

## Effectual Fervent Prayer

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*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. 15 And the prayer of faith will save the sick, and the Lord will raise him up. And if he has committed sins, he will be forgiven. 16 Confess your trespasses to one another, and pray for one another, that you may be healed.*

*The effective, fervent prayer of a righteous man avails much.*

*17 Elijah was a man with a nature like ours, and he prayed earnestly that it would not rain; and it did not rain on the land for three years and six months. 18 And he prayed again, and the heaven gave rain, and the earth produced its fruit. (Jam 5:13-18)*

On the Highveld we're more or less used to lightning. We've gotten used to a truly awe-inspiring event in creation. Lightning heats the air around it up to about 27,700 degrees Celsius, and contain a hundred million electrical volts.

When we think of lightning we think of a bolt that goes in one direction, from cloud to earth. But a lightning strike actually consists of two opposite charges of electrical energy. A negative charge or build-up occurs in the bottom part of the cloud closest to earth and a positive charge of energy occurs directly underneath in the ground. Separating these two opposite charges is the non-conducting dry air belt separating cloud and earth. As the two opposite charges continue to build up and the dry air belt becomes moist, lightning starts down toward earth in 50 meter jagged steps or intervals.

Nature illustrates for us the two opposite poles or charges that happen in life on God's earth. We have God's glorious grace wanting to display His mercy and love. God desires to glorify Himself in His acts among people. You could think of that as the negative charge building up in the clouds of heaven itself.

But then you have the opposite charge: our need. We are needy people. We are sinners, needing forgiveness and deliverance. We are sheep, needing direction. We are helpless, needing food and provision. We are unwise, needing wisdom. We are suffering, needing comfort or love or hope or righteousness or help or strength. And our dire need is like the positive charge building up in the ground.

What then causes the lightning strike of grace from heaven to earth? The strange conductor from Heaven to Earth is this thing called prayer. Like many letters in the New Testament that close with a call to prayer, James begins wrapping up his letter with an exhortation to prayer. All the writers of the New Testament exhort us to pray, both because they know it is essential, and they know prayer is that duty we let slip.

Christians preach about prayer, sing about prayer, talk about prayer, read about prayer. But too often, Christians don't pray. So James has a very practical and compelling way of exhorting us to use this lightning strike of grace, to become those conducting rods. He does so by encouraging us to pray with two exhortations – in all circumstances, and then with all confidence. He doesn't tell us to pray long, or to pray complicated prayers. Instead, he simply says, let every circumstance turn into prayer, and do so with all confidence, because your prayer counts.

### I. Pray in All Circumstances

*13 Is anyone among you suffering? Let him pray.*

*Is anyone cheerful? Let him sing psalms.*

*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.*

James begins by asking his readers if any of them fall under one of three circumstances. Is any suffering? Is any cheerful, and is any sick? And for each of these, there is a kind of prayer that James says is appropriate. In other words, James is saying what Scripture affirms repeatedly: that for a Christian, prayer is to be woven into all of life.

**Ephesians 6:18** *praying always with all prayer and supplication in the Spirit, being watchful to this end with all perseverance and supplication for all the saints*

**1Th 5:17** *pray without ceasing,*

**Phi 4:6** *Be anxious for nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication, with thanksgiving, let your requests be made known to God;*

*Jesus taught in Luk 18:1 that men always ought to pray and not lose heart,*

*The apostles delegated administrative tasks because they said "but we will give ourselves continually to prayer and to the ministry of the word."*

Christians are not simply to be a people who at times pray. Christians are to be a praying people.

His first circumstance is for anyone suffering. Are you a Christian going through any kind of hardship, misfortune, difficulty, problem, pressure, persecution, reproach, or struggle? If so, James say, you must pray. The word for prayer here in the original is the most common word for prayer, which means to ask, to make requests. When you are in a trial, turn upward to request from God grace, strength, wisdom, resolution. Let your trials, your problems, your pains, be goads and reminders to pray. Trials either turn you inward, trying to find the answer within, or outward, trying to find it in other people and in circumstances, or upward to God.

