

Desperate people do desperate things. When you drive around town perhaps you have seen homeless people begging for money at the intersections. Some drivers stop and give away cash to those people. A guy named David living California was also a homeless person who stood at a median asking for help. He did not ask for money. He dressed up in a suit and a tie, and held up a sign that reads: “HOMELESS. HUNGRY 4 SUCCESS. TAKE A RESUME.” David was a 26-year-old college graduate who hoped to start up his own company. Unfortunately, his business failed. He lost all his money, and even his car where he lived in. He has been sleeping in the park ever since. David realized that he had to do something crazy. He reasoned that if his plan to ask for job did not work out he would give up his dream and go home. A lady stopped by and asked David if she could take a picture and post his request on the social media. The message was forwarded over 100,000 times. A few days later David had to resolve another headache. He received hundreds of job offers from many companies big and small in the Silicon Valley. Desperate people do desperate things. What would you do in a desperate situation? The book of James was written to some Jewish Christians with desperate needs. There was pressure from outside and inside of the church. When it comes to the last chapter of the book, James encouraged the Christians to commit their requests to God in prayer. The word “pray,” or related words appear in each verse in the passage we are about to study today. Why does prayer work? James’ answer is that it works because God ministers His grace to us through our prayer.

1. 受苦的禱告 Prayer of the Sufferers

First, James encouraged those who suffered in difficult circumstances to pray. He said in the first half of **verse 13**: Is any one of you in trouble? He should pray... It is natural for us to pray under hardship. Quite obviously we will ask God to remove our problems. In James’ letter we read examples of how the recipients suffered. In chapter 2, James convicted members of the church because they showed favoritism to the richer people in the society, while despising the poorer brothers and sisters. Then in chapter 5, some workers in the field were deprived by their employers because they withheld the wages. Besides asking God to show justice there is another aspect the sufferers should pray for. James shared in **5:10** that: Brothers, as an example of patience in the face of suffering, take the prophets who spoke in the name of the Lord. We can ask God for patience. Many Old Testament prophets suffered because they preached the truth. For example, Jeremiah was mistreated because he told the king and fellow Israelites that God’s judgment would come, and they should surrender to the Babylonians. Who would welcome those kinds of messages? But Jeremiah patiently endured hardship because he knew that God had a plan for him and his country. James quoted the example of Job in chapter 5. If Jeremiah suffered for a righteous reason, Job suffered for no apparent reason. Job lost all his possessions and even children overnight. His three friends were supposed to bring him comfort. However, they spread salt on Job’s wound and determined that Job suffered because he sinned. Even Job’s wife concluded that it was foolish to keep trusting God. But Job patiently endured the physical and mental suffering. Besides praying James added another advice in the second half of **5:13** that: ...Is anyone happy? Let him sing songs of praise. The word translated as “happy” here is a synonym to “joy.” Even when a person is suffering he can still have joy. Happiness may depend

on what you get in life. But joy is a decision of how you react to life. For example, you feel happy when you have a promotion, get an A in school or receive a gift. However, even when you are bed-ridden, being laid-off from work or being falsely accused you can still have joy. That was why in 1:2-3 of the book, James encouraged his readers to have joy under hardship - 2 Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds, 3 because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance. We can have joy when we know that God understands our situation and He is still in full control. Also, He delights to use challenges to strengthen our faith. Going back to 5:13, James told us that we can show our joy in singing. Rather than grumbling we can use our lips to praise God. When you sing you express an assurance that God is watching over you. You shift the focus from your problems to God's goodness. Therefore, the kind of song you sing is not "Don't worry, be happy" or "I believe I can fly," but "Great is Thy faithfulness" or "God is good, all the time." Brothers and sisters: ask God to give you joy, so that you can sing with joy. You do not need to be a professional to sing to God. Memorize a song and sing it wherever you are. I learned a simple song years ago. The lyrics go like this: "Thank you, thank you Jesus, in my heart."

