

A misty forest of evergreen trees, with a white rectangular box at the top containing the title.

PERSPECTIVE

DECEMBER 2022

*How Should
the Suffering Pray?*

WHAT JAMES 5 TEACHES ABOUT PRAYER

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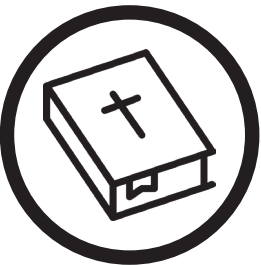
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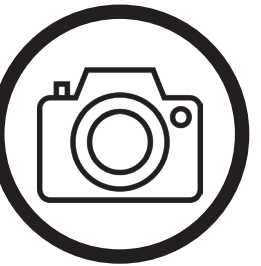
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How Should the Suffering Pray? What James Teaches About Prayer

Recently Julia and I purchased a baby swing to help soothe Brooks. The only problem is that it doesn't swing. We had to get rid of it because a baby swing that doesn't swing is worthless! Too many of us think prayer is like that baby swing—it *doesn't do anything, so why waste my time?* You may not neglect prayer because you know God commands us to pray, but deep down, you may wonder if your prayers accomplish anything. I want you to believe that prayer works! Of course, God doesn't always give us what we ask, but Scripture teaches us that the prayers of Christians work.

In James 5:13-18, James focuses on prayer and, specifically, the fact that prayer works; it does something. This passage can be a little hard to understand, but when we do, these verses and the truth they contain will cause our prayer life to grow.

THE NECESSITY OF PRAYER (VV.13–15)

James highlights three different situations believers may find themselves in. First, are you suffering? If so, you should pray. Second, are you cheerful? If so, praise God through prayer. Third, are you severely sick? If so, consider calling on the church's elders to pray for and with you. Every believer falls into at least one of these three categories. So, which one most applies to you? Let's look at each in turn.

ARE YOU SUFFERING?

James begins by commanding those who are suffering to pray. Believers suffer in all sorts of ways. You should pray if you are struggling to be content in your singleness. You should pray if you are anxious about the future. You should pray if your day does not go as planned. In all suffering, however major or minor, you should pray.

With this instruction, James is following the pattern found in the Psalms. David and the other psalmists consistently cried to God for help because they knew only God could help. When we are suffering, it is tempting to rely on ourselves, especially during a minor trial. However, it is also easy to only rely on others for help. After all, God has given us the church (Heb. 3:12–13; Mk. 10:29–31). People are a source of comfort. Their help may even be God's answer to prayer. But James and the psalmists remind us that, ultimately, only God can help us, which is why believers should pray when suffering.

Do you ever fail to pray because you don't believe God

will answer your prayer? Does prayer *feel* like a waste of time? Let me share another baby example (I'm a new dad, so bear with me!). Bathing our infant son may feel like a waste of time. We clean him up and down, but practically the moment he comes out, it feels like he's dirty again. Parents, can you relate? Why do we keep bathing him? Because he needs it. It's good for him. We may doubt it at times, but washing works. Our prayers can feel like they don't change anything. Still, failing to pray is the mark of foolishness. Consider James 4:2, "*You do not have because you do not ask.*" Consider also Jesus' words in John 16:24, "*Ask, and you will receive.*" God wants us to pray when we're suffering. He may not remove the suffering, at least not yet. But we have every reason to believe he will help us as he sees fit.

Again, this doesn't mean we should expect to receive everything we ask God to give us. There is a difference between praying according to God's will and praying in submission to God's will. For example, God will make you content if you pray for contentment. After all, God wants us to be content (Heb. 13:5). It is God's revealed will for our lives. But we have no similar guarantee of a spouse, a job promotion, or even deep friendships. God *may* give these to you. They *are* good things. But he may withhold them from you, too. Even in the withholding, God is faithful. He has different and better plans for you in his perfect wisdom.

This withholding can be discouraging. But, when we don't get what we ask, remember that Jesus can relate. He prayed for an alternate way than the cross. The Father answered, "No." Nonetheless, Jesus submitted his will to the Father's will, and Jesus died on the cross.