It is a gift when you begin to allow your troubles to reflexively drive you to ask.

The text which so beautifully summarises this transaction is Psalm 50:15: "'Call upon me in the day of trouble: I will deliver thee, and thou shalt glorify me.

Spurgeon comments on this text: "First, here is your share: "Call upon me in the day of trouble."

Secondly, here is God's share: "I will deliver thee." Again, you take a share—for you shall be delivered. And then again it is the Lord's turn—"Thou shalt glorify me." Here is a compact, a covenant that God enters into with you who pray to him, and whom he helps. He says, "You shall have the deliverance, but I must have the glory. You shall pray; I will bless, and then you shall honor my holy name." Here is a delightful partnership: we obtain that which we so greatly need, and all that God getteth is the glory which is due unto his name.

But for all that to happen, you must acknowledge you are in trouble, humble yourself to call, and look to God to deliver in ways that will glorify Him.

But look at the second circumstance: Is anyone cheerful? Let him sing psalms.

Here is the Christian in the opposite state of the one suffering. He is in a place of joy, gladness, and good spirits. Whether it is that he is in a season with few troubles, or whether it is that he finds himself simply in a place of high spirits, he has a spring in his step. Either way, James commands a different kind of prayer. Let him sing psalms. The word in the Greek is *psalleteo*, which can be translated psalming, singing psalms. But the words actually mean strumming, playing on a stringed instrument, as David did when he composed and sang his psalms. The idea is make music and sing your praise and your thanksgiving. Make musical prayers of thanksgiving and rejoicing.

You realise, of course, that when we sing our psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs to the Lord on a Sunday, we are praying as we do so. In many of them, we address God directly. Even when we sing about God, we are still directing it to God. James says, the very best thing to do when your heart is full, is to sing or play or hum, or whistle musical prayers to God.

Here is one of the best reasons for having a hymnal at home, and even better, for memorising hymns. Sometime, you are going to find yourself somewhere, and you will either see the splendour of creation, or you will be marvelling at His providence, or the Spirit may simply be illuminating some Scripture to you. And in those moments, you want some effective and shapely way to express your joy. Ordinate worship has three things: it must have truth about God, it must have a right affective response in our heart to that truth, and then it must have an appropriate vehicle to express that affections. The best hymns are just that: well crafted vehicles to carry your joy, your thanksgiving, your admiration.

When you are feeling joyful, instead of switching on secular radio and whistling to some pagan celebrating his unbridled appetites, sing to God. Use good music, or make your own, but turn your cheerfulness into adoration and thanksgiving.

But now James moves to a special case, one that tends to absorb all our attention – the person who is sick and the anointing of oil. But as we examine it, let me remind you that the focus of this passage is not oil, it is prayer. And here James is telling us about a third kind of situation and a third kind of prayer.

*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. 15 And the prayer of faith will save the sick, and the Lord will raise him up. And if he has committed sins, he will be forgiven. 16 Confess your trespasses to one another, and pray for one another, that you may be healed.*

Now there is a lot here that we need to look at carefully.

First, notice that James is still speaking to believers. Is anyone among you sick? It is not for unbelievers, it is not a mandate to go through hospitals, or set up healing crusades using this specific technique.

Second, notice that there is something about this sickness that is out of the ordinary. The word in the Greek for sick is used for regular sickness, and sometimes for serious sickness, so we don't get much more light there. But there are several clues in the passage that a serious sickness is meant. One is that the person who is sick must call for the elders of the church. We would expect a person to be told to go to the elders of the church, but the fact that they are called may suggest the person is bedridden, or at least very weak. Also, in verse 15, we have these words, "the Lord will raise him up", which are words used for healing, but they imply a fairly serious condition. I suggest this is more than the average sickness, it is a debilitating, or extremely serious sickness.

So look at the procedure here: Let him call. Who is to initiate this process? The person afflicted. After studying the Scripture, he or she must decide if this Scripture applies to his or her situation. This is not something where the pastors go around looking for people to anoint with oil. Moreover, I suggest that in calling for the elders, this is to be done in the person's home, or perhaps at a hospital bedside, not in corporate worship.