2. 病患的禱告 Prayer for the Sick

James told us that we should pray and rejoice when we suffer. Among the various kinds of suffering there is physical sickness. James explained that in some cases patients should invite church leaders to pray for them. **Verses 14-15** read: 14 Is any one of you sick? He should call the elders of the church to pray over him and anoint him with oil in the name of the Lord. 15 And the prayer offered in faith will make the sick person well; the Lord will raise him up. If he has sinned, he will be forgiven. Bible commentators debate whether James was referring to physical illness or spiritual weakness here. I am convinced that here James was talking about physical ailment. Imagine a patient is bed-rested with a serious sickness. The elders have to go to the patient. But who are the elders? In the New Testament, "elders," "overseers" and "pastors" refer to the same group of spiritual leaders in the church. Those two verses generate some questions.

First, what is the purpose of anointing with oil? In the first century, it is known that oil has a medicinal function. For example, in the parable of the Good Samaritan in Luke chapter 10, the Samaritan went to injured traveler "...and bandaged his wounds, pouring on oil and wine." (**Luke 10:34**) But if James had the medicinal use of oil in mind a family member or a friend could anoint the patient. Another possibility for the anointing has to do with its symbolic meaning. In the Old Testament anointing symbolizes the setting apart of persons or things for God's use. For example, we can look at **Exodus 28:41** - "After you put these clothes on your brother Aaron and his sons, anoint and ordain them. Consecrate them so that they may serve me as priests." In last week's sermon we talked about the process of consecration. It is the setting apart of people or objects for God. Therefore, here the anointing of a patient is to set the patient apart for God's special attention.

Second, we need to ask how does this prayer for healing work? There was no magical power in the oil or the elders. In verse 14, James told us that the elders had to pray "in the name of the Lord." Also, in verse 15, he said that "the Lord will raise him up." Prayer is effective only because of the Lord's power. Some people think that pastors have a special channel to God that

makes their prayer work better. They don't! Just like you, I am a child of God. Having said that I love to pray for your needs. I think of a couple in our midst. They have a rental property in another state. It is an old apartment in a multi-story building. It gets heat in the winter by circulating hot water through the pipes. But to save utility bill the tenants shut off the water. Hence, the pipes were frozen. If the problem was not fixed the pipeline that connects to all other units might be busted. Before he left, the husband asked me to pray for the matter. Soon after he arrived he sent me a message saying the issue was fixed within minutes. Tears of joy rolled down my cheeks. This brother had a simple faith and God answered our prayer. But in other cases, God did not choose to honor our wishes. Patients with terminal diseases died, marriages shattered and immigration applications were rejected. We have to trust that God has another plan that we cannot fully comprehend. We should still continue to believe in Him.

A third question we may have in mind is whether every sickness is the result of sin. James' answer is no. In verse 15 he said "If he has sinned, he will be forgiven." The conditional conjunction "if" helps rule out the assumption that we fall sick because we sin. However, some sicknesses can be caused by sins. A drug addict may become ill and even die from the substance he takes. We can also think of incidents in the Bible where God used plagues to punish the wicked and discipline His people. When we pray for the sick we should focus on the healing, rather than asking the patient to repent. I once know a pastor's wife who contracted cancer. She suffered a lot through chemotherapy. Give thanks to God that she was declared cancer free afterward. But a few years later the cancer came back. Someone told her that she was not cured because there must be some unconfessed sins. What kind of encouragement can you bring to a cancer patient by saying that? None! Please do not do that to any patient. If the disease is caused by sin, leave it to the Holy Spirit to convict that person.