Brothers and sisters, are you suffering and pleading with God to take away your trial? Keep praying. God may take that trial away, but your prayers still work even if he doesn't. God is doing what is best in your life. And even in prayers that feel futile, you are walking in the footsteps of Jesus, who can sympathize with you.

ARE YOU CHEERFUL?

James commands the cheerful to praise God (5:13). You may be joyful because you are getting a job promotion, having a baby, developing deep friendships, or transitioning into an easier season of life. These are all reasons to praise God!

But why is cheerfulness a reason to pray? I think it is because James knows we can forget God when life is good. King Agur in Proverbs also knew this: "*Give me neither poverty nor riches; feed me with the food that is needful for*

me, lest I be full and deny you and say, 'Who is the LORD?'" (Prov. 30:8-9). Constantly praising God reminds us that everything we have is a gift from God. Just as we praise God in song, we should praise God in prayer. Thank him for what he has given you. Remember that the reason for your cheerfulness is a gift from your Father in heaven.

If we forget God when life is going well, it is harder to keep praying when suffering knocks on our door. Perhaps this is why James returns to the problem of suffering.

ARE YOU SEVERELY SICK?

In a most remarkable verse, James invites the severely sick person to call on the church's elders (5:14). The word "sick" can refer to someone who is spiritually weak, but it likely refers here to someone severely ill. We see this word used elsewhere in the New Testament:

- Lazarus was "ill" to the point of death (Jn. 11:1-6);
- Epaphroditus was ill and nearly dying (Phil. 2:26-27);
- the official from Capernaum had a son severely ill (Jn. 4:46-47)
- the "sick" who had no other way to be healed wanted to touch Jesus' garments (Mk. 6:56)

Assuming James is referring to someone severely, physically ill, it appears medicine has proven futile. Thus, James invites the elders to get involved. Notice that the severely sick person is to take the initiative and call upon the elders to pray for healing. Why? Perhaps to demonstrate he believes God can heal him!

But why reach out to church elders? We know our shepherds are responsible for keeping watch over our souls (Heb. 13:17). They are to pay careful attention to the flock (Acts 20:28). Thus, we can trust godly elders probably won't *only* pray for the healing of our bodies but will counsel and pray for our souls as well.

James invites the elders to anoint the sick with oil in the name of the Lord. There is nothing magical about being anointed with oil. We have reason to believe this is a symbolic action. Take the fact that the disciples often anointed sick people with oil before healing them (Mk. 6:31). Biblical scholar Douglas Moo argues that such a person was being set apart for God's special attention.ⁱ

The elders' prayer is called a prayer of faith (5:15). The elders need to believe, too. Deciding to pray for physical healing while anointing the person with oil shows that

the elders trust God *can* physically heal this person. We worship a God who is Lord of nature—including our bodies!

But what will happen when the elders pray for the sick? James continues, "*And the prayer of faith will save the one who is sick, and the Lord will raise him up. And if he has committed sins, he will be forgiven*" (5:15). Clearly, prayer is powerful! Of course, the Bible does not guarantee physical healing. To take verse 15 this way would require us to deny many other passages. Scripture does not promise us a physically healthy life (Acts 14:22). John elsewhere clarifies that we are to ask according to God's will: "*If we ask anything according to God's will, it will be done*" (1 Jn. 5:14). Thus, if it is God's will, this severely sick person will receive physical healing. Please don't miss James' point that prayer is powerful. The severely ill person may have no earthly hope of being healed by medicine, but this person can be restored by prayer if God so chooses.

Notice how James ends verse 15. He says the one who has sinned will receive forgiveness. Could this be because sometimes severe sickness may be the result of sin? It's possible. We read of sin leading to physical suffering, even death, in 1 Corinthians 11:30. Only God knows the reason for our suffering, but it is good, whenever we pray, to confess our sins to the Lord, turn to the blood of Christ, and trust God for forgiveness.

