

## Week 11: The Prayer of Faith

### The Place of the Passage

One of the main points James has been making throughout his letter has been that Christians should not just profess faith in God, but they should live lives that reflect the reality of their profession. In other words, they should live in a way that underscores their declaration that God really exists. [James 4:13–17](#), as well as [James 5](#) to this point, have been emphasizing this. In [James 5:13–20](#) now, James continues to make that point. One of the main ways we live in light of God’s reality is to pray to him. He hears prayer, and he answers it. Prayer is powerful.

### The Big Picture

Prayer is powerful because God hears and answers it.

### Reflection and Discussion

Read through the complete passage for this study, [James 5:13–20](#). Then write your own notes on the following questions. (For further background, see the ESV Study Bible, page 2399, available online at [www.esvbible.org](http://www.esvbible.org).)

Without yet getting hung up on some of the more difficult details in this passage, what do you think is the main point James is trying to make to his readers? How is he trying to encourage them?

How does the illustration about Elijah in [James 5:17–18](#) underline James’s main point? What specifically is James trying to get across when he says that Elijah was “a man with a nature like ours,” and then goes on to point out the powerful effects of his prayer? What is he aiming to tell us about prayers and the God who hears them?

[James 5:14–16](#) have been the occasion for much debate and disagreement among Christians. There are several things at issue. First of all, do you think James is there talking about a physically sick person, or a person who is spiritually sick or weak? (Hint: remember that James draws heavily on Jesus, and in Jesus’ teaching, the words used here for “sick” are always used of physical sickness!)

What do you think the oil signifies? Some have argued that it is an example of the sacrament of “extreme unction,” in which a person is anointed with oil just before death to absolve them of sin. Do you see anything in the text that would suggest that? (Hint: no!) Others have suggested that the use of the oil is medicinal. That’s possible, but do you see anything in the text that would lead you to think that the point is something else—that it is not primarily just medicinal? After all, why would medicine need to be applied by the elders in particular? In your answer consider the purpose of oil in the anointing of a king or priest. Read [Exodus 30:30](#). What does it mean to “consecrate” someone?

In [James 5:16](#), James connects sickness and sin. Can each and every sickness be traced back to a particular sin? (Hint: read [John 9:2–3](#).) Can sickness sometimes be traced back to a particular sin? (Hint: read [John 5:14](#) and [1 Cor. 11:29–30](#).) Given that, what do you think James is saying in [James 5:16](#)?

What does James mean by saying that “the prayer of faith will save the one who is sick?” What is the prayer of faith? Does he mean that if you simply have enough faith, God will always heal—and that if God doesn’t heal, it’s your fault for not having enough faith? Read [2 Corinthians 12:7–9](#). Was Paul’s prayer there not very faithful? Read [Philippians 2:25–27](#). Were Paul’s prayers for Epaphroditus not faithful enough until Epaphroditus was almost dead? Read [2 Timothy 4:20](#). Did Paul not pray hard enough and faithfully enough before he left Miletus?

Many people believe that James is talking about a special gift of faith—that is, a gift of extraordinary certainty that God gives to a person when he has already determined to heal someone. [First Corinthians 12:9](#) may be talking about a gift of faith like that. How does that understanding of a gift of faith according to God’s will differ from an understanding that would say James is commanding us to work up enough faith within ourselves so that people will be healed through our praying?

Another possibility is that James is simply picking up again on the teaching of Jesus, which he does often. In that case, he would simply be teaching about the power of praying with faith, just as Jesus often did. Read [Matthew 21:21–22](#). Those verses sound just as absolute as James’s saying that “the prayer of faith will save the one who is sick,” but they also assume the theological truth that God is sovereign—that is, he determines how he will answer our prayers. In other words, you will get what you ask for when you pray in faith if what you ask for is in line with God’s will. That is a truth stated explicitly in [1 John 5:14–15](#), but it underlies all the Bible’s teaching about prayer. If that’s the case, then what is James’s meaning when he says, “And the prayer of faith will save the one who is sick?”