3. 聖徒的禱告 Prayer of the Saints

In this passage, James told us that those who are suffering should pray. The leaders of a church should also pray especially for those with serious illnesses. Then James also encouraged the whole church to pray. He said in **verse 16**: Therefore confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous man is powerful and effective. The conjunction "therefore" here signals a conclusion of what James shared above. James encouraged Christians to confess their sins to each other and to pray for each other. The Bible tells us that sin hinders our prayer. **Psalm 66:18** reads: If I had cherished sin in my heart, the Lord would not have listened. James was not saying that we need to hold a public confession meeting where church members openly admit their sins and ask for forgiveness. Some of us grew up in that kind of political background. It only leads to condemnation and it will not build people up. We confess our sins to the Lord. In cases where we offended another believer we should go to that person privately and ask for forgiveness. We clear our conscience so that our prayer can be effective. Besides confessing our sins to one another James also encouraged us to pray for one another. In saying so, James reiterated that the privilege to pray is given to every believer. That was why James concluded verse 16 by saying that "The prayer of a righteous man is powerful and effective." A "righteous man" is not someone who has a halo on his head. They are people who put their trust in Jesus Christ. God makes them righteous. In other words, they are saints. James used Elijah as an example for a righteous man. Look at **verses 17-18**: 17 Elijah was a man

just like us. He prayed earnestly that it would not rain, and it did not rain on the land for three and a half years. 18 Again he prayed, and the heavens gave rain, and the earth produced its crops. Elijah's story is recorded in 1 Kings chapters 17 to 19. He was a prophet sent by God to convict the sins of king Ahab of Israel. This king married a foreign princess and thus brought in idol worship to the whole nation. Take note of how James described Elijah – he was “a man just like us.” Does that mean something to you? I find comfort in that description. Often when we read the Bible we feel that people whom God used were out of this world. Moses divided the Red Sea and led the Israelites to get out of Egypt. David launched a stone and killed Goliath the giant. Daniel was thrown into a lions' den but came out alive. These and many other servants of God did wonderful things. But the power is not in them. Their power was from God! He used Elijah's prayer to stop the rain. God also administered His power on Mount Carmel when Elijah had a contest with the prophets of Baal. God sent fire down to consume the sacrifice Elijah offered. What a spectacular scene! Then when king Ahab told his wife what had happened, this woman pledged to get rid of Elijah. How did Elijah respond? He chickened out and fled the scene. What does that tell us about Elijah? He was “a man just like us.” He had his weaknesses. Elijah could perform miracles only because God used him. If God has given us this powerful tool of prayer then why don't we use it? Do not just pray for your own needs at home. Pray for each other in the church too. Pray for the items listed at the back of your Sunday bulletin. Pray for the needs that you receive every week via email. Besides, I urge everyone to come to our monthly prayer meeting too. If we do not pray then we are operating by our little human wisdom. A church that does not pray is like a brand-new car sitting in a showroom. It looks good but there is no gas in it.

CONCLUSION

God ministers His grace to us through our prayer. How desperate are your needs? You will surely pray earnestly if you trust that God is your only help. A missionary named Helen once served at an orphanage in Africa. There was a villager who died in childbirth, leaving behind a premature baby. There was no hospital and no electricity. Without an incubator, the infant could not get enough warmth. A helper used a hot-water bottle to maintain the body temperature of the baby. But suddenly, the bottle burst. It was the last bottle in the village. The missionary thus asked the orphans to pray for the situation. Little ten-year-old Ruth then prayed: “Dear God, would you send us a new water bottle? It will be no good tomorrow. Please send it to us this afternoon.” If that prayer was not bold enough you need to hear the second half of it. Ruth continued: “God, while you are taking care of it would you also send the baby a doll so that she knows You really love her?” Helen felt that she was put on the spot. “Can I honestly say ‘amen’ to that prayer?” she wondered. “Yes, God can do impossible things. But isn't there a limit?” The only hope was getting something sent from overseas. However, Helen had been in the field for four years and she had never received anything. Even if someone sends a package who would include a hot-water bottle to Africa? That afternoon a car dropped off a parcel. There were clothes, medical items and some food. Helen kept searching inside. Then she pulled out a brand-new water-bottle. Then little Ruth rushed forward. She exclaimed: “If God sent us a water-bottle there must be a doll too!” The missionary dug through the box. Lo and behold, there was a doll at the bottom. It was the only package Helen ever received at the village. God answered the prayer from a child of simple faith. God responds our prayer not because of who we are, but because of who He is. He is our Heavenly Father. Come to Him with your needs.