Verses 14 and 15 are strange to our modern ears. They may even have been odd for first-century readers! You may even be embarrassed to call the elders to pray over you. I encourage you to take this passage to heart. Call the elders to pray for you, trusting that God can heal you. Even if he chooses not to, we can trust him to work on our hearts, to encourage us in our faith, and to forgive us of our sins.

THE CORPORATE NATURE OF PRAYER (V. 16)

Verse 16 begins with an important word, "therefore." James shifts from addressing individual believers and the elders to directing the church. He wants believers to pray for those in their local church regularly and to confess sin to one another so that they may receive healing. I want to focus on the importance of praying for one another. It's a command we find throughout the New Testament (Eph. 6:18).

We have a responsibility to pray for the members at Mount Vernon. It is easy to focus on ourselves. There are so many things in our lives that we hope will change. We want to grow in contentment and love for the lost. We

want our children to know Christ. These are good things for which we should pray. But do you pray for others, too?

We should want others to pray for us. James points out that the prayer of the righteous is powerful (5:16). Are you one of the righteous? If you're a Christian, you are! God has declared you *right*—justified—through faith in Jesus Christ because he died for you. When God sees you, he sees the righteous robe of Christ. Christ put on your filthy robe of sin when he died for you on the cross. You now have God's listening ear through Jesus' death on the cross. Thus, God answers the prayer of the righteous, and his prayer "has great power as it is working" (5:16). We should not neglect to pray for one another because the supplication of the righteous is powerful!

A great way to start praying for others is by committing to pray through the membership directory. This practice can seem overwhelming because, as of today, there are 414 members. You only have so much time. Consider praying through one page a day and make your prayers brief. If you have time, you might text that person and tell them you prayed for them. Don't do this to *appear* godly—do it to encourage others. Larry Chandler models this very well—I am so thankful for the texts I've received from him through the years reminding me he is praying for me.

You can do this too! Are you praying for other members? Do you see other members struggling? Do you see areas where they need to grow spiritually? Then, you have good reason to pray for them. As you pray, you can trust God to work in their lives.

Another great way to start praying for each other is by participating in prayer during corporate gatherings. Volunteer to pray on a Sunday evening. This public prayer can be nerve-racking for many reasons, but you don't need to be eloquent like Shakespeare! Remember that you are praying to God and serving the church when you pray aloud. Try not to zone out during Sunday morning prayers. It helps to say, "Amen!" in agreement with what your brother or sister in Christ just prayed. Record what we pray for on Sunday night and pray for them in your devotional time throughout the week.

THE POWER OF PRAYER (VV. 17–18)

James not only tells us but also shows us that prayer is powerful. He gives us an example. James wants us to know we don't need to be anyone special when we pray. We only need to pray.

ELIJAH WAS JUST A MAN

Elijah was one of the most significant Old Testament

prophets. God used him to perform many incredible miracles.

- He provided an endless supply of food (1 Ki. 17:8-16).
- He raised someone from the dead (1 Ki. 17:17-24).
- He called down fire from heaven (2 Ki. 1:9-12).

No wonder some thought Jesus to be the expected Elijah (Mal. 4:5; Mt. 16:14). James, however, does not focus on Elijah's greatness. James emphasizes that Elijah was a man just like us (v. 17). Elijah prayed, and it didn't rain for three years and six months. This answered prayer served as God's judgment against rebellious Israel. Elijah then prayed again, and the clouds burst (v. 18). We may think God answered Elijah's prayer because Elijah was so special. No! It's because he prayed. Elijah was just a man, and James emphasizes this because the power of our prayers is not in the one who prays. You don't have to be someone special. You only have to pray.

Elijah is one example of a man who prayed, and God answered him. There are many more! Joshua prayed, and the sun stood still (Josh. 10). Moses prayed, and God's wrath against Israel relented (Ex. 32). David prayed, and God saved him from Saul. Yet, these significant figures in the Bible were just men. God didn't answer their prayer because they were great but because they prayed.