So the sick person calls. Who does he or she call? The elders of the church. Elder in the New Testament is the term for the office of pastor or overseer. Three titles, but the same office. Let the person call for the pastors. If the church does not yet have multiple pastors, then let those men that come closest to elder, the deacons, accompany him.

Ask yourself, why would the Christian call for the spiritual leaders in his church, and not for the doctors, the healers? Not because Scripture has anything against doctors. Most of God's healing takes place through the use of good medicine and healthy eating and resting and exercising. But here the person is exhorted to call for the spiritual leaders. That means the Christian in question believes there is a side to this sickness related to his walk with the Lord, related to possible sin in

his life, related to God's very specific purposes for this sickness. This sickness is out of the ordinary. For that reason, the person calls on spiritually mature people to come to pray.

Just as an aside, if you believe that the gift of healing still operates in the church today as it did during the book of Acts, how do you explain this passage? Why this elaborate instruction if the person with the healing gift could just arrive, use the gift and provide instantaneous, complete, and permanent healing? This passage shows us that what was happening in Corinth was more the exception than the rule. This is the healing passage that I suggest is normative for all churches of all times.

So the elders are called, and they are told to come to the person and pray over him, specifically the prayer of faith. Each one must come, praying with the faith God gives him about this sickness, and pray over the sick Christian for healing.

As they do this, they are told to pray anointing with oil in the name of the Lord. Main verb pray, helping participle, anointing. But we are justifiably curious about this. What is the oil? Is this still for today? Unfortunately, we only have one other Scripture that mentions this, and it doesn't shed much light on the topic. **Mar 6:13** *And they cast out many demons, and anointed with oil many who were sick, and healed them.*

So with little Scripture to compare this with, there have basically risen three views on what this oil is: the sacramental view, the medicinal view, and the symbolic view. The early Greek church had a practice called *euchelaion*, which was the application of oil for the sick. The Roman Catholic church took this and eventually developed it into the sacrament of extreme unction, that the priest can visit the person on his deathbed, and remove any remnant of sin and strengthen the soul of the dying. Of course, this sacramental view is not what James has in view.

The second view is that the oil is medicinal. In biblical times, oil was very much a remedy for all kinds of ailments. We remember the Good Samaritan pouring in oil and wine into the man's wounds. So in this view, James is saying to his first-century audience, let the elders go to the person's bedside with both spiritual and medicinal resources. Let them pray, and then let them apply some oil to the person, to speed up healing. On this view, the prayer would be what we still do today, the oil could be replaced with some kind of modern remedy.

The third view is the symbolic view. This means that the oil is a symbol of something, and so it must always be applied when this kind of prayer is offered. Now I think there are four good reasons to take this view. First, the elders are called, not the doctors. If you want someone to give or apply medicine you don't call your pastors, you call your doctor. The early church had no problem using physicians. So that counts against the idea that the oil is simply ancient medicine. Second, the oil is anointed, not drunk, or imbibed some other way, which is what you would expect if his oil is purely medicinal. Yes, the word can mean massage, or rub, but it can also mean, as every Bible translation renders it, anoint. Anointing has a connotation in Scripture that is symbolic. Third, this one particular remedy is applied to a limitless amount of sicknesses. James and the ancients knew better than that. They knew that oil was not a catch-all remedy for every possible disease. Again, this counts against the oil being medicinal, and counts in favour of it being symbolic. Fourth, as we have read, the apostles used it in this symbolic way in Mark **6:13** *And they cast out many demons, and anointed with oil many who were sick, and healed them.* Since the apostles had unique miraculous power, we know they were not using oil medicinally.

So I think we are justified in taking the oil here as a symbol. A symbol that is still to be used today. There really is no reason to limit this to the early church. This is found in an epistle to the church, not in the transitional book of Acts, it is not associated with the office of an apostle, and so I believe this is still something we should practice.

