

For Better or For Worse

James 5:13-20

3 April 2022 | Grace Bible Church Corinda | Ben Shannon

Big Question: How do we face trials?

Big Idea: In sickness and in health – grow up.

Introduction

'Now for it! Now for the last gasp!' said Sam as he struggled to his feet. He bent over Frodo, rousing him gently. Frodo groaned; but with a great effort of will he staggered up; and then he fell upon his knees again. He raised his eyes with difficulty to the dark slopes of Mount Doom towering above him, and then pitifully he began to crawl forward on his hands.

Sam looked at him and wept in his heart, but no tears came to his dry and stinging eyes. 'I said I'd carry him, if it broke my back,' he muttered, 'and I will!'

'Come, Mr. Frodo!' he cried. 'I can't carry it for you, but I can carry you and it as well. So up you get! Come on, Mr. Frodo dear! Sam will give you a ride. Just tell him where to go, and he'll go.'¹

That's a snippet from *The Lord of the Rings*, which I've seen described as, "A pacifist and his friend beat a minor God."²

In the final throes of the story, just short of completing his quest, Frodo literally falls down and can't go any further.

His faithful friend Sam helps him to complete the quest by not just carrying Frodo's burden, but Frodo himself.

Tolkien once described Sam as the chief hero of the book.³

The story reminds us that we don't have to go through hardships all by ourselves.

As Christians, we don't have to defeat God, he's on our side.

We can turn to God in dependent prayer when we've got a heavy burden to carry.

But the Lord's also given us the gift of the church, brothers and sisters who can help shoulder the burden when we're struggling.

They mightn't be able to solve our problems or completely take the load off, but they can help us, especially by praying.

Outline

Today's the last talk in our series in the letter of James while it mightn't be an epic, it's been an epic ride.

{DP} James's deeply concerned about giving us wisdom for living our faith in a fallen world.

Working through this letter has been a challenge for us to grow up towards full maturity in Christ.

We mightn't be all grown up yet, but we've seen more clearly what it looks like to be a mature Christian.

Hopefully you can remember back to last week, when we looked at what it means to live expecting Jesus to return and judge.

Don't live for bling, but wait on the king.

We're not the masters of our own fate, so we should make our plans in submission to God.

We're not the captain of our soul, so we condemn ourselves when we tread on others.

We wait patiently on king Jesus to come back, judge and make all things right.

This week, we've come to the end of the letter.

New Testament letters and other letters from around the same time finish with encouragements to pray and remarks about people's health.

It feels to me almost like James ran out of paper, given that it ends so abruptly, but he does both – encourages us to pray about health.

{DP} It's a fitting end as he winds up the topic of how to deal with trials.

The big idea for this final section is **in sickness and in health – grow up**.

Just as most of the verses fall into the third point, that's where we're going to be spending most of our time too.

- To the suffering... pray (v13a)
- To the cheerful... sing (v13b)
- To the weak... call (vv14-18)
- To the strong... intervene (vv19-20)

To the suffering... pray (v13a)

To all those who are suffering, you need to pray.

This isn't just some random advice that jumped into his mind as James was wrapping up his letter.

Last week we saw James say something specifically to people who are suffering.

He said to be patient, verse seven, stand firm, verse eight, because the judge is coming, verse nine.

The blessed people are the ones who persevere.

One of the reasons that we struggle to be patient is because we want to do something.

We all know people – some who are here – who’ve got ants in their pants – they just can’t sit still and always have to be doing something.

When we’re in trouble, even if it seems like there’s nothing else we can do, there’s one thing we can do.

We can pray.

{DP} What should we pray?

It’d be breathtakingly presumptuous to demand an explanation from God.

There’s nothing wrong with asking that God would take the trial away, yet you need to recognise that if he didn’t take away Paul’s “thorn in the flesh,” then he mightn’t take away yours either.⁴

Do you remember what James said way back at the start of the book?

You might like to flip back a few pages with me to the start of the letter.

James 1:3–4 NIV11 ³ because you know that the testing of your faith produces perseverance. ⁴ Let perseverance finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything.

{DP} You might remember that we diagrammed it like this.

A trial becomes a test when it’s met with faith and leads to endurance, maturity and life.

