
Prayers

To God

Weekly theme: our heritage of faith

Pray for those who passed the faith on to you by their faithful witness. If they have now died, then praise God for their lives of faith, and commend them into God's hands.

For myself

When I am faint-hearted, Almighty God, lift me up.
Lift up my senses so I may see and hear You,
Lift up my body so I may strong in You,
Lift up my feelings so I may be encouraged,
Lift up my heart so I may praise You forever.
For You are my salvation, forever, and beyond.
AMEN

For others

Pray for the renewal of the church throughout the world. Pray for all who work for this and who make a sacrifice of their time and their efforts for the sake of God's Kingdom.

Meditation

(A reflection based on Isaiah 40:12-23)

To whom can you compare the Lord our God?
A craftsman working with exquisite beauty and skill ...
 A parent rearing a child with great care and tender love ...
 An engineer who knows the finest details of how things work ...
 A young person full of potential, energy and drive ...
 A great leader with the humility to love and serve ...
 A child who challenges us with truth and perception ...
 A professional working with knowledge and competence ...
 A farmer giving everything to complete work in season ...
To whom can you compare the Lord our God?
Have you not heard?
 Have you not known?
 He was there at the beginning,
 and He is the Lord!

Bible Passage

James 5:17-20

¹⁷ Elijah was someone just like us: he prayed earnestly that it might not rain, and no rain fell for three and a half years. ¹⁸ Then he prayed again, and the rain fell from the skies and the earth produced its harvest.

¹⁹ My friends, if one of you is led away from the truth and is then brought back to it by someone, ²⁰ know that whoever brings a sinner back from the path of error will save a soul from death and cover many sins.

Review

The letter of James is something of an enigma. It begins with a powerful call on God's people to be encouraged in the midst of suffering and endure temptations, but quickly changes to its main theme, the spiritual problems of God's people. Most of the letter contains complaints at behaviour amongst Christian people that belies the Gospel and flies in the face of the evangelistic task; wrong teaching and bad speech, for example. But here at the close of his letter, James teaches his readers about the healing ministry with considerable practical wisdom. He emphasises the role of leadership and fellowship in healing, and he speaks about the importance of confession to the general health of God's people (5:16).

Here in these final verses of his letter, James describes healing as a miracle of grace by which God breaks through into this world to help people in their distress (5:13-15). Then, lest anyone feel his advice about prayer is somehow out of reach, James gives a scriptural example of God's miraculous intervention in people's lives. He quotes from the life of Elijah (5:17,18), and appeals to us to believe that God's power to heal is always available to us as we call on His name, as Elijah did. He then concludes his letter rather abruptly, by reminding us of the most important miracle of all, which is the miracle of salvation. James wants us to remember his letter most by accepting that the most significant healing of all is the one by which the love of God saves a sinner from death itself; the miracle of resurrection, played out in the life of everyone who believes (5:19,20).

We may not immediately see a connection between healing prayer and the story from the life of Elijah quoted here. Surely, James might have quoted one of Elijah's famous 'healing' miracles such as the raising of the widow's son (1 Kings 17:17-24). However, he did not, and if we consider why he chose to tell us about Elijah's prayers for rain (1 Kings 17:1f.), then we will find that we learn more about the purposes of his letter.

In the Old Testament, Elijah's prayers form part of his prophetic record, and they are recorded at the very beginning of the cycle of stories about him found in 1 Kings (1Kings 17:1ff). Significantly, the background to these stories is that of drought within Israel; from the stories of Abraham onward, drought was always an important factor in the life of God's people and their dependence on Him at such times was an indicator of their spiritual health. Elijah perceived that drought was a sign of the desperate state of Israel, at a time when Ahab's queen, Jezebel, had introduced the worship of 'Ba'al' gods into Israel (1 Kings 16:31-34). Elijah confronted this royal and religious 'coup' with its accompanying idolatry by his famous challenge to the prophets of Ba'al on Mount Carmel (1 Kings 18). Elijah prevailed

against these false gods and dealt a blow against the evils Ba'al worship, and for a brief time, he rid the country of this sin, much to the anger of Jezebel (1 Kings 19:2f.)!

Spiritually, the people of Israel and her land were cleansed, or perhaps 'healed' by the prophetic work of Elijah, and the sign of this success and blessing was the coming of rain to water the land after drought (1 Kings 18:41ff). In those days, rain was the difference between life and death, and the coming of this rain was quickly perceived as God's blessing (1 Kings 18:39ff). In this way, James reminds us that our ultimate healing lies in remaining pure before the Lord, and in allowing Him to root out all sin from our midst. Of course, as soon as we say this, we realise that this is probably the best way to sum up James' letter; it is his attempt to draw sin to the attention of God's people so that they might be healed and become pure before Him again.

