

James 5:13-20

James 5:13-20 Is anyone among you suffering? Let him pray. Is anyone cheerful? Let him sing psalms. (14) 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. (15) And the prayer of faith will save the sick, and the Lord will raise him up. And if he has committed sins, he will be forgiven. (16) Confess your trespasses to one another, and pray for one another, that you may be healed. The effective, fervent prayer of a righteous man avails much. (17) Elijah was a man with a nature like ours, and he prayed earnestly that it would not rain; and it did not rain on the land for three years and six months. (18) And he prayed again, and the heaven gave rain, and the earth produced its fruit. (19) Brethren, if anyone among you wanders from the truth, and someone turns him back, (20) let him know that he who turns a sinner from the error of his way will save a soul from death and cover a multitude of sins.

Questions On The Text

What are the best responses to suffering and good times?

Verse 13: The best response to suffering is prayer, and the best response to good times is praise. The word “suffering” refers to all kinds of hardship and affliction. When everything is going well and we feel happy, we should show our appreciation to God for His goodness with songs of praise and worship.

What is the best way to deal with sickness?

Verses 14-15: The sick person is to call for the elders of the church so that they can pray for him. The elders are then to anoint the sick with oil. Anointing with oil is a symbol of the activity of the Holy Spirit. (See 1 Samuel 16:13). According to this passage, not only will the prayer of faith bring healing, but the sick person’s sins will be forgiven too.

What is the responsibility of the sick person?

Verse 16: The sick person’s responsibility is two-fold. First, they have the responsibility of initiating the process where the elders pray for the sick; this responsibility of taking the initiative does not rest with the elders but with the sick person. Second, they are to confess their sins. The word “confess” implies a complete, open and honest admission.

This shows that there can be a link between sin and sickness, and there are times when we should confess our sins to other people, and not just to God. In this case, confession of sin is followed by prayer which is then expected to result in physical healing.

Once confession of sin is made (and, presumably, there’s genuine repentance too!) prayer is now able to be effective. See Psalm 66:18 and 1 Peter 3:7 for examples of how sin can seriously hinder prayer.

What example is given of effective prayer for a righteous man?

Verses 17-18: Elijah the prophet is a great example of answered prayer for a man of righteousness. (See 1 Kings 17:1; 18:1,41-45.) The point that James brings out in this story is that Elijah was an ordinary human being like us, but because he prayed earnestly that it wouldn’t rain, it didn’t rain for three and a half years. Then when he prayed for rain, it rained. The prayers of righteous people achieve great things.

Interestingly, it does not specifically mention in the Old Testament that Elijah’s prayers resulted in a drought for “three years and six months.” This was probably handed down by tradition; nevertheless, this is confirmed by Jesus in Luke 4:25.

What promise concludes James' letter?

Verses 19-20: The phrase "anyone among you" refers to a person in the community of believers. The promise is that if anyone among the believers wanders from the truth, and someone brings him back, they will have saved a soul from death.

Bringing a person back to the path of truth also covers a multitude of sins. Compare this with 1 Peter 4:8 which says that "love will cover a multitude of sins," as well as with Proverbs 10:12. The phrase "turns him back" is literally "to cause him to turn around" and is a reference to repentance since an about-face is the key element in repentance. "Cover a multitude of sins" refers to the forgiveness that the returning sinner will experience when they repent.

Further Questions For Discussion:

How should Christians respond in tough times? What about during good times?

Why do you think that anointing with oil is important?

Do you believe that God heals the sick today, and what role should your elders play in this?

Why is confession of sin so important?

How does unconfessed sin affect a person's prayer effectiveness?

How can you go about turning a wandering brother or sister back to the paths of righteousness?