We may think God would more carefully listen to and faithfully answer our prayers if we were more extraordinary. After all, people pay attention to celebrities. Millions would memorize his plan if LeBron James tweeted his secret to success. If I said the same thing, those millions would probably ignore me—I am not LeBron James. The world works this way, and we may even work this way. God works differently. God does not pay more attention to the prayers of the elders at Mount Vernon. Our prayers' effectiveness depends not on our spiritual position but on the person and work of Jesus Christ.

God destroyed the barrier our sin erected between him and us by sacrificing his Son on the cross and raising him, giving us unfiltered access to God. Now that we're in Christ, God listens to our prayers.

But notice how Elijah prayed. He prayed according to God's will. Let's look at the record of Elijah's prayer in the Old Testament. We realize God *told* Elijah there would be no rain and that about three years later that there would be rain: "*After many days the word of the LORD*

came to Elijah, in the third year, saying, 'Go show yourself to Ahab, and I will send rain upon the earth'" (1 Ki. 18:1). God worked through Elijah's prayer—a prayer offered according to the Word of the Lord (1 Ki. 18:1; 19:41-46). Ordinary people praying according to God's will see their prayers answered.

BROKEN SWINGS BUT NO BROKEN PRAYERS

Back to my broken swing: we may neglect prayer because we think it's worthless. Why do we conclude that our prayers are useless?

- ✦ We are discouraged by what appear to be our many unanswered prayers. Maybe you've prayed for your relatives to trust Christ for years, yet they still love their sins. Eventually, you stop praying because you are disheartened.
- ✦ It is hard work. Some people don't like going to the gym because it takes time to get in shape. It feels better to sit on the couch and watch a good movie until the doctor encourages us to get healthy. Prayer takes time, energy, and thoughtfulness.
- ✦ We are ashamed of our sins. We know God answers prayer, but we don't think God answers our prayer because we think we aren't good enough.
- ✦ We don't know what to pray for. With so many things to pray for, we get overwhelmed.

In the face of all these reasons, James 5 teaches us that prayer is always powerful.

At Mount Vernon, as we close out a year thinking deeply about prayer and in light of James 5:13–18, would you strive to grow in your prayer life? Here are three ways:

FIRST, SIMPLY DEVOTE MORE TIME TO PRAYING.

Extend your prayer time even just a few minutes. Maybe you can decrease the time you use technology—computers, phones, and television. You might fear missing out, but the only thing you miss out on (if you fail to pray) is deeper communion with God.

SECOND, HAVE A PLAN WHEN YOU PRAY.

Pick a passage in the Bible to pray through each day. A chapter or a section works fine. For example, pick one chapter in Proverbs a day and pray through that book over a month. When finished, pick another book and do the same. Or use what you are currently reading in your quiet times as a launching pad for your prayers.

THIRD, PRAY BOLDLY.

Remember, God promises to give us whatever we ask according to his will (1 John 5:14). God has revealed his will for how we ought to live in his Word. Therefore, as we pray the Bible, we expect God will answer our prayers as he promised. Praying with confidence may seem presumptuous, but it shows that we are confident our faithful God will keep his holy word.

Julia and I threw that worthless swing away. Thankfully, our prayers are not like that swing; they work. They are powerful. Not only are we commanded by God to pray, but we can trust that God, in his perfect, sovereign wisdom, will answer every prayer as he sees fit.

— Darius Tucker

¹Douglas J. Moo, *The Pillar New Testament Commentary: The Letter of James* 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2021), 306.

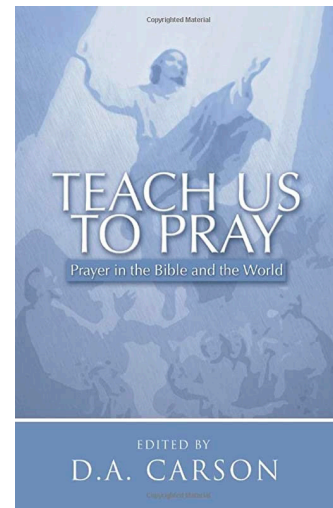
Teach Us to Pray: *Prayer in the Bible and the World*

Edited by D.A. Carson

D.A. Carson's *Teach Us to Pray* seeks to build a robust theology of prayer, engage with worldwide perspectives on prayer, and—most importantly—call Christians to pray more and better. The book contains four main sections: the biblical theology of prayer, prayer in world religions, prayer practices in the global church, and the call to prayer. Each part contains several essays addressing specific topics from the prayers in Revelation, to prayer in Hindu thought, to affirmations and critiques of prayer habits in the Latin American church, and the list goes on. Each essay written by a different author provides a highly academic look at its topic and reasoning as to why it deserves special attention from the average Christian.