James encourages us to endure even if the suffering isn’t taken away because God’s working to mature us.

Perhaps a better thing to pray for then is what James told us in verse five.

There, he says to pray for wisdom.

James 1:5 NIV11 ⁵ If any of you lacks wisdom, you should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to you.

In verse two of chapter four, James told us “You do not have because you do not ask God.”

We often don’t pray, asking God for our needs or we ask God with the motive of fulfilling our own pleasures rather than for wisdom to persevere.⁵

{DP} Deep down, we know praying’s a much better response than getting angry or wallowing in our own self-pity or complaining against God and others.

Yet too many times praying’s the last thing that we really think to do when our backs are against the wall.

This’s a good reminder that prayer works.

In prayer we get to come as children and ask our Father of heavenly lights, from whom every good and maturing gift comes, to provide for our every need.

Prayer brings our expectations into line with God's and reminds us of our place in the world as we express our utter dependence on him.

So when you're in trouble, pray and keep on praying.

To the cheerful... sing (v13b)

Secondly, to the cheerful... sing.

Anyone who's of good courage should praise or psalm.

Even if your natural impulse when you're in a fix is to Philippians 4:6, it can still be hard to turn to God when things are going well.

When you're not busy enough that feel like you've GOT to pray.

Surely God deserves praise as much when life's going well as when he snatches victory from the jaws of defeat?

While that's true, I'm not sure that's the main thing that James has in mind here.

I was really puzzling over the second half of verse thirteen because it sticks out for being so positive.

And James is my man; he's a realist.

How does being cheerful fit with the context of suffering?

Until the penny finally dropped when I re-read chapter one and was reminded of the mindset that we're meant to have in trials.

{DP} We're meant to be joyful when we encounter trials.

James 1:2 NIV11 ² Consider it pure joy, my brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of many kinds,

I suspect that he's very much still got people who are suffering trials in mind.

Specifically, Christians who're mature enough to find joy in trials because they're able to understand that God's working trials for our good.

It makes sense, doesn't it, to praise God when we realise that he's using trials for our good, to mature our faith?

{DP} We tend to think that God is most glorified in us when we're most satisfied.

And by that we mean an Instagram-able meal, clothes with the right labels, harmony in our family, the right Tik Tok followers and an easy day at work.

John Piper says, rightly I think, that “God is most glorified in us when we’re most satisfied IN HIM.”

Joy allows us to find satisfaction in God alone even when we’re facing trials.

This isn’t an attempt to stick our heads in the sand and deny reality.

It’s actually the opposite because it allows us to have a true perspective on reality and see what God’s doing.

We are children of the Creator and Sustainer of the Universe.

And our maturity and godliness – our hearts – are much more important to him than our comfort.

God doesn’t want us to be deluded into putting our assurance in a faith that doesn’t work.

Praise God that he loves us enough to help us put to death the filthy, vile, shameful and pathetic sin that we have in our lives.

To the cheerful... sing.

To the weak... call (vv14-18)

The context here is clearly people who’re suffering: if you’re in trouble, pray; to the cheerful, sing; and if you’re weak, then call.

People have come to vastly different conclusions about what the “plain” reading of this part of James is.

I haven’t checked in to see where everyone’s landed, but earlier this week the pastors of the three Grace Bible Churches held different views.

How you understand these verses doesn’t change the gospel, but it does change what we do.

Now, OF COURSE, I’ll share the right view with you, but honestly it’s tough.

James’s talking about someone who’s suffering is much more than just the general suffering of trials that he was talking about in verse thirteen.

He takes the time to unpack someone whose suffering is really intense.

James describes them as being sick in verse fourteen.

So sick that they can’t get to see other Christians, so the elders need to come to them.

I was going to say that the big debate is whether James is talking about someone physically sick or spiritually sick here.

But there doesn't seem to be much debate as the vast majority of modern scholars I could find think that it's physical sickness.

However, there's still an adamant minority of people insist that this is spiritual sickness.

The word itself is used in the New Testament sometimes to mean physical and sometimes spiritual sickness.

I'll admit that I like to have my cake and eat it too, but I see both physical and spiritual weakness here.

I suspect that we misunderstand this verse when we think it must be one or the other.

