don't grumble against each other, brothers and sisters, or you will be judged.

The judge is standing at the door. And brothers and sisters, as an example of patience in the face of suffering, take the prophets who spoke in the name of the Lord. As you know, we consider blessed those who have persevered.

You've heard of Job's perseverance and have seen what the Lord finally brought about. The Lord is full of compassion and mercy. Keep persevering, in other words.

Well, the last two verses in chapter 5, 19 and 20 support this idea that the underlying issue here is sin and forgiveness. Because in these last two verses, James wants his readers to have a spiritual perspective towards those who wander away.

So point 3, verse 19. My brothers, if one of you should wander from the truth and someone should bring him back, remember this, whoever turns a sinner from the error of his way will save him from death and cover over a multitude of sins.

[25 : 51] Notice again, the issue is saving people from sin and death. That is, we're to have a spiritual perspective when it comes to one another even, especially those who wander from the truth.

Because to wander from the truth of Jesus is to wander away from eternal life. Eternity is at stake, you see. And so James wants his readers to know that to bring a person back to the truth of the gospel is to save them from hell and a multitude of sins.

For God always answers yes to a humble prayer for forgiveness. And so I take it we had to work hard at asking after each other here at church. And if we don't see someone here at 6pm for a few weeks, give them a ring to see how they are going.

You will not only encourage them because you noticed, but if they are drifting away, then you may just save them from hell by bringing them back to Jesus. The stakes are high, says James.

And so we're to do what we can to love and encourage one another, help each other to keep trusting in Jesus, especially those who start to wander. There was a lady from my old church called Natasha, whose son I taught CRE to.

[27 : 05] They started coming to our church and she became a Christian. But she was a single mum and a young Christian and she started dating a non-Christian man without realising the dangers. And very quickly she stopped coming to church and this was around the time that Michelle and I moved to Melbourne.

But a friend's wife called Karen actually continued to ask after her, not in a pushy way, and sometimes they didn't talk about Christian things all the time, but she kept the friendship going, you see.

And every now and then invited her to the women's Bible study or to a Christmas service and so on. Point is, Karen kept caring for Natasha, who had wandered from the truth and was in danger of eternal death.

And as I understand it now, as a result of Karen's actions, Natasha is back with her two kids, growing in their relationship with Jesus at church. You see, God used Karen's willingness to save Natasha from hell and bring forgiveness.

And I rejoice in that. And that's what James is getting at here. Well, let me finish. In life, we can get distracted by all sorts of things and miss what matters most. I did it the morning.

[28 : 12] I was more concerned about parking between the lines than my wife about to give birth. But we had to make sure we don't miss the point in life about who matters most, that is God.

Instead, we had to have a spiritual perspective in life where we enjoy and endure with God in mind, either praying or praising. And we had to take sin seriously such that we even consider, well, maybe there's something in my life I need to repent of.

And we need to do what we can to help each other continue trusting in Jesus so that on that last day, we may all stand side by side and enjoy God's rest together forever.

Let's pray. Our gracious Heavenly Father, we do thank you. that prayer is powerful and effective because you, our Heavenly Father, are powerful and effective.

And Father, we thank you for the confidence we can have that every prayer for forgiveness meets with the answer yes because of the Lord Jesus and his death for us.

[29 : 18] Father, help us to rejoice in this fact. Help us to have a spiritual perspective in all of life, in times of suffering, times of joy. Help us to care for one another with a spiritual perspective, encouraging each other to keep following the Lord Jesus, that together we may stand on that last day enjoying and praising you forever.

We pray these things in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.