This book is an excellent resource for anyone who wants to learn more about prayer and practice praying more and deeper. I would encourage you not to let the intimidating size (all 362 pages!) keep you from picking up this helpful book. Consider adding this to your personal library to consult an essay or two as needed. Perhaps you have burning questions about imprecatory psalms; if so, Kyu Nam Jung's article, "Prayer in the Psalms," is for you. Maybe you want to understand your Muslim friend's take on prayer to better share the truths of the gospel with them; I would encourage you to read Michael Nazir-Ali's "A Christian View of Prayer and Spirituality in Muslim Thought." Are you interested in missions to China? You may find "Lessons from Prayer Habits of the Church in China" by David Wang a helpful look at historical and cultural prayer practices before you go. Or maybe you are interested in attending seminary or becoming a pastor. Consider Russell Shedd's "Prayer and the Training of Christian Leadership" for a thoughtful look at how we might appropriately train our pastoral leaders to pray. This book is for those looking to think deeply about prayer and those who want to pray more faithfully and personally to our great God, who has given us such a means of grace as prayer.

— RECOMMENDED BY MADISON STRICKLAND



Excerpts from the Book

1

"The most characteristic picture of prayer in the Old Testament is that of a mediator, a bridge-builder, a person 'standing in the gap,' who, as it were, brings God and man together, speaking for one to the other. In this the great men and women of prayer in the Old Testament foreshadow the great Intercessor and Mediator himself."

— *Prayer in the Old Testament Outside the Psalms*, p. 30

2

"If the imprecatory psalms open our eyes, on the one hand, to the final destruction of the wicked and, on the other hand, to the vindication of the righteous, they have done their work. Now Jesus asks Christians to be ministers of his love which was shown on the cross."

— *Prayer in the Psalms*, p. 53

3

"A man cannot lightly invoke God to come as King, Saviour and Judge, yet at the same time consciously linger in sin and self-centred living. More positively... He is less likely to pray frivolously or selfishly if he has first, and meaningfully, called God 'Father,' and begged him to bring his kingdom."

— *Prayer in the Gospels and Acts*, p. 65

Calling on the Name of the Lord: A Biblical Theology of Prayer

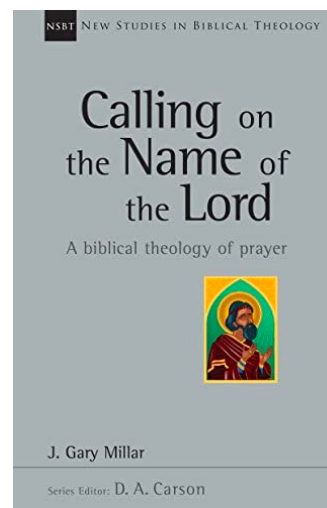
Written by J. Gary Millar

J. Gary Millar traces the theme of prayer from Genesis to Revelation. His central insight is that prayer in the Bible is frequently made in response to God's prior promises, and the content of prayer is simply asking God to do what he promised. Biblical prayer begins when men and women yearn for God to fulfill his promises. The first mention of prayer is Genesis 4:26, "At that time, people began to call upon the name of the Lord." Millar shows that this is significant because a few generations have been waiting for God to fulfill his promises to provide a son to Eve who would crush the serpent (3:15). After generations have come and gone with no such promised son having arrived, men and women begin to ask God to do what he promised. Their example is followed throughout the bible and is instructive for Christians today: prayer centers around asking God to do what he has told us he will do.

