

James 5:13-16

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[0 : 0 0] Now, going back, oh, I guess a few years now, during Tony Blair's time as Prime Minister, his confidant and special advisor, Alistair Campbell, famously said of number 10, we don't do God. It's a very famous quote of Alistair Campbell's, and I'm sure many of you are familiar with it. We don't do God. Now, in stark contrast, James, in this letter that he writes, urges his readers, urges us to do God all the time. The big message of this little section that we've read in chapter 5 of James, the big message is that God is for everything. God is for all the time. God cares about you and is available to you in every circumstance of life. Are you in trouble? Go to God. Are you happy? Go to God. Are you sick? Go to God. It's the same answer, not always those exact words that we find in the text, but that's really what James is saying, that in every circumstance, we can turn to God. And he knows us, and he cares for us, and he is able to help us. I don't know if you've heard of people referring to somebody else as their go-to guy. I suppose it could be a go-to gal as well. The guy who is able to help in any situation.

Well, God is presented to us by James as our go-to God. Indeed, he is also, by the by, our can-do God. And it's important for us as believers to never forget that. These are simple truths. They're truths that we know intellectually, but it's important for us to cling on to them in the rough and tumble of life. We can go to God at any time and in any circumstance, and he is there for us. And that's, I think, the big message that we have in these verses that we're going to be thinking about this evening. What I want us to do is to spend a little time exploring the three particular scenarios or circumstances that James refers to where we can and must go to God in prayer and in praise. When we are in trouble, there at the beginning of the passage, is any one of you in trouble? So that's one circumstance when we can turn to God. When we are happy, is anyone happy? Let him sing songs of praise. And then thirdly, when we are sick. We can also turn to God as we involve God's people in praying for us and in accompanying us in the midst of our sickness. So three particular circumstances that James touches on in these verses. Let's just look at them one at a time. First of all, is any one of you in trouble? Now the word translated trouble there, notice in verse 13, is any one of you in trouble? The word there, the Greek word there, is the same word that James has used in verse 10. So if you just look back a few verses, we read there, brothers as an example of patience in the face of suffering. It's the same word. The translators have seen reason and good reason, no doubt, to translate the same word on one occasion with the English word suffering, and on this occasion here in verse 13 with the word trouble. And the very fact that these two words can suitably translate the Greek original gives us an idea of the breadth of meaning of the word that

James is using here. Is any one of you in trouble? Is any one of you suffering? Is any one of you afflicted? Is any one of you struggling for any number of reasons? To such, James is speaking, is any one of you in trouble? The word covers all manner of afflictions and trials. So whatever trouble you are facing, whatever suffering that you are enduring, it's covered by this advice.

So nobody here this evening needs to say, well, not what I'm going through, not the trouble that I'm facing. That one, no, I don't think that one is covered. No, that's covered as well. I don't need to know what it is. Probably don't want to know what it is. But whatever it is, you can turn to God.

Is any one of you in trouble? He should pray. So that's the circumstance that has been suggested, and as I'm saying, it's really a very broad range of possibilities. But before noting that the advice that is given, it's clear that James takes as a given that believers will face all kinds of trouble and affliction. He doesn't need to make that point. It's just implicit. It's obviously the case, but it's worth stating it. We shouldn't be surprised if we face trouble. We shouldn't be surprised if life is punctuated by hassle and pain and trouble of one kind or another. That's the way it is.

[5 : 11] And that's the way it is for believers. We're not spared these things. It's not as if, oh, now, well, I'm a believer, and, you know, I've got this special relationship with God, and so I'm going to be spared all of this bad stuff. No, that's not what happens. And that's implicit in what James is saying and posing the question, is any one of you in trouble?

Well, he's just taking it as a given. Well, of course, many of you are, hence the need for the advice. So it's worth just making that point. But what are we to do when we are in trouble? Well, it's very simple advice. Is any one of you in trouble? He should pray. What does this advice tell us about God? Well, it tells us that God can help. It tells us that God wants to help, and it tells us that God will help. You know, James isn't throwing out some piece of advice that we're going to try it out and we'll see what happens. No, clearly, James takes it as a given also that when we do pray, we are praying to a God who is able to help, who wants to help, who will help us in the midst of the trouble that we're facing, whatever it might be. But let's just think a little bit more about this matter of praying. What are we going to pray for? You know, James is very economical in his language. He doesn't develop what he has to say. He simply says he should pray.

Okay, fine, but what am I going to pray? What am I going to pray for, if I can put the question in that way? What am I going to pray for? And I pose the question in that way, in a sense, just to then question the question, because I don't think it's always about praying for anything. Sometimes, sometimes it's just about bearing our soul before God. We're not asking for anything. We're simply saying, God, this is where I am. This is the trouble that I'm facing. This is the pain that I'm enduring.

I don't even know what to ask for, but I want you to know, I want you to hear the trouble that I'm going through. Of course, God knows already, but you have the opportunity to unburden yourself, as it were, in prayer, as you share with him the trouble that you are facing. God can simply be a listening ear in times of trouble. He's much more than that, but he is also that. But having said that, of course, we can pray for, we can pray for comfort when we are facing trouble of one kind or another.

