

## LIVING THE CHRISTIAN LIFE

---

### GOD'S WONDERFUL GIFT!

A man's daughter had asked the local pastor to come and pray with her father. When the pastor arrived, he found the man lying in bed with his head propped up on two pillows and an empty chair beside his bed. The priest assumed that the old fellow had been informed of his visit. "I guess you were expecting me," he said.

"No, who are you?"

"I'm the new associate at your local church," the pastor replied. "When I saw the empty chair, I figured you knew I was going to show up."

"Oh yeah, the chair," said the bedridden man. "Would you mind closing the door?"

Puzzled, the pastor shut the door.

"I've never told anyone this, not even my daughter," said the man. "But all of my life I have never known how to pray. At church I used to hear the pastor talk about prayer, but it always went right over my head.."

"I abandoned any attempt at prayer," the old man continued, "until one day about four years ago my best friend said to me, 'Joe, prayer is just a simple matter of having a conversation with Jesus. Here's what I suggest. Sit down on a chair, place an empty chair in front of you, and in faith see Jesus on the chair. It's not spooky because he promised, 'I'll be with you always.' Then just speak to him and listen in the same way you're doing with me right now."

"So, I tried it and I've liked it so much that I do it a couple of hours every day. I'm careful, though. If my daughter saw me talking to an empty chair, she'd either have a nervous breakdown or send me off to the funny farm."

The pastor was deeply moved by the story and encouraged the old guy to continue on the journey. Then he prayed with him, and returned to the church. Two nights later the daughter called to tell the pastor that her daddy had died that afternoon.

"Did he seem to die in peace?" he asked.

"Yes, when I left the house around two o'clock, he called me over to his bedside, told me one of his corny jokes, and kissed me on the cheek. When I got back from the store an hour later, I found him dead. But there was something strange. In fact, beyond strange-kind of weird. Apparently, just before Daddy died, he leaned over and rested his head on a chair beside the bed."

We are going to be looking at James 5 13 – 20 is entitled The prayer of faith, as we read James 5, I would like to explore what a prayer of faith is and faithful prayer as well as healing.

### **James 5 13-20**

Is anyone among you in trouble? Then that person should pray. Is anyone among you happy? Then that person should sing songs of praise. <sup>14</sup> Is anyone among you sick? Then that person should send for the elders of the church to pray over them. They should ask the elders to anoint them with olive oil in the name of the Lord. <sup>15</sup> The prayer offered by those who have faith will make the sick person well. The Lord will heal them. If they have sinned, they will be forgiven. <sup>16</sup> So confess your sins to one another. Pray for one another so that you might be healed. The prayer of a godly person is powerful. Things happen because of it.

<sup>17</sup> Elijah was a human being, just as we are. He prayed hard that it wouldn't rain. And it didn't rain on the land for three and a half years. <sup>18</sup> Then he prayed again. That time it rained. And the earth produced its crops.

<sup>19</sup> My brothers and sisters, suppose one of you wanders away from the truth. And suppose someone brings that person back. <sup>20</sup> Then here is what I want you to remember. Anyone who keeps a sinner from going astray will save them from death. God will erase many sins by forgiving them.

James is coming to the end of his letter and turns his focus to prayer & praise which is what we do as a church Sunday evenings, praise and have a conversation with Jesus.

If anyone among you is happy, let him sing songs of praise, worship and praise being happy is a great gift,

Laughter itself reduces stress and releases endorphins and infection fighting anti-bodies. To praise as we have done this morning is healing and healthy for us.

James goes on to say: 'If you are in trouble pray,' we often pray more when our backs are against the wall.

I guess many of us find ourselves somewhere in the middle ground - lukewarm not overly joyful or in enough trouble to really earnestly pray - to pray without ceasing - Or is it just me?

Sometimes I feel I have the stamp on my prayer card: 'Could do better!' When all God is saying is, come sit with me and chat with me in my chair.

Sometimes illness provides that place to listen to God when we have come to the end of our strength

I am learning that knowing God is more of what I need, rather than doing more for him. Yes we do have to have faith and action but our action should be from a place of security in God's love rather than a duty to perform.

James reminds us the Elijah prayed that it would not rain for 3 and a half years and it didn't, then he prayed again and it rained. What a warrior in prayer.

So why does he make a cameo appearance? James makes the point that Elijah was just like you and me human and fallible.

Elijah had learnt to trust God in barren years and through the drought God had provided for his needs time and time again. Then to his high point on Mount Carmel where he defeats Jezebel's prophets, there was no stopping him! But we find him later- running away in fear.

Just like you and me we have our highs and lows, there are many things we don't understand about life, but it does not mean we can't be faithful in prayer, each day, even if for 5 minutes a day, giving thanks and praise to God.

We can learn to be content with God's love, grace and provision. We may not at times be overflowing with joy, as with the wedding yesterday, or so desperate we don't know where to turn, but each day we still need to lift our eyes to God. Take hold of God's promises and acknowledge who God is - invite him into the everyday things of life, as the Psalmist did and the old bed ridden man did. If we are to live the Christian life it must be in communion with God.

In Hebrews 11 the great chapter of faith, many did not see what God had promised, but hoped in faith, prayed in faith and still believed.

We are called to deepen our relationship and friendship with God the father, Jesus our friend, to listen and be guided by the Holy Spirit day by day. Having the chair open for a conversation.