It seems to me to make the best sense of everything in the passage.

I've read a number of people who seem to be trying harder to justify their convictions about healing rather than listen to what James actually says.

We can fall into the trap of trying to tear apart the physical, mental and spiritual aspects of our being when they're interrelated.

We know that our physical health can have a big impact on our mental health.

People who've experienced depression have told me that exercise is one of the best tools for helping them to feel better.

Beyond Blue say that "regular physical activity is a good way to help prevent or manage mild anxiety and depression."⁶

What's true of us physically and mentally is also true of us spiritually.

Serious physical sickness can also be a spiritual trial for us.

It's harder to be kind and patient with others when you're feeling crook with a serious case of man-flu.

Physical sickness can cause spiritual depression.

And it works the other way because Paul tells the Corinthians that their physical sickness is caused by a spiritual problem.

A number of times in the gospels, it's confusing whether Jesus and the disciples are healing spiritual sickness or physical sickness because they heal both!

I think James is talking about someone who's suffering physically AND spiritually – physically sick AND spiritually weak – since they can be related.

They're either so spiritually burdened that they've also got a physical response or their physical sickness is a spiritual trial.

Given what James said in verse fourteen, then they should pray.

But what if they're too sick to pray?

It seems like they need someone to come and pray for them because they don't have the strength to pray for themselves.

When we're struggling on our own we might be tempted to go solo, but it's right and appropriate and good to call on the elders for help.

There's a sense in which it could be any other Christian, given what James says in verse 16.

I'm Australian and so I'm really nervous about anything that suggests that elders have superpowers or an extra special line to God.

Yet elders are meant to be men who've got God on speed dial and so when you're not doing well, it makes sense to call on the men God's gifted to lead the church to come and help.

One of our privileges as elders is to come and visit and pray for saints who can't pray for themselves.

That's the kind of situation James has in mind: the elders come and pray for someone who's too burdened to pray for themselves.

Interestingly, this's the only time in the NT where praying OVER someone is used.

Perhaps it means laying hands on them or standing over the sick person to pray – I'm not sure that the specifics matter all that much.

I've never done this because I've never been asked and I've never seen it done.

It seems biblical to me and so you're free to ask, but whoever's the first one needs to know that I don't really know what I'm doing.

This's another one of those "they didn't cover THAT in Bible College" things.

I do think James is talking about quite rare circumstances here.

The elders will happily try to support you whenever you need it.

However this seems to be a really acute and on the whole, unusual situation.

I'm not going to come and pray over you and anoint you when you've just got a sniffle.

But if you're sick, lonely and struggling because you can't get out, you're too weak to pray for yourself, then we'll happily come and pray for you.

When the elders come, James talks about them anointing with oil.

Now, before you ask John and I to rock up at your house with a bottle of Home Brand Extra Virgin Olive Oil, it might be worth asking what the purpose of the oil is.

There's only one other place in the New Testament that talks about anointing with oil, which's in the context of driving out demons and healing sick people – both spiritual and physical weakness.⁷

It could be that the oil's being used as medicine because that's how oils were sometimes used in the ancient world, but I don't think that's very likely here.

Practically, I'm nervous about elders medicating people – especially with untested and unproven oils – that's not our area of expertise.

It's particularly puzzling why someone who thinks this is only spiritual weakness would think this's medicinal oil.

Elders have the spiritual power of prayer rather than being medicine-men who hand out physical tonics.

It seems much more likely that the oil is symbolic.

I'm not sure exactly why because James doesn't tell us and I can't find a clear reason elsewhere in the New Testament!

Perhaps it's a physical demonstration that the person has been prayed for.

Whatever the reason, the oil seems to be far less important than the actual praying.

Roman Catholics use these verses in support of their doctrine called Extreme Unction or more recently Anointing the Sick, which is part of the Last Rites.

They believe that it's a sacrament that confers grace, so can only be done by a priest and not an elder.

The magic words and the magic potion give a special booster of grace to the person who's unwell.

I don't think that's what's happening here though.

Verse fifteen is really where the real difficulty is because it just sounds so certain.

James says that the prayer offered in faith will make the sick person well.

James uses a different word for prayer here than in verse fourteen and it means intense prayer.