Here and in a number of places within the Bible, especially in the Old Testament, healing and salvation can mean virtually the same thing. Certainly, to be healed is to be saved by God from earthly death, just as to receive Jesus' salvation is to be saved from spiritual death and receive life eternal. So from this point of view, it might seem natural that James should end a letter about dealing with sins within the Christian community with some advice about the healing ministry. His letter attacks sinful behaviour, that is, wickedness (1:21), the evil use of the tongue (1:26, 3:5ff), favouritism (2:1ff); cursing (3:10), envy and ambition (3:16), conflict (4:2ff), and speaking evil against others (4:11ff). Such sin leads people away from the path of true discipleship and ultimately from their salvation (5:19), and for James, this was a serious matter. No wonder he ended his letter giving the example of Elijah, who fought strenuously against the evils within Israel so they might be saved.

So now, James ends the letter with two simple verses that have had a powerful affect on many who have read them. He paints what is a simple picture of exactly what he believes he has been doing throughout his letter, which has been to lead his readers, if they will heed him, away from error and sin (5:19), and back to the pathway of Christian living and holiness (5:20). James certainly hopes that his letter has done just this, and that he has led sinners away from the eternal death of those who rebel against the revelation of God in Christ Jesus.

Much debate has taken place over the very last sentence of this letter, which says that the deed of bringing a sinner back to the path of Christian holiness and truth will '*cover many sins*' (5:20). What does James mean by this? Some people believe that this phrase speaks of the pure action of salvation, by which the sons of the sinner are covered over and lost forever in the embrace of Christ the Saviour. Some scholars reckon that James is speaking more specifically about the sins of Christians who continue to sin and have to repent over and over again; this was a contentious issue in the life of the early church, and James appears to insist that even such sins are covered. The last possibility is that James is saying that such action will 'cover' the sins of the one who has led others back to the Lord; if so this seems a rather strange point to make at the end of his letter.

Whatever view you take of this ending, I reckon that James is probably talking about the sins of the sinner rather than anything else, because this makes sense of the rest of his letter. It was James' heartfelt desire that all God's people turn back from sin and follow the Lord Jesus with both purity of intent and direct action. These verses seem to be an abrupt way to end a letter, but they do fit with the general theme of all James has written.

Discipleship

Application

Praying for rain

While most of us will not pray about rain as much as people of the middle East in ancient times, we can understand what James is saying here. Elijah was a man who jealously guarded the things of God in his soul and was determined to protect what was godly from the ravages of the leaders of his day, king Ahab and his wife Jezebel. In our own times, Christian faith is indeed under attack both from the resurgence of other religions throughout the world, and also from secularism and atheism in its various forms through the Western world. We should expect such things. However, perhaps the greatest dangers come from within, because there are many examples of how evils have infiltrated the church to draw otherwise godly people away from the heart of God in the Gospel. For example, some examples of televised Christianity are painful to watch because of their flagrant commercialism and lack of genuine focus on Jesus and God. I will leave you to add your own thoughts about what is wrong within God's church, but the truth we find in James is this. God's people are called to fight for what is right within the church, and make sure, as Elijah did for Israel, that it remains pure.

Sins, mine and ours?

This passage of scripture reminds me that sin is a community matter as well as an individual one. Sin is not just individual it is collective. People tend to join in the sins they see other people do, just as the Israelites 'joined in' the worship of Ba'al under the reign of Ahab and Jezebel. We need the Elijah's within our communities to rise up and confront our irreligion and false gods today!

Ideas for what to do

- Reflect on the communal sins of society today. How can they be confronted? Take the time necessary to pray through what God is calling you to do.
- Write a resolution to your church council which suggests that your church should properly explore the use of healing in its services.

Questions (for use in groups)

1. Read back over some of the stories of Elijah in 1 Kings 17 and 18 to check out what James says about him in his letter.
2. To what extent is the church of today effected by sins which people try to ignore as not being bad enough to worry about?
3. Have you any experience of helping other people to come to terms with their sin, so that they return to a path of discipleship? How may we gain this essential skill?

Final Prayer

Great Creator;
Powerful Lord!
Glorious Redeemer;
Wonderful friend!
You are worthy
Of our highest praise;
I give you my all,
To follow You always.
AMEN