



We look this morning at a passage of Scripture that appears to be a number of disjointed thoughts, but I believe that the Lord has brought these together for us this morning. We'll be looking at the end of the book of James. Chapter 5:13-20.

Proverbs 15:29 says that “**He hears the prayer of the righteous,**” but I think we've all been through times of doubt, when it comes to prayer. All of us at one point or another wonder whether prayer works? Does

God hear us? If God's in control of all things and doing what He's doing, then what's the use of praying anyway? If we've prayed for healing and that healing didn't come, then why pray? Do our prayers feel like they're just hitting the ceiling and bouncing back? We doubt the effectiveness of prayer.



Many years ago I recall receiving a phone call from a troubled mother who asked me to pray for her family. I agreed to do that. And then she said, quoting James 5:16, “**For the prayer of a righteous man availeth much – the prayer of a righteous man is powerful and effective.**”

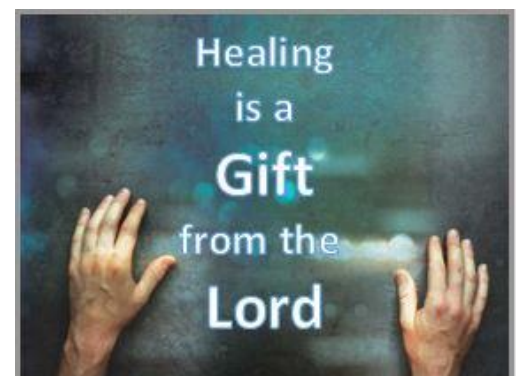
I was saddened by that response because as we talked about that, she had determined that her prayers were less effective than she thought mine would be. The flip side of that of course is, that if my prayers for her were not answered then I was not as righteous as she thought I should be. But somehow, she understood that some people are more righteous than others and that God answers the prayers of the most righteous.

Unfortunately, it's a misunderstanding of a verse like this, that causes us to believe that somehow through prayer we must have to reach a certain standard, and then when we do, then we'll have some controlling influence over God's response. And on the other hand, if we're not righteous enough then God won't hear our prayers.

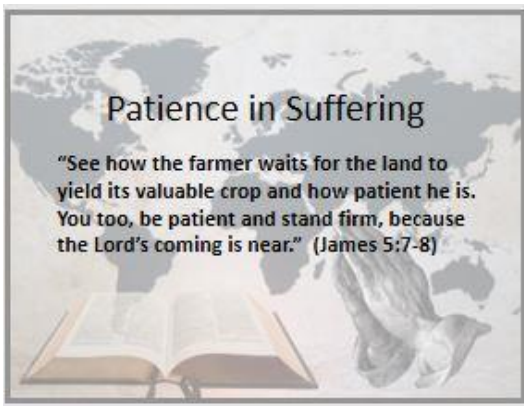
And we reason that, God is God; He is sovereign; He is the one in control, and we pray that His will might be done. We remember too that Jesus prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane was that God's will be done, and it was – resulting in great pain and suffering and death for Jesus.

And then we consider Paul – a faithful and faith filled Apostle of the Lord Jesus – who had a thorn in his side that caused him great suffering and he prayed earnestly on at least three different occasions, and the Lord did not remove it.

And so as we consider prayer we have our doubts. But I do need to state it right up front that **we cannot ascribe a lack of healing to lack of faith. Paul's faith was unquestionable, but he wasn't healed.** We need to readjust our thinking; healing then is not a right, but it's a gift; it's not a reward for one's level of righteousness. God does not owe healing to someone simply because he or she has a strong faith. God does not have to heal you, nor your loved one. Healing is a gift of grace from the hand of God – giving us what we don't deserve.



And so as we come back to our reading today that includes James 5:16 we must understand the context of these verses. James writes to the church around 64-65AD. And the church has been scattered and Christians are under great persecution. This was the time when Nero placed the blame for the great fires in Rome squarely at the feet of Christians and they were to be held to account. And so James sought to encourage Christians as they sought refuge, and as they sought to share their faith.