Will the prayer ensure that you'll be made well?

This passage has been used as a justification for faith healers who guarantee that they'll fix your sore back or gammy leg with prayer.

Being cautious about spiritual gifts is one of the distinctives of our church.

The gift of healing is being able to heal someone on demand, completely and instantaneously.

I've heard about a whole heap of stuff that claims to be the gift of healing but doesn't seem to meet the criteria of healing that's in the Bible.

This's so serious because it's cruel and unloving to giving false hope, especially to people in chronic pain, that they'll definitely be healed.

I don't think that's what James's talking about.

It's important to say that just because James isn't talking about the gift of healing, that doesn't stop God from healing however and whenever he wants.

God does heal our physical bodies and that's why we pray for people who are sick.

Sometimes that'll be through the ordinary means of doctors and it could also be supernatural.

James isn't talking about the gift of healing to use on demand so much as the gift of humility to see ourselves rightly before God.

Prayer is an important tactic because when we pray, we ask God to help us in our struggle.

More literally than making you well, James is saying that you will be saved.

The fact that James uses the word 'saved' might suggest that the problem is at least in part spiritual.

However, the word can also be used to describe physical healing as well.

I'm assuming that this's a Christian and so we're not praying to bring them into the kingdom.

Instead, we're praying for them to have the strength to cling to God.

James often has the end in mind and so it's a good fit to understand this as praying that they'll hold onto their faith until the end.

That seems very biblical, even if it's someone else praying on your behalf.

Any illness needs the right treatment.

Two Panadol isn't going to do very much to take the edge of the pain off, let alone fix a compound fracture in your leg.

A physical illness can be cured by ordinary medicine and the body healing itself.

Unless it's a spiritual problem causing the physical illness.

And if the problem is spiritual, then a spiritual treatment is needed.

A prayer offered in faith will make the person well if there's a spiritual problem.

If a person is sick because of sin, then that sin needs to be dealt with.

They're going to be made well by asking for forgiveness since God promises to forgive our sins if we confess them to him.

1 John 1:9 NIV11 ⁹ If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness.

If you repent of your sin, the Lord will raise the sick person up from their spiritual situation – from the depths (a la Psalm 42) – and also possibly from their bed.

Let me try and clear up some of the misunderstandings that we might have this morning.

All sickness, in general, is a consequence of sin.

Illness is part of living in a sinful world, but God created a world that was very good and not full of sickness and illness.

That only started when Adam and Eve decided to rebel against God.

However, we need to be clear that not all sickness is the direct result of a specific, personal sin.

What I am NOT saying is that if you're sick, then it MUST be because of a sin in your life.

You don't need to spend all day trying to discover this secret sin that's making you sick.

Job's friends assumed that he must've been cursed by God and they were wrong.

But some sickness IS caused by sin.

If you're sick, it COULD be because of sin.

That sounds really out there, even for some Christians.

However, we've got good, Biblical reason to think that in SOME CASES, we can be sick because of our sin.

Take for instance 1 Corinthians 11. Paul makes it shockingly clear that you can be physically sick because of a sin problem.

Some Christians have given me funny looks as if that's the only thing that it COULDN'T be.

We need to be careful of ruling that out as a possibility.

It's humanist thinking, not Christian, to think that medicine and science understands and can fix everything.

It really is worth asking, so don't be surprised if you're really sick and I ask you whether it could be a spiritual problem.

I'm going to go where angels fear to tread and say that one area where this seems to be the case is mental health.

Because mental health was treated like a joke for so long, I'm so thankful that it's taken seriously now.

I really appreciate doctors – psychologists and psychiatrists and GPs – who can help with all kinds of ways to help manage mental illness.

I'll say again, I am NOT saying that if you're struggling with a mental health condition then it has a spiritual cause.

It is likely possible that your mental health issues are medical and so it pays to speak to your doctor.

At the same time, it could be a sin issue that's causing the sickness.

Depression and anxiety can, at least in part, have spiritual causes.

Science and medicine can't fix spiritual problems.

Even your Christian doctor mightn't feel like they can ask you about that.

So, when I ask you questions about your spiritual health, please don't get offended, I think it's an important part of caring for your soul.