So what is the oil symbolic of? We don't know. It could be the Holy Spirit. It could be the power of prayer. It could be the setting of this person apart, specially consecrated for healing. I think it is likely that it represents healing, this time 'in the name of the Lord' meaning Christ is the Great Physician and the oil is symbolic of trusting in his healing powers. Scripture doesn't tell us how to apply it, nor does it have to, for that is simply a matter of prudence and good judgement.

What will happen if this is done?

*15 And the prayer of faith will save the sick, and the Lord will raise him up. And if he has committed sins, he will be forgiven.*

Verse 15 gives three promises – the prayer of faith will save the sick, the Lord will raise him up and if he has committed sins, they will be forgiven him. 'Save' refers to physical healing. Remember when Jesus would say to people, "your faith has made thee whole". The Lord will raise him up – refers to the same thing.

Does this guarantee healing for everyone who does this? No. Scripture gives general promises with special cases. God's Word has universal promises still have exceptions. The New Testament had men who were not healed – Trophimus, Epaphroditus.

But now turn your attention to the phrase "if he has committed sins, they will be forgiven him". Of course, who hasn't committed sins? Obviously the sick person, like any other Christian has committed sins. But the fact that James brings it up here suggests the possibility that in some of these cases, the sickness may be connected with sin. That's the reason for the word 'if'. Sin does not always produce sickness, and not all sickness results directly from a sin. But James says, if that is the case in this person's life, there will be a cleansing of the conscience, a vindication of the person. That explains verse 16. *16 Confess your trespasses to one another, and pray for one another, that you may be healed.*

During this time, if the person becomes aware of sin that has been unconfessed, or undealt with, or of a habit or attitude that he would not surrender, he confesses it. To whom? We do not confess our sins wider than the circle of the sin's influence. You do not confess what will defile the minds of others. But I think we can draw a straight line from this to Matthew 18, where we must seek to make restitution with one another, confessing our wrongs, seeking closeness and restoration. We confess and we pray for one another. The person has the elders there, and if appropriate, confesses what was hidden and secreted away.

And if it is the case that sin was involved, God's physical healing will mean God's chastening hand is over. The person is almost exonerated before the body.

So this is a special case. A severe sickness, the person believes this is for him or her, the elders are called privately, they pray with the faith they have, anointing with oil in the name of the Lord, and the person is repenting and making restitution if it is applicable in his or her life.

James wants us to pray in all circumstances: when we are suffering, when we are cheerful, and when we are sick. But he does not only want us to pray in all circumstances. He also wants us to

## **II. Pray With All Confidence**

*The effective, fervent prayer of a righteous man avails much.*

Does prayer really make a difference? If God is sovereign over all, and does all He pleases, and none can stay his hand, isn't prayer just a kind of empty commenting or cheerleading on the sidelines? Is prayer just a spectator sport, when God is the real mover and doer?

That's not what this inspired text says. It says clearly that Christians must confidently pray knowing that the prayer of a righteous man avails much. This verse is actually very difficult to translate, because of how certain words in the original are ordered. That word effectual can either modify the person praying, or it can modify the results of the praying. But here is what is clear.

The prayer of a righteous man avails much. Who is a righteous man? A believer in Christ. The person who has been justified by faith, and been declared righteous by God. That person is righteous, just – the same word in Greek. If you are a Christian, then when you pray, you pray in the Person and work of Jesus, and that gives you great standing.

What then is this fervency? It is not length? “The great matter is not how long you pray, but how earnestly you pray. Consider the life of the prayer rather than the length of the prayer. If your prayer reaches to heaven it is long enough.”

That is, prayer is effectual when it is grounded in God's Word and will, prayed with a sincere, honest and humble heart, and looks to God as those who wait

When a Christian prays, and prays effectively, that is with faith, sincerity, diligence, that prayer, the Bible says, avails much. It literally means, how much, how great will be the power of the prayer of the righteous.”

Prayer affects the world. Prayer changes things. Prayer brings about a state of affairs that would not have happened without the prayer. James said earlier “You have not, because you ask not.” Jesus said **Mat 7:7-11** “Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you.

