

## **FAITH THAT WORKS** // Prayers that Matter

In the 1850s, an economic crisis roiled America, causing a lot of panic. The crisis was felt most acutely in New York City, which was our nation's economic center even then. Feeling the pressure all around him, a Christian businessman named Jeremiah Lanphier called together members of his church on Wednesdays, during lunch, just to pray. Lanphier was not a pastor, just an ordinary business guy. At the first gathering, only six people showed up, but they prayed for God to pour out his power on our country and for a fresh move of the Holy Spirit.

Six months later, that weekly prayer gathering had ballooned from six people to more than 10,000 gathering in locations all across Manhattan. Non-believers even showed up and many came to Christ. Within two years, over a million people in the United States had become followers of Christ out of this movement. It was one of our country's most significant spiritual awakenings, and it all happened because one ordinary, Jesus-loving businessman felt compelled to pray.

History would label what happened in the 1850's as "the Layman's Prayer Revival," and it illustrates a profound biblical truth: God's greatest movements have always come in response to normal people praying.

**James 5:13-20**, "Is anyone among you suffering? Let him pray. Is anyone cheerful? 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 his soul from death and will cover a multitude of sins."

There's a lot here. It sounds incredibly promising! Healing from sickness! Forgiveness of sin! Prayer that has results! Sign me up! But it also brings up a lot of questions. Is James guaranteeing healing from sickness if we just pray with enough faith? What's up with the anointing oil?

New Testament scholars consider this not only one of the most difficult passages in James, but one of the most difficult, misunderstood, and misrepresented passages in the entire New Testament.

Because the truth is, sometimes healing does happen when we pray and other times it doesn't. We don't get healed every time, so this passage seems to say one thing, but it's not always what we see.

**James 5:15**, "And the **prayer of faith** will save the one who is sick..."

"Prayer of faith" is an incredibly unique phrase in Greek, that isn't used anywhere else in the Bible (Tim Keller, *Prayer and Healing*). Some people think it means to pray with absolute certainty. No doubts. No wavering. You are absolutely certain that God is going to do what you're asking, so you muster up all the certainty and confidence you have and demand something from God. Which if you're praying with other people, and God doesn't give you what you're asking for, that can only mean that one of you is doubting... and all of a sudden, the interrogations begin. So, not only is "God not bringing healing" but now, someone's faith is deficient.

The prayer of faith is not praying with absolute certainty, and here's how we know.

**Mark 9** - The father of a demon possessed boy come to Jesus and says, "Please heal my son," to which Jesus responds, "Do you have faith?" And the father says, "I believe... help my unbelief." In other words, *"Sort of? I mean, I do and I don't. I have faith, I think... But I'm not sure it's enough faith, and I wish I had more... Honestly, I'm not sure if you'll do this or not. But Jesus, I have nowhere else to turn. So, please help me."*

Jesus says, *"That's faith!"* and then He heals the man's son. So, when someone says, "You can't doubt or you won't get the answer," remind them that there's a guy who doubted plenty and still got the miracle. Also notice who is praying. It's not a crazy healing rally with elite Christians who change their voice and get all riled up. It's elders, pastors, overseers, shepherds of a local church, "normal" people, praying simple prayers, in the context of someone's home.

So, what IS the prayer of faith?

It's exactly that: a simple request for healing. And the faith is not in the outcome, but in the God who controls the outcome.

Does the prayer of faith guarantee healing?

**James 5:15**, "And the prayer of faith will save the one who is sick..."

There is a danger when we extract one verse and build an entire theology around it. As followers of Jesus and students of the Bible, we have to interpret the Bible with the Bible. We know this verse doesn't guarantee healing because of all the other places in scripture where there is a prayer of faith and healing doesn't happen.

For example, in 1 Timothy, Paul had to leave one of his most trusted companions, as he was recovering from sickness. In the same letter, Paul recommended that Timothy take some medicine to treat his illness. He didn't just tell him to pray in faith. Even Jesus had seemingly unanswered prayer. In the Garden of Gethsemane, He said, "Father, if it's possible, let this cup pass from me." What did he mean by, "if it's possible"? He meant, "if there's some other way to do this." Did God not answer this prayer because Jesus lacked faith? Of course not.

So then why does James say that the prayer of faith **will** save the one who is sick?

God often does heal in response to our prayers. In a very real sense, God does guarantee healing, He just doesn't guarantee the timing. There is a day coming where all of our ailments and illness will be totally healed in eternity with Him. But what's interesting is that James makes a connection between sin and sickness that we experience in this life.

**James 5:16**, "Therefore, confess your sins to one another and pray for one another, that you may be healed."

Sometimes, our sickness or physical ailments are caused directly by our sin. But not every sickness is caused by some sin. Sickness is part of what it means to live in a broken world infected with sin, and it's unwise and unhelpful for us to rush to say that someone is suffering because of something they did, or that I must be suffering because of something I did. That's exactly why God dealt harshly with Job's friends. So, we should never just assume that someone's sickness, or our sickness, is because of sin.