And I'm going to assume that few if any other people are going to be asking you those questions.

James gets more general in verse sixteen, which he begins with 'therefore'.

Because the elders can be called upon to pray for someone when they hit rock bottom, the whole community should confess their sins to each other.

That's a really good way of ensuring that you don't get to that point where you're weighed down.

Keep a short account with God by confessing your sin to each other.

Interestingly, this's the only verse in NT that calls us to confess sins to each other.

Special Methodist meetings sprang out of this verse.

I don't think we need special meetings so much as a culture of confessing sin and extending forgiveness like God does.

One of the reasons we can be scared to confess our sins is because we might expect (perhaps rightly) that we'll receive condemnation rather than grace.

Christian communities show what God's like when we show mercy and extend forgiveness to confessed sin.

James gives the example of Elijah, who you can read about in 1 Kings 17-18.

With their Jewish background, everyone James was writing to would've known Elijah because he was the great a miracle worker.

He prayed and fire came down from heaven and defeated the prophets of Baal.

He even lay on top of a widow's son and brought him back to life, yet James doesn't mention either of these events.

If I was James, that's what I'd focus on.

However, James draws our attention to the rain.

Elijah prayed intensely and it didn't rain, James tells us, for three and a half years.

Why did Elijah pray that?

Well, it was because of King Ahaz's sin and specifically because of his idolatry.

When Ahaz repented, Elijah prayed and it rained again.

In Israel, what the king did affected the whole nation.

When King Ahaz repented and confessed his sin, he did so on behalf of the whole nation.

James goes out of his way to tells us that Elijah was a human being just like us.

Elijah was a big cheese and yet James makes it really clear that he was just a man.

His prayers were powerful.

They resulted in Ahaz's repentance and a whole nation turning around.

When we're weighed down and broken, that's when we especially need the help of others.

So James encourages anyone who's weak to call for help from others.

To the strong... intervene (vv19-20)

Finally, we've reached the last part of this section and also the last paragraph of the book.

It feels like an abrupt end to a letter, but it also kind of ties everything together nicely too.

It's a warning about the deadliness of a dead faith and so the need to call people back.

Throughout the whole letter, James has been speaking to people who are Christians, often calling them brothers and sisters.

Christians with some maturity problems for sure, since he also calls them spiritually adulterous people!

But definitely Christians.

Those who are doing well – we might call them the strong – have a responsibility to help anyone who's weak amongst them.⁸

We persevere at watching our life and doctrine closely so that we can save ourselves and others.⁹

{DP} We're all prone to wander from the truth from time to time.

In James' language, that's not having a faith that shows it's living by being worked out in action.

The thing about wandering from the truth is that you often don't realise it even though others might be able to see it clear as day.

When we're driven by our sinful desires, we may let go of our lifeline and move away from the word of truth which saved us.

When someone wanders from the truth, that's a bad place to be.

The Bible keeps calling us back, but often those are the times that we're not even trying to listen to God's Word.

God's given the gift of the church, other Christians, to help muster wandering sheep and bring them back to the word of truth.

Someone should bring that person back and that person is you.

Did you see that James doesn't just single this out for the elders to do – this's for everyone.

There's a legit danger of being the busybody who spends all their time minding everyone else's business, but we don't want to swing the pendulum so far the other way that we use that as an excuse for not doing anything.

We need to be careful not to neglect this responsibility, but take it seriously.

The goal isn't to use shame and condemnation to whip other people into shape.

We don't reach out as those who are better and superior, but as fellow sinners who've experienced God's lavish grace.

We're always seeking to restore, which is why we try to use gentle words rather than a cattle prod.

Paul wrote to the Galatian churches:

Galatians 6:1a NIV11 ¹ Brothers and sisters, if someone is caught in a sin, you who live by the Spirit should restore that person gently.

What does that look like practically?

It starts with asking something as simple as "Howzit goin'?"

The next step might be to say something like “I’ve heard you say…” or “What I’ve noticed is…”

It’s right to make judgments about what the person says, but you’re not there to make a final determination on their actions.

You can ask things like, “I wonder if…” or “Do you think what might be going on is…”

Remember that we’re aiming for the heart – the level of desires – and not just actions, although actions might indicate what’s going on in someone’s heart.

