



# VILLAGE BIBLE CHURCH SUGAR GROVE CAMPUS

## Real Faith. Real Life.

Part 15: Before I Go...Don't Forget

James 5:13–18 | Tim Badal | April 30, 2017

We're in a series entitled "Real Faith for Real Life," looking at this first-century letter written by the half-brother of Jesus. James was quite skeptical early in his life, even though he lived and talked with Jesus. He didn't believe Jesus was the Son of God and the Messiah until after the resurrection. But then his life was transformed as he, too, confessed Jesus as Lord and Savior.

After his salvation, he became the pastor of a prominent church in Jerusalem, presiding over a large group of believers and impacting the church in significant ways. We also know he died as a martyr for his faith, which brings a depth to the things we've been studying. We know that James did live out a real faith in a real life, even when the going got tough. Each week he has called us to live differently—not to just speak about our relationship with God, but to live it out as he did and as he saw modeled in his Brother's life.

Today's sermon will be the second to the last in this series. We'll look at the subject of prayer and I've decided to address only points 1, 2 and 4 on our outline. We'll save point three for when we look at James 5:19–20 when we finish the series. Let's turn now to James 5:13–18. This is what the Word of the Lord says through the writing of James:

*<sup>13</sup> Is anyone among you suffering? Let him pray. Is anyone cheerful? Let him sing praise. <sup>14</sup> 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. <sup>15</sup> 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. <sup>16</sup> 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. <sup>17</sup> 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. <sup>18</sup> Then he prayed again, and heaven gave rain, and the earth bore its fruit.*

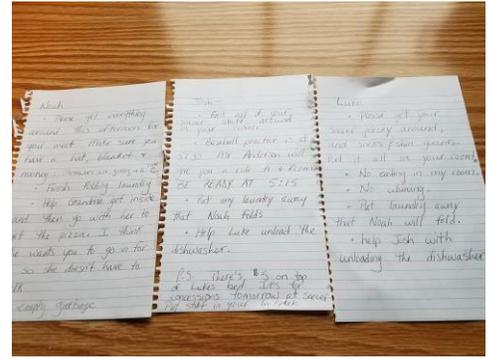
In this passage there are four imperatives. James gives four clear commands to the people, but not so much to give them duties—"Do these things whether you like them or not. Just grit your teeth and bear them." Rather, he says, "When you do these things, they are graces God gives to His people so we might commune with Him without hindrance. They will bring blessings to our lives through our relationship with Him and with one another."

Prayer, praise and having the elders in community with us in our times of sickness—these are all opportunities for us, as people of God, to experience His grace, goodness and mercies. Regardless of our circumstances or struggles, whether we're in a time of celebration or pain, God has a word for us here. I've titled this sermon, "Before I Go...Don't Forget." As James brings his letter to a close, he has a few more things he still wants to say to the church.

When I put this sermon together, I prophesied something concerning an illustration I'm going to use—and I want you to know that I'm a true prophet. As you know, we have over 60 ladies who are on our women's retreat right now. That's why we're missing so many people this morning, because as go the wives, so also go the families. Our prayer is that the women will have a great time of community, really sensing God's presence in their lives, and that He would impact their lives through the speaker.



As is probably true of many of the ladies, my wife said as she was leaving, “Before I go...don’t forget...” When Amanda leaves for any prolonged period of time, she always leaves lots of notes. If you don’t believe me, I’m going to show you evidence. When we got home on Friday—the kids had an early dismissal—she was ready to leave, and this was what was on the table. In fact, there was a fourth letter, but it was too big for me to take a picture of. There were lots of commands in these notes—one for Noah, one for Josh, one for Luke and one for Tim. Here’s why. Amanda has very little trust that the children will be alive when she gets back. She’s concerned that in her absence there will be things that will be missed or overlooked.



I wonder, as James was penning his letter, if he was thinking, “Before I go, maybe I should remind the people about this...and don’t forget about that...and make sure you remember this, that and the other thing.”