Then the verse: 'If anyone of you is sick, he should call the elders of the Church to pray over him and anoint him with oil in the name of the Lord. And a prayer offered in faith will make a sick person well.'

Part of me wanted to skip over this passage of the letter, do I have enough faith to pray to make a sick person well? Does God still heal today? What is healing? Some really big questions that can rock our faith and even destroy it if we are not careful.

So let's unpack this a little, as Chris reminded us last week, life is a gift and each breath is a gift, and we need to treat healing in the same vein, a gift from God, that can only be exercised this side of heaven, there won't be the need for any healing in heaven.

There is a danger we can also get caught up with the Hollywood version of anointing, when the Minister or Priest comes round and gives a person their last rights or prays with them in their final hours.

Prayer and anointing in the context of this letter was intended for the person to get well and not for them to die peacefully.

Having received anointing, which we do in our life group (there is something tactile and intimate about anointing - when you feel the oil on your forehead and receive God's blessing for you). It may not be oil, it could be washing your hands in holy water symbolically washing them clean from sin and life's mistakes or having your feet washed. Using your senses is very different from just knowing God only with your mind.

When I read this verse, I only thought of physical healing, however, from the commentaries I have read, healing of the sick could be emotional, spiritual or physical healing.

The Elders/ Presbytery referred to here, are not your super apostles or bishops of the day but your local church leadership, expected to put faith into action, there was no one else to turn to in the fledgling church.

Anointing was a significant act in Jewish culture and in other expressions of the Christian faith today, anointing is still actively practiced, James was simply calling them to be faithful to God.

However, it does leave the problem when it says: ' A prayer offered in faith will make a sick person well.' So when we pray and people are not made well, was the prayer not faithful enough?

I don't think this is the case, healing is a gift such as life, ultimately God is a God of love and wants the very best for us and He does not want to leave us disappointed and discouraged.

The step of faith is both that a person asks for help and anointing, and the elders anoint, we have to leave the outcome to God.

I am not trying to present an easy answer to a difficult question, but I don't yet understand why God heals in the way that he does.

I have been away on a healing weekend and received healing for something I knew nothing about, it was emotional rather than physical, but I was definitely healed, big step on my journey of faith. If you asked me: Would I have preferred to be healed with what I thought was wrong, or what God revealed, I would go with God all the time.

Could God have healed me here in this Church? Yes, and he has. Did I have to go away somewhere special to receive the healing? No! But in going away I found the space to be with God. When we are sick or ill and too weak to pray for ourselves, someone praying for us is such a blessing. If we draw close to God as James say God will draw close to us.

God did not heal me of everything that weekend but I have to trust he did enough.

Whilst preparing for this talk I had a problem with my foot and knowing that I was going to preach on the subject, I faced a dilemma, should I pray and anoint myself with oil in faith that God would heal me? Or should I pray in faith and go to the Walk in Centre as it was around 5.30 in the morning? I knew what the issue was and in the end went to the Walk in Centre and they sorted it. I think doctors, nurses and advances in medicines are gifts of healing from God, but just like Elijah, they are human just like you and me and need our prayers.

I would suggest we need to call a doctor and pray in faith when we are sick as much as we call the Elders of a church to pray for us.

However, the heart of the issue, for me, is that we call and ask and invite God into our situations whether we need physical healing, spiritual or emotional

healing, we are all battered by life, but in Christ we can find hope, peace, joy, freedom and healing.

God may not heal every time in the way we think he should, but it does not mean we should not come before God in faith, for healing.

James goes on to say that we need to confess our sin if we are to receive healing. If you are anything like me, I hold onto my own guilt and sin, as I think I can sort things out in my own strength.

However, if I am part of one body of Christ my sin does affect the life of the Church, and we all suffer. I expect as a body we are susceptible to the Seven Deadly Sins - of pride, greed, lust, envy, gluttony, wrath and sloth. Even if we don't talk about it, or confess it to one another.

James knew the lifestyle issues faced by his listeners, and they are still relevant to us today, we are sinful people, we say and do things we don't want to do, think things we don't want to think, we don't fully live the life God wants us to live. The things of this world want to starve us of a loving eternal relationship.

As with the old man in the story who thought he could not pray, until a friend prayed with him and gave him the key to prayer, to confess and share his concerns through and to an empty chair.

I wonder in the hours that followed, he began to have a conversation, to pray and talk to Jesus his friend. Did he start with two hours a day? Probably not! But the more time you spend with people the more you get to know them the more you want to chat and share. Even in my men's life group we share a few deep things.

Or perhaps in the silence, lying on his bed with nothing said, the old man had the most meaningful conversations and confessions of his life with Jesus, knowing he was deeply loved.

As he slipped away his head on the chair close to his friend he knew that he would soon be home.

Do we have that assurance that, one day, we will be home, forgiven, healed, freed by God's grace and Christ's healing through His death on the cross?

In this letter James shares many practical truths but reminds us in these closing verses to call to God for help, to share our needs and our issues with one another and to pray.

As we pray for others, helping them to find their place of reconciliation, peace and freedom, God in his grace will help us to turn from our wrong ways and values to starve our sinful nature and to grow in maturity, freed by grace so that a multitude of sins will be overlooked.

Its never too late to pull up an empty chair!

Preached in Crawley Baptist Church on Sunday 7<sup>th</sup> April 2019, by Ian Larkham