Once a sheep who’s wandered is called back, that’s often not the end of it.

You’ll be left scratching your head when you see them, sometimes immediately, wander off again.

Extra grace and patience is required because sometimes they need to be rescued again and again.

A bit like the sheep in this video which I’m sure some of you have seen, but is worth seeing again.¹⁰ {DP}

This’s a legitimate time to act, to intervene, because there’s a danger bigger than a ditch here.

We need to remember that we’re talking about life and death.

Sin has serious consequences.

It’s not loving to allow someone to whistle as they wander off into hell.

If you know that a building’s on fire, it’s not loving to let someone just stay in it.

You call on them to come out of the flames to save them from dying.

James says:

James 5:20 NIV11 ²⁰ remember this: Whoever turns a sinner from the error of their way will save them from death and cover over a multitude of sins.

What does he mean that this will cover over a multitude of sins?

For anyone who’s wandered from the truth, there really is forgiveness to be found.

But you have to turn from your sin and turn back to God.

If we confess our sins to God, he really will forgive them no matter how bad – or how trivial – they might seem.

Jesus gave his life so that our sins could be covered over by dying on the cross so that our sins could be washed away if we place our trust in him.

The strong don’t sit back, they intervene for the good of their wandering brother or sister.

Conclusion

This's a fitting end to the book because James is all about having a living faith – a faith that actually does something.

As we live out our faith, we need to grow up.

God allows (and causes) us to face trials, not because he's evil, mean or vindictive, but because he uses them to grow our faith and mature us.

We need wisdom to navigate a fallen world so that we're friends with God and not the world, and James has given it to us in spades.

The human condition isn't a problem "out there" but a problem in here – in our hearts and misplaced desires.

Often our words will show what's really going on in our hearts, so we need to tame our tongues not as a way of masking what's going on in our hearts but by allowing God to tame our hearts themselves.

Don't let money get in the way, whether that's judging others for having it or not, trampling on others to get it or being trampled on.

God opposes the proud, so don't think that you're the one who should set the agenda.

Above all, remember that a faith that doesn't result in action is dead.

That's why God gives us people to call us back when we wander.

May we not be like people who listen to the word and not do what it says.

My prayer is that we wouldn't just throw away what we've learned like someone who looks intently into a mirror and then walks away and forgets what they look like.

James 1:25 NIV11 ²⁵ But whoever looks intently into the perfect law that gives freedom, and continues in it—not forgetting what they have heard, but doing it—they will be blessed in what they do.

Let's pray.

¹ J. R. R. Tolkien, *The Return of the King: Being the Third Part of the Lord of the Rings* (London: HarperCollins, 2012), 1230, https://archive.org/details/returnofkingbein0000tolk_j1m4.

² missjardinera, 'I Can't Carry It for You, but I Can Carry You.', Reddit Post, *R/Tumblr*, 7 February 2018, www.reddit.com/r/tumblr/comments/7vz087/i_cant_carry_it_for_you_but_i_can_carry_you/.

³ 'Letter 131 - Tolkien Gateway', 131, accessed 2 April 2022, http://tolkiengateway.net/wiki/Letter_131.

⁴ 2 Corinthians 12:7-9

⁵ James 4:3

⁶ beyondblue, 'Keeping Active - Beyond Blue' (beyondblue), accessed 1 April 2022, <https://www.beyondblue.org.au/get-support/staying-well/keeping-active>.

⁷ Mark 6:12–13

⁸ 1 Thessalonians 5:14

⁹ 1 Timothy 4:16

¹⁰ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bLZW-kWr1F4>

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Big Question: How do we face trials?

Big Idea: In sickness and in health – grow up.

Discussion Questions

1. What are some of God's purposes in suffering?
2. How does praying help when we're suffering?
3. Why do you think he has a word to the cheerful in verse 13?
4. What would suggest that James has physical sickness in mind? What would suggest that James has spiritual sickness in mind?
5. How does the role of elders (v14) compare to the whole congregation (v16)?
6. What grounds are there for saying that a physical condition has spiritual causes?
7. What do you think the purpose of the oil is?
8. How should a strong Christian pursue someone who's wandered off? What's the right and wrong way?