In our short passage here James manages to address every group of people in the church. As we’ll see, the first and second points are relatively easy to understand. But the final point becomes a little more difficult because of the interpretive nuances that are in the text. So I’ll go more quickly through points one and two, and then we’ll slow down with point four. So James says, “Before I leave, remember these things.”

## 1. If you are suffering, pray to God.

The first group James wants to speak to are those who are suffering and his word to them is that they should pray to God. Verse 13: “*Is anyone among you suffering? Let him pray.*” Very straightforward. If you are suffering in life, your calling and opportunity is to go to the Lord, seeking His help.

As simple as this seems, we still need to ask some questions. First, what does James mean by suffering? That word speaks of all types of suffering—emotional, physical, financial, mental and so forth. These sufferings come from the multi-colored trials that James spoke of in chapter one. When these trials come into our lives they produce a variety of sufferings. As a good pastor, James knows his church is filled with people who are suffering.

In my roughly 15 years of ministry here at Village Bible Church, I’ve learned some things. During this time the church has changed and grown, our staff has changed, and our way of doing ministry has changed. But one thing has been a constant since I began and will probably be true until I retire, and that is that people here will suffer. Our ministry is to join into people’s everyday suffering, finding ways to speak into it on the Lord’s behalf.

James is clear: in this life we’ll have troubles and burdens. We need to be patient, because the coming of the Lord is at hand. But in the middle of our suffering, what are we to do until then? James says, “If you’re suffering, I want you to pray.” He’s not just giving some trite advice. He recognizes that some people in his day had lost everything because of the call of God in their lives. They had their jobs, their property, their family members and other relationships—all because they acknowledged Jesus Christ as their Lord and Savior. These weren’t small problems—they were big. Today some of us are also enduring some hard struggles and burdens, and James’ word to us as well is we need to pray.

What causes us not to pray? I have thought of two reasons why we might decide not to pray. On the one side of the pendulum, we might not pray because we think we can handle our situation ourselves. Maybe you’re suffering today, maybe you have some serious issues, but you’re thinking, “I’m working through this. I’ll make it on my own. I’ll find a way.” We turn to things like money or jobs or other people—and we try to solve the problem through these means. That’s not inherently bad, but if it’s the only place we turn, then we’ll fall short of the wisdom God wants to give us.

Remember James 1:5 talks about when we lack wisdom. In our suffering we often lack wisdom, because something in our lives has brought questions to our minds. We have questions about our future: What does this medical report mean? What does this financial setback mean for our family? What about our kids? What about my relationship with my spouse? Suffering can bring many “what ifs.” Often we try to address those “what ifs” through our own strength, but God wants us to run to Him. Maybe you’re suffering and you’ve tried the “I’ll take care of it myself” route. Remember what we talked about last week? That’s the “fight” in us.

Others may choose the “flight” approach. Instead of going to God or even to other people, they turn away from Him. They’re afraid He will be angry, or He will point out that their sin has caused their suffering, or perhaps bad decisions have taken them to where they are. They conclude God doesn’t want to hear from them—and even if He does, He will respond with anger or at least a lecture. But James 1:5 says if we lack wisdom, we need to go to God, “*who gives generously to all without reproach.*” Rather than

giving us a lecture, God wants to give us grace. He wants to empower us to get through our trials or sufferings. So it's our choice. Will we try to solve our problem on our own without God's help, or are we going to turn to Him Who can give us strength?

Here's a problem: Most of us love to talk about prayer. We love a good sermon on prayer. We love to see how God used prayer in the Scriptures. We love the stories from church history of how God used the prayers of great Christians in the past to do unbelievable things. We love everything about prayer—except for actually praying. Right?

*Christianity Today* recently took a survey that revealed that the average Christian prays anywhere from three to five minutes a day. Now, compare that to the next question in their survey: How much time do you spend watching TV, listening to the radio, or on social media? That number went as high as five hours a day.