Unanswered prayers have a variety of causes. For example, God intended to bless Israel, his covenant people in the Old Testament. God was faithful to his word; not only would he bless his covenant people as they obeyed his word but also curse them when they disobeyed (see Deut. 28). Habakkuk is one prophet that had to reckon with God refusing to answer prayers for mercy in his generation. The time for mercy had passed (and would return), but God would only be faithful to keep his word to judge when the Babylonians came as his covenant enforcers. In a time of suffering in Job's life, God used unanswered prayer as an operating instrument to craft a greater conviction of God's sovereignty and humility in Job. Ultimately, God, in his sovereign goodness, sometimes makes himself feel distant from his people so that they might know him more deeply. Yet, even these hard purposes are consistent with God's good design for his children.

As I walk away from this book, I have to ask myself a few questions. (1) Are my prayers oriented mainly toward God's concerns and promises? Namely, am I often praying for my holiness, the knowledge of God to grow among my family and the saints at MVBC, and for faithfulness in boldly testifying to the gospel among MVBC members and mission partners? Am I regularly praying that MVBC would abound in the fruit of the Spirit and that we would excel at dying to ourselves and pursuing the interests of others out of deep love both for them and for Christ? (2) When I pray for other matters disproportionately, why has my prayer center of gravity shifted? Namely, what about the gospel is less satisfying today, such that I find myself less needy of God's mercy and promises? How is it that I find the gospel less life-nourishing in my spiritual poverty today? Millar has helped me think about God's promises in Scripture and ask that God fulfill every last one.

— RECOMMENDED BY JEFFREY TIMMONS



Excerpts from the Book

1

"The beginning of the post-Eden 'conversation' between humanity and God begins with 'crying out to God' (or 'calling on the name of Yahweh')...To call on the name of Yahweh in Genesis, then, is to respond to God's promise-making initiative by asking him to act to fulfill his promises."

— *Calling on the Name of Yahweh*, p. 22

2

"Prayer is established (perhaps even defined as) calling on God to come through on his promises. To pray is to ask God to do for us what we cannot do for ourselves. It is to admit our weaknesses and appeal to his awesome strength."

— *Prayer in the Pentateuch*, p. 27

3

"When Paul prays for others, whether individuals or churches, and even when he prays for himself, he prays for God do his work in their lives by the Spirit through the gospel. He prays that God may apply the benefits of Jesus' death and resurrection to their lives, and continue his work of perfecting them until the day when all things are brought together under Christ. He prays gospel-driven, gospel-centered prayers."

— *Praying for Others with Paul*, p. 209

DECEMBER

These Scripture readings have been selected to help you prepare for the Sunday morning message. Take Up & Read!

December 1	Proverbs 7:1–27	December 17	1 Samuel 2:1–11
December 2	James 3:13–18	December 18	Luke 1:39–56
December 3	Proverbs 8:1–36	December 19	Luke 2:1–21
December 4	Proverbs 1:20–33	December 20	Micah 5:1–15
December 5	Proverbs 2	December 21	Matthew 2:1–12
December 6	Proverbs 9:1–12	December 22	Matthew 2:13–23
December 7	Proverbs 9:13–18	December 23	Luke 2:1–22
December 8	Matthew 13:44–46	December 24	2 Samuel 7
December 9	Colossians 1:3–14	December 25	Luke 2:1–21
December 10	Ecclesiastes 7:1–29		
December 11	Proverbs 2		
December 12	Luke 1:39–56		
December 13	Matthew 1:1–17		
December 14	Matthew 1:18–25		
December 15	Isaiah 9:1–7		
December 16	Luke 1:26–56		

*Sermons in bold

TAKE UP & READ

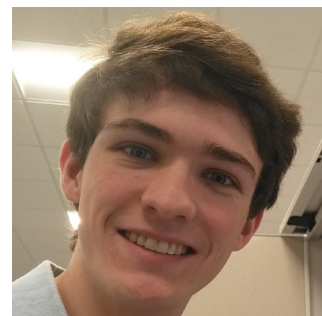
NEW MEMBERS



Joy Baxley



Natalie
Menikoff



Micah Morris



Mount Vernon
BAPTIST CHURCH