Of course believers have wrestled with understanding this paradox. But listen to how the 1689 Baptist Confession summarises God's sovereignty and his use of means: “FROM all eternity God decreed all that should happen in time, and this He did freely and unalterably, consulting only His own wise and holy will. Yet in so doing He does not become in any sense the author of sin, nor does He share responsibility for sin with sinners. Neither, by reason of His decree, is the will of any creature whom He has made violated; nor is the free working of second causes put aside; rather is it established.”

Spurgeon put it this way: “Prayer is an essential part of the providence of God, so essential, that you will always find that when God delivers His people, His people have been praying for that deliverance. They tell us that prayer does not affect the Most High, and cannot alter His purposes. We never thought it did; but prayer is a part of the purpose and plan, and a most effective wheel in the machinery of providence.”

God plans to do something. But one of the ways He will accomplish what He is going to do is through His praying people. What then if they do not pray? Those who do not pray, do not receive. But when God is going to accomplish something through prayer, He will make sure someone is praying. And I will simply caution you against some simplistic mechanical explanation that seems to sew it all up. Anytime the human and the divine combine, the result is a fathomless mystery – whether it is the Incarnation, whether it is inspiration, whether it is salvation, or whether it is prayer. Here God's sovereign purpose is combining with human will. We know whose will is ultimate and final, and whose will is subordinate and contingent. But it appears that human prayer, just as Christ's human nature, and the human authors of Scripture, and the human act of repentance are still necessary parts of the final picture.

Would you pray more, if you believed it would change your family? Would you pray more if you believed it would affect your business? Would you pray more if you believed it would affect your

relationships?

Pray with confidence because prayer actually affects events on Earth. But we should also pray with confidence because it is for all of us. We might read that and feel that when it says the fervent, effectual prayer of a righteous man, that we are ruled out. We might think that only the prayers of the super-spiritual, the near-sinless, the permanently victorious Christian are answered and make any difference. So to answer that, James gives us the example of a righteous man very much like us.

*Elijah was a man with a nature like ours, and he prayed earnestly that it would not rain; and it did not rain on the land for three years and six months. 18 And he prayed again, and the heaven gave rain, and the earth produced its fruit.*

Elijah, James tells us was a man with a nature like ours. In fact, the word here is *homoipathos*. Pathos in Greek referred to feelings, emotions, affections, desires. When we speak of the pathos of a speech, we mean its emotional appeal. James says that Elijah was a similar man to all of us in his inner man, in his nature. He could be very bold, and very afraid. He fell into the depths of depression after Jezebel decided to hunt him down. He experienced the same kinds of inner worlds we experience, changing moods, days of encouragement and days of discouragement. He probably doubted himself on one day, and was over-confident on another. He could have experienced the same temptations to laziness, to prayerlessness that we do.

But the text is meant to encourage us. This man, with the same kind of nature as we have, prayed earnestly for it not to rain, and it stopped raining. He prayed again for it to rain, and it began raining. First Kings doesn't actually record these prayers, but it records the events in 1 King 17 and 18, where the drought and famine brought Israel to its knees, and resulted in a public contest between Baal and Yahweh. And after the contest, Elijah prayed, and God returned rain to Israel. This man, like us in so many ways, changed the weather. He influenced events.

You might feel you are the worst prayer in the world. Good. Start there and begin praying for your prayer life. Admit you are weak and of the same nature as Elijah, and ask God to end the drought of prayerlessness in your life. You feel you do not have the right words. Pray with the words you have and pray for growth in your prayer. You feel you are too distracted to pray. Pray for less distractedness, more focus. You feel you pray so weakly. Begin by admitting the weakness and pray for stronger prayers.

And then weave prayer into all of life. When you are rejoicing, and laughing, and thriving and feeling in top of the world – pray. When you are under pressure, reviled, rejected, despondent, weak in body, perplexed, hemmed in – pray. Because your prayers, as a righteous person, when effectually used by the Spirit are going to be powerful.

All of life can become the positive charge of need going up, attracting the negative charge of grace coming down. And because it literally changes things, we should pray.