Listen, if in our suffering we're turning to the television, social media or other things instead of God, we will never suffer well for the cause of Christ. James is telling us that prayerlessness is a problem. We need to be moved and empowered by God Himself to pray. We need to pray more than ever before. Yes, there's a lot we need to do besides pray. But that should be our first priority when we're suffering: take it to God and say, "Lord, I cannot do this on my own." The basis of prayer is dependence on God. "God, I am small. You are great. Therefore, I turn to You."

We understand that in our suffering we need to pray, but we would ask James, "What should we pray for?" Notice that James doesn't tell us what we should pray for here, but there are a lot of answers to that throughout the Bible. Here are some of the important answers we find for your prayer list when suffering comes.

1. Pray for wisdom. We've already seen that in James 1:5. We need to tell God, "I'm in a place where I don't have answers. I need You to speak to me and show me which way to go." We need to admit we don't know what to do in times of suffering. We don't have the answers. God offers a lamp for our feet and a light for our path (Psalm 119:105), so we'll know which way to turn. Yes, there is a way that seems right to man, but Scripture says it leads to destruction (Proverbs 14:12). We need to know the way that leads to God. So we should ask for His wisdom and perspective in the context of our suffering. The moment tribulation arises—maybe a phone call that comes on a random Tuesday—the first question we should ask is, "Lord, how would You respond to this? What is Your wisdom in this situation?"

2. Pray for the ability to suffer with joy. When suffering comes, Scripture tells us to endure it with joy. We can tell God, "I don't know why You allowed this trial in my life, but here's what I know. I know You're at work." We should see our trial as a long, dark tunnel and understand that joy is the ability to see the light at the end of that tunnel—even if it is very faint. We can't deny the darkness, but because we see that little bit of light, we know that at some point the trial will end and our suffering will cease.

Let me remind you that there's no guarantee that our suffering or tribulations will end in this world. Remember, we are to be patient for the coming of the Lord. James says some of us may suffer for the entirety of our lives. But as Christians, our hope is that one day—at the end of that very long tunnel—there's a light which is the coming of our Lord. That's when God will receive us unto Himself to be with Him forever in heaven, where there will be no more crying or sorrow or pain and God will wipe away every tear. So with joy in my heart, I need to say, "This trial, this suffering, is but for a moment."

3. Pray that God's hand would be displayed in our trials. So often we have the "bunker" mentality when trials are being lobbed our way. We hunker in, thinking, "I can only worry about myself." But a real Christ-follower should instead pray, "Lord, would You use this for the benefit of my neighbors, friends, coworkers or family? Let them see the strength You're giving me in this suffering, so they might wonder where my joy comes from, why I have hope in the midst of my pain, and ask about the Source."

Hopefully our times of suffering can create opportunities for evangelism when we can tell others that the joy of the Lord is our strength (Nehemiah 8:10), that we have the peace that passes all understanding and guards our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus (Philippians 4:7). We should pray, "God, use my suffering to draw people to Yourself."

4. Pray that the fruit of the Spirit would increase in our lives. Sometimes during suffering sin becomes a problem. When we're hurting, we can grow bitter. We become weary, which can lead to complaining. But James warns us in James 5:9, "*Do not grumble against one another.*" Why do we grumble when we're suffering? We want to make sure everybody knows we're hurting. We want people to know how angry we are at our circumstances.

Instead, we need to pray that the fruit of God's Spirit—the love, joy, peace, patience, kindness and longsuffering (Galatians 5:22–23)—would be manifested in our lives. Rather than comparing our situation with that of others who aren't suffering, we should see our pain as the opportunity to show the fruit of God's Spirit moving in our lives. We have much to pray for when we're suffering. But James is telling us: when you're in pain, pray.

## 2. If you are successful, give God the praise.

Next James goes to the other extreme to look at times when we're successful, when things are going well—in his words, *"If you are cheerful."* The word "cheerful" is only used one other time in the New Testament, when Paul is experiencing a shipwreck with a group of passengers who are scared for their lives (Acts 27:13–44). In that situation Paul tells them, "Be of good cheer. God has told me that we're not going to die here, so don't lose heart."