That said, sometimes God uses sickness to get our attention, and James wants us to be aware of that. If you ask Him, the Holy Spirit will reveal it to you. You don't need to

obsess over it or live in fear about it, because God isn't trying to hide these things from you. Trust that if there is something God wants to address, and you ask Him to reveal it to you, He will. If you're dealing with illness or sickness, ask the Lord if there's some sin He wants to address with you and trust that He'll reveal what it is.

Now, what about the anointing oil?

**James 5:14**, "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."

Oil in the Bible is used both as a healing ointment and as a symbol of the Holy Spirit coming upon someone for a particular purpose. When David was called to be king, he was anointed with oil. When new priests were commissioned, they were anointed with oil. So, oil was medicinal and a symbol of the Holy Spirit's power and presence. Prayer and medicine are both methods of God bringing healing into the world. One is natural, the other is supernatural. Both are necessary.

When I pray for God to heal someone, I'll often ask for God to do that by either natural or supernatural means. I'm like, "God, whatever way you want to do it!" The hands of the doctor can be the answer to the prayer!

And sometimes, when I am praying for healing, I will anoint someone with oil, if they ask for it, as a reminder of the Holy Spirit's power at work in their heart, soul and body. But anointing oil is not some kind of magical Harry Potter potion or isn't a biblical requirement for healing to happen. Not once does Jesus or the apostles anoint someone with oil when they pray for healing. That doesn't mean we shouldn't do it. But it does mean it's not required for healing to happen. Oil is often a helpful reminder of God's presence and power in the midst of our need for healing and in that can be incredibly powerful.

Elijah prayed God's promises into reality. He knew the Old Testament scrolls; he knew the promises of God and prayed them into existence. That's exactly what we're supposed to do. To scour the scriptures, learn God's intentions, and pray them into reality in our time, in this generation. Powerful prayer is not about you being a faith super-hero, it's about finding out what Jesus wants and asking Him for it.

Martin Luther says that effective prayer is catching Christ in His own words. Like, "Ha! I caught you! This is what you want and now I'm asking for it!" Because the truth is Church, the same power that brought rain from heaven in the days of Elijah is the

same power that can bring spiritual awakening to our homes, our community, across Franklin, all around Williamson County, and the Nashville area.

And James concludes his letter by not only talking about prayer but by pointing our attention to people around us that need Jesus, and it raises the question: of all the things you're praying for right now, how many of those prayers are for people to come to Christ? Involving people that are far from God right now?

Are your prayers all about your own needs, your own wants? If God answered all the prayers you've prayed this last week, how many new people would be in the kingdom of God tomorrow? God has given us prayer to bring His kingdom to the earth at this time. *Are you using it?* He's given you prayer to bring people into His kingdom. *Are you using it?*

The 19th century American evangelist D.L. Moody, whose preaching sparked an incredible revival in our country, carried around in his pocket a list of names of 100 people who needed Jesus that he prayed for every day. And he did this for decades. At his funeral, 96 of the 100 had come to Christ. A 96% success rate isn't bad! But it gets better. At his funeral, the remaining 4 were in attendance, and they all accepted Christ on that day.

Or, George Mueller in his book, *Release the Power of Prayer*, tells the story of how he committed to pray for five young men—friends of his sons—to be saved. He committed to pray daily until they became believers. It was 18 months before the first one came to faith in Christ. (Which is a long time—18 months is over 500 days. Have you ever prayed for the same thing 500 days in a row without seeing an answer?)

When that first friend was saved, Mueller wrote in his journal how he praised God for the answer but that there were four more left. So, he kept praying. After another five years, the second came to Christ. He kept praying. Another six years, the third one came to Christ. He kept praying. 52 years later—63 years after he had started praying, and a few years after his death, for these five young men by name—the final two were brought to faith in Christ.

Mueller kept meticulous prayer journals, and over his lifetime he cataloged 50,000 answers to prayer. But here's the thing: Of those 50,000 answers to prayer, only 5,000 came on the day he asked for them. For 45,000 of them (90% of them!), he had to persist for a while. Mueller wrote this:

*"Don't let yesterday's seemingly unanswered prayers stop you from praying in faith today."*

- George Mueller

Those prayers for your kids, for your campus, for your husband, for your wife, for your mom, your dad, your friends, for that people group—God hears them. DON'T EVER STOP. DON'T EVER GIVE UP.

The effectual fervent prayer of a righteous person avails much.

*"The potency of prayer has subdued the strength of fire, it has bridled the rage of lions, it has expelled demons, it has broken the chains of death. It has assuaged diseases, it has rescued cities from destruction, it's stopped the sun in its course, it's arrested the progress of the thunderbolt. There is in prayer an all-sufficient armory, a treasure undiminished, a mine never exhausted, a sky un-obscured by clouds, a heaven unruffled by any storm. Prayer is the root, the fountain, the mother of thousands of blessings."*

- John Chrysostom

Or, as James would say, "You have not, because you ask not."

Come and pray, even just to kneel at the altar, ask God for whatever you need. Let's invite the Kingdom of God to invade our hearts, our homes, and our community.