Prior to v.13-18 on prayer, James has just been calling the believers to be patient in the midst of the suffering that they're going through. **"See how the farmer waits for the land to yield its valuable crop and how patient he is. You too, be patient and stand firm, because the Lord's coming is near."** Are we suffering at the moment; are you suffering? Then v.8, **"Be patient then, until the Lord's coming."**

James also reminds them of Job, and his perseverance through his times of great suffering. Job didn't lose everything and then upon his prayers, two weeks later receive it all back, and then some. He persevered through his suffering; and no doubt following the Lord's double fold blessing, he grieved his losses, and would rather have not gone through what he did. But be like Job and stand firm – persevere.

And so, whilst you are going through these days of suffering, James says, pray! V.13, **"Is any one of you in trouble? He should pray. Is anyone happy? Let him sing songs of praise. Is any one of you sick? He should call the elders of the church to pray..."** Whether you're suffering or whether you're not – pray. Prayer is obviously the main idea in this passage because from verses 13 – 18, James mentions it in every verse. If you're suffering or hurting, sick or happy, then pray. In other words, whatever place you find yourself in, you ought to also be in prayer. **"Rejoice always, pray continually, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus."**

We tend to come to God in prayer more often when we're in trouble. We don't know what else to do, or where else to turn, so we turn to God. But treating God like this, or treating prayer like this, means that we then tend to see prayer as failing. But if we spent time in prayer continually, then we be praising God through all of the good times, and seeing His wonderful hand of provision and protection constantly. We then appreciate all the more how God is at work and answering our prayers. But if we only come to Him when we're in trouble, and He doesn't answer us the way we think He should, we don't see the value of prayer. And so James says, whatever your circumstances – pray!

James then gives some advice as how to pray when we're sick. V.14-15. **"Is anyone among you sick? Let them call the elders of the church to pray over them and anoint them with oil in the name of the Lord. And the prayer offered in faith will make the sick person well; the Lord will raise them up."** The Greek word for sick, meant "weak, or in a weakened state." So, if you're unwell, and not getting better after some time, then request that the Elders of your church come and pray over you, anointing you with oil.

Now, remember when Moses came back down Mt Sinai with the Law, God had clearly set out how the tabernacle was to be built. Once completed it was then to be consecrated. We read in Exodus 40, **"you shall take the anointing oil and anoint the tabernacle and all that is in it, and consecrate it and all its furniture, so that it may become holy. 10You shall also anoint the altar of burnt offering and all its utensils, and consecrate the altar, so that the altar may become most holy. 11You shall also anoint the basin and its stand, and consecrate it. 12Then you shall bring Aaron and his sons (they were the spiritual leaders of Israel) to the entrance of the tent of meeting and shall wash them with water 13and put on Aaron the holy garments. And you shall anoint him and consecrate him, that he may serve me as priest."**

This anointing went on to include everything that would be used in the tabernacle. Whenever someone or something is anointed with oil in the Bible, it is being set apart as something special; as holy; as the place where God is; it is the place where God is present and at work. And so as the Elders anoint the sick with oil, they are demonstrating that God is being invited into this space; into this situation and for Him to be glorified as a result. This is a place where God is being invited to be present and to work in power.



And both the prayer and the anointing with oil is to be done in the name of the Lord. It is the Lord who heals – not the Elders. It is faith in the Lord, to bring about healing, not the amount of faith of the ones praying. Because although James goes on to say that **“The prayer of a righteous man is powerful and effective,”** that doesn’t mean that the prayer of a righteous woman is not also powerful and effective, nor that a certain level of faith is required.

Again, Paul was a righteous man, and prayed earnestly. The thorn in his side is described using the same Greek word for a weakness. And yet he was not delivered of his infirmity. However God was glorified. For Paul went on to say that God had said to him, **“My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.”** Therefore (Paul said) **I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me. For the sake of Christ, then, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities. For when I am weak, then I am strong.”** (2 Cor 12:9-10) “For I know the power of God who strengthens me and sustains me.”



Just to clarify then, who is righteous? Although the Bible teaches that **“None is righteous, no, not one; that all have turned aside; together they have become worthless; no one does good, not even one.”** (Rom 3:10-12) The Bible also states that followers of Jesus **“have been declared righteous by faith, and have peace with God through the Lord Jesus Christ.”** (Rom 5:1) Through faith in Christ, we are declared righteous before our holy God. Therefore, your prayers are powerful and effective. Your prayers are necessary, for they invite God into your life and the life of those you pray for.