If someone is full of good cheer then surely they're not suffering. Their life is going well. Think about it. In our church we could divide ourselves in a number of ways. We could divide ourselves by our nationalities, ages, gender. But James sees a dichotomy in his church between people who are suffering and those for whom life is going well and they're celebrating. James tells those who are celebrating, "You need to praise God. You need to thank God. You need to be announcing to the world how wonderful your God is, that He is faithful and His mercies are new every morning" (Lamentations 3:22–24). Specifically, James tells them their response should be singing. When a person is so filled with excitement and joy in what God is doing, they're whistling, they're singing—there's a melody in their heart.

Now how should we deal with this dichotomy? James describes two types of people: the suffering who are to pray, and the cheerful who are celebrating in song. This division applies to any group of Christians. Why does God call the suffering and the celebrating—the successful, if you will—to the same place? It's because we need each other in our lives. Both groups can teach us about God.

Let's begin with Sam the Sufferer. He comes to church, overwhelmed, heartbroken and filled with much angst. What does Sam the Sufferer teach the one who's celebrating? We'll call her Sally. What does Sam have to teach Sally the Celebrator? It's the truth that life isn't always good or easy. He reminds her that sometimes life can be really hard, and sometimes it's filled with questions. Sam the Sufferer is dependent on God's promises. So for those who are doing well, it's good to remember there are no guarantees that life will always be perfect or without concerns. Sam reminds us where life can be and where we need to turn.

Why then do we also need the successful, the celebratory? Because Sam needs hope. Sam needs someone to say, "It isn't always this way. Things get better. God is a good God." When they're gathered together, both Sam and Sally are singing the songs. Sam might look at Sally and think, "Why is she so filled with joy? What's going on in her life that allows her to smile as she sings?" Well, maybe it's her family life. Maybe it's the blessing of work. Maybe....and he starts to go down the list of what seems to be good in Sally's life. But then Sally looks at Sam and wonders why he's able to say, "Christ is enough for me." He's broken. Tears are coming down. Still Sam can testify that in his greatest hardship and struggle, he can turn to our God Who is enough for us even when success is not with us. Even when we can't celebrate our circumstances, we have reason to hold on to Christ. He is enough for us.

Why do we sing in church? This is how we pass on encouragement to one another. As we pronounce the goodness of God to one another, we encourage the sufferers that God is going to be enough and will bring His purposes to pass in our suffering. And in our times of celebration, we thank God each day for all the good things He brings to us.

So this is James' message: there is always, always reason to praise. Remember Paul and Silas in prison (Acts 16:16–40). They've been beaten and flogged, and everything seemed to be going wrong for them. Yet in that Philippian jail, they praised God. Why? Because they had much for which to be thankful. Likewise there is much for us to give God praise for as well. Just as Jesus endured great pain because He knew the joy set before Him (Hebrews 12:1–2), we also have an opportunity in our sorrows to see God work in marvelous ways. If you're suffering, pray. If things are going well and you find yourself successful, praise God. Give Him the glory—don't take the glory on yourself.

That brings us to the hard thing. We'll address point three when we get to verses 19 and 20—if you're stumbling, find an accountability partner. We'll talk about those who wander from the truth. I was going to bring it into this message, but I felt I should put that off until a later time.

## 4. If you are sick, call the pastors.

So let's spend the rest of our time on point four. If you're sick, call the pastors. As James continues, what at first seems simple becomes more complicated. In verses 14–16 he says:

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.

James says if we're suffering, we pray. If we're cheerful, we give God praise. But now what about the sick? This passage seems to have a lot of nuance and we can have a tendency to blow it out of proportion. We must be careful. James doesn't dedicate a lot of time to these thoughts, which tell us several things. First, he knows what he's talking about. Second, the people seem to know what he's talking about, because there's no real explanation of what's going on here. James is just as straightforward with this command as he was with his first two commands, which makes it hard for us to know where to place it in our activities.