Once we understand all the details, James’s point comes through loud and clear: prayer is powerful, and God wants to answer prayer! Do you pray with the understanding that God desires to answer our prayers, or do you pray with the expectation that he won’t answer them?

[James 5:19–20](#) forms a conclusion to the whole book of James. What does James exhort us as Christians to do for each other? What is the benefit of our caring for one another in that way?

Read through the following three sections on Gospel Glimpses, Whole-Bible Connections, and Theological Soundings. Then take time to reflect on the Personal Implications these sections may have for your walk with the Lord.

**Anoint:** In Scripture, to pour oil (usually olive oil) on someone or something to set the person or thing apart for a special purpose. Anointing was performed for the high priest, for tabernacle vessels, for kings, and for prophets. The Hebrew word Messiah and its Greek equivalent Christ both mean “Anointed One.”

### **Gospel Glimpses**

**FORGIVENESS.** “And if he has committed sins, he will be forgiven” ([James 5:15](#)). For those who have grown up in the church, such a promise may seem unremarkable. But consider what is being said by James here. Sins are not forgiven through some act of self-atoning. Sinners do not need to feel sorry intensely enough or berate themselves long enough. This goes against our natural intuitions. James says that all that needs to be done is open, honest, penitent confession. That is how sins are forgiven. In the world of the gospel, we are freed from the

masks we all tend to wear. We can be honest about who and what we truly are. For in Christ, we are fully and freely accepted.

**BRINGING BACK A SINNER.** The gospel is about saving sinners from their sin and the death that results from it. In the last sentence of his letter, James reminds us of that fundamental fact. Sin leads to death, and therefore a sinner who is brought to repentance is one who has saved his soul from death. James has been clear throughout the book: this is no small matter. It is a matter of life and death, judgment and salvation. Praise be to God, who through Jesus Christ makes a way for sinners to be brought back. The work of Christ is fully able to “cover a multitude of sins” ([James 5:20](#)).

### **Whole-Bible Connections**

**PRAYER.** “Let him pray” ([James 5:13](#)). Prayer lies at the heart of this closing passage of James and is a recurrent theme throughout the entire Bible. Adam and Eve walked with God in Eden and therefore had full access to God. Yet after the fall this fellowship broke, and Genesis tells of the time when “people began to call upon the name of the Lord,” not having previously done so ([Gen. 4:26](#)). The Old Testament goes on to describe the complex system of sacrifices and offerings that were God-given ways for prayerful sinners to be in contact with God once more. When Christ came, he too taught his disciples to pray ([Matt. 6:5–13](#)). And at the end of history, when Christ returns, once more full fellowship with God will be restored ([Rev. 21:1–4](#)). Our faith will become sight ([2 Cor. 5:7](#)).

**ELIJAH.** The story of Elijah’s prayer and the resulting drought is told in [1 Kings 17–18](#). The drought was a divine punishment on King Ahab and the people of Israel for their disobedience and idolatry. Elijah and Moses appeared with Jesus at the Transfiguration ([Mark 9:2–13](#)). Elijah represented the Prophets and Moses represented the Law, both of which Jesus brought to fulfillment. Indeed, Jesus is ultimately the prophet like Elijah who was to come and turn the hearts of God’s people back to God himself ([Mal. 4:5–6](#)).

### **Theological Soundings**

**THE POWER OF PRAYER.** The Bible is consistent in its teaching that prayer is powerful and effective. Ours is a God who hears the prayers of his people and who delights to answer them.

### **Personal Implications**

Take time to reflect on the implications of [James 5:13–20](#) for your own life today. Make note of the personal implications for your walk with the Lord in light of (1) the Gospel Glimpses, (2) the Whole-Bible Connections, (3) the Theological Soundings, and (4) this passage as a whole.

1. Gospel Glimpses
2. Whole-Bible Connections
3. Theological Soundings
4. [James 5:13–20](#)

**As You Finish This Unit . . .**

Take a moment now to ask for the Lord's blessing and help as you engage in this study of James. And take a moment also to look back through this unit of study, to reflect on a few key things that the Lord may be teaching you—and to take note of things to review again in the future.