James then mentions Elijah. And we race over these verses interpreting them as an example of a righteous man before God whose prayer was indeed powerful. And that is true. But Elijah was a man just like you and I. He was born in sin and was no better than anyone else. He was "subject to like passions as we are"; both in body and soul. He became hungry, he got tired and sometimes he became very discouraged. He was afflicted, persecuted and at one point even asked God to kill him and take him on to Heaven because he couldn’t stand the pressures of life anymore.

In spite of all this, and notice that God didn’t answered his prayer to die, Elijah prayed believing for something that would not be of his own will, but rather he must have been led by the Holy Spirit to pray that God would withhold the rain. He prays for that which he nor the people of Israel would want – who in their right mind would pray for a drought? But the Lord had led His prophet to pray for drought because under King Ahab the nation had turned its back squarely away from God.

Did Elijah want to bring such suffering upon his people and more so the innocent? Probably not! But God had a higher purpose in mind – spiritual restoration.

You see, we always think that healing for the sick is the best result for them; it wasn’t for Paul. And James seems to be emphasising that point here too, that spiritual healing or restoration is more important than physical healing. He goes on to speak about forgiveness, and then about the turning of a back slidden brother back to the ways of the Lord.

“If they have sinned, they will be forgiven. Therefore confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed. (And there is a connection between spiritual and physical healing, but he then goes on to say..) **...if one of you should wander from the truth and someone should bring that person back, remember this: Whoever turns a sinner from the error of their way will save them from death and cover over a multitude of sins.”**

A common belief in the 1st century, when James was writing this letter, was that if you were sick, you had sinned. So, in order to be cured, your sins would have to be forgiven. And to be forgiven, one must confess their sins. However, not all illness is due to personal sin. But we all do need forgiveness.

So, before we wrap this passage up where we consider healing, forgiveness and turning someone back to the Lord, let us share in communion.

In the Lord's prayer, Jesus taught us to pray "deliver us from evil." Now, as we contemplate Jesus crucifixion, we would say that "evil" had its way with Jesus; inflicting incredible pain and suffering – even death. That God didn't answer Jesus prayer to be delivered from evil.

But... I believe that Jesus was delivered from evil. Ultimately He was raised up into glory. But consider also, that Jesus never came under the rule or reign of Satan; He never submitted to Satan's authority. Nobody took it from Him; He gave up His own life – He willingly went to the Cross. He lived in an evil world but was delivered from it.



And although we live in a sinful world, and we may also suffer the consequences of living within this evil world, we remain under the wings of our loving Saviour. He delivers us from evil; he is our refuge and strength. We may be weak with sickness and disease, but that doesn't mean we bow under Satan's reign for we know salvation through faith in Jesus Christ. Praise God for the death of our Saviour Jesus Christ. Praise God that He delivers us from evil.

Communion

So, let me try to tie together these thoughts concerning forgiveness, turning someone back to the Lord, healing, and the example of Elijah.

As you pray, being led by the Holy Spirit, it is the Lord's will that none should perish, and so, as you pray, have you noticed that you are often drawn to pray for the lost and for those who are at risk of wandering from the truth; wandering off in their faith journey? Your prayers are powerful and effective because they are inline with the will of God. Are you praying for your brothers and sisters; are you praying for your family; your neighbours; your work colleagues? Are you praying for spiritual restoration or spiritual awakening?

Hannah More wrote this, "If a surgeon were to put into the hand of a wounded patient the scalpel, how tenderly would he treat himself! How skin – deep would be the examination, how slight the incision! The patient would escape the pain, but the wound might prove fatal.

The surgeon therefore wisely uses his instruments himself. He goes deep perhaps, but not deeper than the case demands. The pain may be acute, but the life is preserved...God graciously does this for us Himself because otherwise He knows it would never be done."

And so as we pray for others and pray for ourselves, for some of them, and just maybe our self; God's answer might mean that we might be led into a period of drought; we may have an affliction that the Lord will not remove; we may have our own Garden of Gethsemane experience that although suffering may lay ahead, we too are at peace knowing that the Lord is about to accomplish His will, for His glory. May we know His presence strengthening and sustaining us.

You see, in prayer, we open the door of our hearts, giving Jesus access to our needs and ask Him to exercise His wisdom and power in dealing with them – to His glory. Our prayers are powerful and effective as we seek for the Lord's presence and power – His grace is sufficient! And ultimately, the Lord will raise up into eternity - all His righteous ones.

Amen – may you know God's blessing.