So let's deal with the passage little by little. When a passage is hard to understand, we sometimes impose motives or meanings that aren't supposed to be there. There are two extreme views here that I think become altogether unbiblical. Our friends in the Roman Catholic church would say this passage speaks of the job of the priest to anoint with oil people who are about to die. They call it "extreme unction" or "last rites." In their mind this prepares a person to meet God by having all their sins absolved by the priest. This implies their standing before God is still in question up to that moment. We would disagree with that. We don't believe that's what the passage is talking about; it's not creating a new sacrament or a new way to receive some level of salvation.

On the other end, in the Protestant world, there are some who see this to be an endorsement of universal healing. In this view, there are healers in the church who lay their hands on people and anoint them with oil, as some sort of spiritual or magical substance that will heal. Sometimes you see on Christian television—if you can call it Christian—someone say, "Give me \$19.95 and I'll send you a prayer cloth with my sweat on it. If you pray this and lay this on your place of sickness, you'll be healed." Or maybe they'll sell some water from the Jordan River or the Red Sea, promising it will have healing properties. They'll use this passage of Scripture to support the idea of anointing some sort of material that brings healing to the person who receives it.

We believe both of these views are extreme and outside of what James intended when he wrote these verses. So instead of running headlong into speculation, let's ask some questions. First, what's the problem? The problem is simple: someone is sick. *"Is anyone among you sick?"* The word sick is a little troublesome, because there are two Greek words that can both be translated as sick. Both point to the issue of weariness, an incapacitation.

It doesn't specify what kind, so some have said it might not be a medical incapacitation or a medical weariness or a physical sickness, but rather a spiritual one. These people would then say the healing that comes is the restoration of a person's spiritual life back to the Lord. A person has wandered from the truth and is struggling and sinning, then they call on the elders to say, "I'm stuck in this sin. I can't get out of it. I need help. I need you to pray. I'm going to confess my sins to you and I desire to have my relationship with God restored."

There's some validity to this kind of confessing, as we'll learn when we go through the next verses. Verses 19 and 20 say that those who are spiritual should go after those who have wandered from the truth to restore them back to God. But it seems as if the Bible makes it clear that there is a physical aspect to this: the one who is sick will be raised up. It's not simply that his sins are forgiven, but that he's being restored in some sort of physical way.

So we have here an individual who seemingly has a weariness or incapacitation where they cannot simply pray for themselves, but require a more extensive solution. James says what they should do is call the elders. Let me make a couple observations. First, James assumes that in that church community this person has a relationship with the spiritual leaders. Thus it is possible for him to call on the group of men who are acknowledged leaders in the church. So if you have been part of a church but have no idea who your pastors and elders are, James identifies that as a problem. You should know your leaders so you can call on them in your hour of need.

Second, this passage helps us understand how our church government structure should reflect the biblical pattern. Notice there isn't just one pastor. James uses the plural form for "elders," signifying the group of men who lead and direct the affairs of each local church. These men are called to shepherd and nurture the flock under their care. So the reason we have multiple elders in our church is that it is biblical. The sick person is, therefore, to call the group of elders and pastors.

Next, notice that it's the sick person who is to call for the elders. Think about it in our church here. We've grown somewhere in the neighborhood of 450%—to between 2,000 and 4,000 people. We're in a big growth pattern. As a church gets larger, when someone gets sick, the question arises: why don't the elders visit them to pray for them? So-and-so is in the hospital, and they may be wondering, "Why haven't the elders come?" And when they do get a visitor, it probably isn't the pastor. So the person who is sick might ask the visitor, "Did they pray for me in church this past Sunday?" "No, I didn't hear them pray for you." "Well, how about those elders? They're not doing their job." The person who isn't doing their job is not the elders, but James says it's the individual. If you are suffering, if you are sick, then you need to call the elders. You need to make the elders aware of your problem.

James says, "Don't expect the elders to read your mind, to know your emotional state or your physical sickness. Let your elders know."

This is a good word for all of us in any relationship. As a husband, if I'm expecting Amanda to know my every feeling, emotion and desire without telling her, she will fail. She's a great wife, but she will fail 99% of the time. My job is to be transparent with my wife. Likewise, James is telling the church, "Be honest and open with the elders about your pain, so they can pray and care for you. Especially when you're highly incapacitated, don't stay in isolation. Go get help."

What does James say next? The elders have been called to go to the sick individual—what are they to do? They are to pray, and they are to anoint him with oil in the name of the Lord. We might want to leave it with them gathering to pray. Anointing with oil—that seems a little different. What's the oil going to do? Some commentaries suggest the oil may have been medicinal in the first century. But that seems doubtful. We know today that olive oil doesn't have much medicinal effect. Or could the oil somehow have been magical? That's one of the extremes we run into with a passage like this, that this oil is some kind of "snake oil," if you will, that will drive away all the ills. That doesn't seem to be the case. What seems to be going on is that there is a spiritual principle. It's not about the oil per se, but rather there is significance behind the oil. It's rather like the way we view the Lord's Supper. It's not that the bread and cup become something they're not, but they point to something of greater significance.

The oil points us to someone being set apart for a specific purpose. In the Old Testament, we read how the anointing oil set apart a person for a certain assignment from the Lord. So in essence, when James tells them to anoint a sick person with oil, he's saying they are to be set apart from the rest of the church. The elders are saying, "While we have a lot of people in this church who are suffering, and others who are celebrating, we are now setting apart this individual to pray for them in a very specific way. We believe their issue is so dire that it requires this kind of focused attention." The oil represents the setting aside of someone in order that healing might take place. It's not the oil that does the healing, but rather the prayer of faith. In fact, James goes on to say that when the elders follow these practices, healing will come. *Not might come—will come.*

That creates a problem for us, because we have no guarantee that everything elders pray for will take place. So let's think about this. It doesn't mean that you have to have sufficient faith before God can answer your prayer. God doesn't measure our prayers on some scale of faith. "Okay, you've got enough faith—I'll answer your prayer." "Aw, you know what? On a scale of zero to five, you were 4.3. Not enough. Sorry, the answer is no. Just exhibit more faith."

We find this idea in the Word of Faith movement in the Pentecostal realm. But that's not what God is talking about. God says our faith can be as small as a mustard seed, one of the smallest seeds on the earth, and it can still move mountains. It's not having enough faith in faith that gets our prayers answered, but something different. We need to recognize that not every prayer that is prayed will be answered. Also, it doesn't negate the fact that we should enlist the help of doctors and medicines.

So what does James mean? I should let you know that here at Village Bible Church our elders do meet with people, anoint them with oil and pray what we believe to be a prayer of faith. What does that prayer look like? Leith Anderson puts it this way:

The elders of the church are to gather with the sick person and pray *in faith* for healing. That doesn't mean they have faith in their prayers. It doesn't mean that they have faith in healing. And it does not mean they have faith in faith. It means they have faith in God. The elders are to pray with absolute confidence that God hears, God cares and God has the power to heal. If that faith is missing, they fail as elders, and their prayers are worthless. The prayer should be sincere, strong and compassionate, passionately desiring healing, fully confident in God.

So the elders gather with a sick person, and to symbolize the importance of this prayer request, they anoint the person with oil. Then they pray prayers that are no different than any other prayers. They say to God, "Because we know You can heal this person, we are asking You—if it is Your will—to heal this person."

Here's how I understand it. What God is asking is for us to join in a supernatural process. We who are finite are called into the infinite and the miraculous. We can never do the miraculous on our own, so we're asking God to do the miracle. But in order for that miracle to take place, God says He wants elders to lay their hands on the individual, anointing them with oil. Then as the elders exhibit faith in this way, He does what only He can do.

To illustrate this, think of a married couple who are longing for a child. They know that God is the One Who gives children. They cannot create children on their own. But God has given them a mechanism for child-bearing to take place. Man and woman have a responsibility, but God is the One Who brings forth the child. Similarly, I believe we are to play the human role in the healing process. We're praying in faith as God called us to pray, knowing He can produce an outcome that we can't do on our own.

When we are obedient in this way and healing takes place, we don't look to the elders or to the oil or to the sick person and ask, "What did they do right?" We bow our knee and praise our God in heaven for what He has done. He is the One Who has healed. To be sure, God heals through many different means. My wife has been healed from cancer through the hands of medical doctors. Now, did the doctors heal my wife, or did God in His infinite grace and mercy use medicine to heal us of all our afflictions? I believe that to be true. But I also believe that God heals people in the here and now through the prayers of righteous men and women.

James says to us, "Look to the life of Elijah." He points out that Elijah is a man like us, yet God used Elijah in powerful ways. In verses 17–18 we read, "*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.*" This example demonstrates that we who are finite, broken and struggling with sin still go to the Lord patiently, persistently and biblically, expecting that the God of the universe can move mountains and that there are times when He will. James wants those of us who are suffering and sick to see in 1 Kings 17 and 18 that Elijah was asking something pretty big from God. After fighting with the wicked King Ahab and Queen Jezebel, he tells them that because of their disobedience that it's not going to rain—and it doesn't rain. As he prayed, the drought continued for three and a half years. Then at just the right time and in just the right place, Elijah asks for it to rain. He prays persistently and expectantly, waiting for God to send the rain. And 1 Kings 18 tells us that the rain comes. God first brings fire from heaven, then rain. But amazingly, James tells us, Elijah is no different from us. Our prayers can avail much.

So this begs the question to the elders and the one who is suffering: are you praying? Are you praying, not as a matter of duty, but because prayer is the evidence that you believe in a God Who is way bigger than your circumstances? Do you believe in a God Who is way bigger than your lay-off, bigger than your cancer, bigger than your relationship issue, bigger than your financial stress? Do you believe your God is able to address everything that comes your way on any given day?

This passage tells us to do three things. What do we do when we read a passage like this?

1. We are called to believe boldly. We must recognize that God is the God of the universe, and He will do all He says He will do. He will answer our prayers. Even when we don't get the answer we desire or expect, God can and does restore broken bones. He does reverse devastating handicaps. He does erase diseases. He does restore relationships. He does give guidance to the confused. He uses these things to grow in us perseverance, hope and character—and He does this because He loves us. Do you believe in a God Who can do far more than you could ask or imagine? Prayer indicates that we do.

2. We are called to trust fully. We are to trust God's sovereign wisdom and grace. God will and does answer our prayers, but sometimes He doesn't answer them the way we think they should be answered. That's hard. And in those moments we have to trust. We have to trust that in a crisis that leaves us sick or weak—even after we've called the leaders to pray for us—we must trust that God knows what is best and He is going to do His will. We don't need to fight Him. Rather, by faith we need to believe and then be obedient.

3. We are called to pray constantly. If we're going to trust God for the great needs in our lives, we must prepare ourselves by daily keeping our relationship with God strong. As is true with our human relationships, strong relationships form through continual communication. The depth of a relationship depends on the depth of that communication. James says, "Don't talk about how deep your relationship with God is. Rather, test it with the prayer test. How are you communicating with God? Is it just small talk, or are you sharing your greatest concerns, fears and struggles? Besides the bad aspects of your life, are you sharing the good with Him as well, praising Him for all His mercies that are new every morning? Are you sharing your frustrations honestly? Are you confronting your temptations directly? Are you giving thanks for the blessings that are often taken for granted?"

Prayer is not just a discipline to master—it is a relationship we need to develop. The Bible never says one can pray too much. It never suggests we should back off on our praying. But it does often mention our prayerlessness. God is doing great things in this congregation. Let us not in our successes focus on our own abilities, desires and opportunities. Rather, in every success—or in every suffering—we should quickly go to one place: to the feet of Jesus in prayer.

So my prayer is that you would grab hold of this gift—that you would utilize this gift—so that God may show you how great and awesome He really is. Are you sick? Are you suffering? Turn to God in prayer. Is life going well? Then praise Him in song. If you're sick and you have nowhere else to turn, turn to the elders who can come and lay hands on you and pray that you might be healed.