We can pray for wisdom, to know how to confront that trouble, to know how to handle that situation that seems beyond our means to confront. And of course, we can also pray for relief from the trouble.

[7 : 59] Now, we leave it to God's prerogative, how he responds. He may, in his grace, remove the trouble, but that is not his ordinary way of working. Ordinarily, what he will do is grant us the comfort that we need, grant us the wisdom that we need to confront that trial. And even if he does, in his grace, remove the trial, you can be pretty sure that around the corner, there'll be another trial and another affliction, and you can go to God in the midst of that also. So pray. Pray for comfort.

Pray for wisdom. Pray for relief. And sometimes just pray, telling God what the deal is, what you're going through, and he will listen and respond as he sees fit. So are you in trouble? I asked you the question this evening. I'm asking you the question. This is directed to you. Are you in trouble? Are you burdened by some problem that you just don't know how to handle? Are you suffering? Maybe you're suffering on behalf of others, as you see those you love struggling or suffering, and that is for you also a source of affliction. What can you do? Well, pray to your Father in heaven. Is any one of you in trouble? But then there's another circumstance that James comments on or touches on here. He goes on to say, is anyone happy? Or he asks the question, is anyone happy? Now, the word happy here is not to be understood principally as bubbly or cheery, though there's nothing wrong with being bubbly or cheery, but that's not principally what James has in mind. The word here carries a sense of, let's call it, cheerfulness of heart. And indeed, cheerfulness of heart in good times and bad. So we shouldn't see these two questions as somehow standing in opposition, two contrasts. So you're in trouble, that's on this end of the spectrum, and you're happy, that's the other end of the spectrum, because actually you can be happy in the midst of trouble. You can enjoy a cheerfulness of heart even in the midst of the trouble. So they're not opposite situations that are being described.

But nonetheless, he contemplates this circumstance that many of the believers or some of the believers that he's writing to will be happy. They will be cheerful. They will be content in the state of, or in the face of varied circumstances, both good and bad, both pleasant and trying.

To get a flavor of the sense of the word, or at least how the word can be used and understood, we can just notice very quickly how the same word is used by Paul in somewhat surprising circumstances. In Acts chapter 27, and I'll just, as I look for the passage myself, I'll just comment, you know, the context of it. It was when Paul was sailing to Rome, the big storm breaks out in the Mediterranean, which would ultimately lead to a shipwreck, and the sailors are terrified in the face of the danger that they are facing. And in that context, Paul addresses them, and listen to what he says to them. He says, and I'll just read from verse 22 of chapter 27, he says, but now I urge you to keep up your courage, because not one of you will be lost, only the ship will be destroyed. And then he uses the same language in verse 27, when he encourages them to be, or in verse 25 rather, when he encourages them to keep up your courage. In the older versions of the Bible, it says, and I always thought it sounded somewhat incongruous, it says, or it's translated, be of good cheer.

You've got this massive storm, and Paul is saying to the sailors who see death, stating it in the face, be of good cheer, and it just doesn't sound right. I think be of good courage, keep up your courage, captures the idea. But it gives you a sense of what James has in mind when he says here, or addresses his audience, and asks them, is anyone happy? You know, are you of good courage? Are you of good cheer? Are you content in the face of your circumstances, whatever they might be? Well, that's a good thing. It's a good thing. It's a good place to be. And we need to recognize God's grace in helping us to be of good cheer. Such a disposition is a gift of God. Well, what are you to do when you are happy? What are you to do when you are of good cheer? How are you to express your gratitude to God?

[12:30] Well, James tells us, is anyone happy? Let him sing songs of praise. Now, this cheerfulness of the heart is to find outward expression as we sing songs of praise to God. And praise, of course, is a form of prayer. Prayer and praise are fundamentally one, the outgoing of the soul in love and trust to God.

And so, I would encourage you, if you know of God's grace in allowing you to be and helping you to be of good cheer in the face of good times and bad, then be ever singing in gratitude. And maybe this is something for you to ponder on, to just reflect. Is it the case that your week is marked by singing praise to God? Or is your singing praise to God limited to when you gather at a service like we're at this evening? And so, this is when you sing, at public worship, you sing. That's good. But what James is saying would suggest that our singing should go way beyond just a gathered, a meeting or service such as we're engaged in this evening. If you're happy, if God has blessed you, as God has allowed you to be of good cheer in the face of whatever circumstances you might be facing, then sing praises to God. But then there's a third circumstance that James touches on, and he spends a little bit more time. He says a little bit more about it. And so, we also will spend a little bit more time thinking about it. He asks the question, the third question he poses, is any one of you sick? And then he says what they should do in those circumstances. Now, as I say, what James has to say about this circumstance is somewhat more extensive. It's still not a huge amount of text, but it's certainly more than what he said about the previous two situations. It's more extensive, and it's also a little bit more complex, a little bit more difficult to get our heads around what he's actually saying and how we're to understand and respond to what he says. We might even say that his instructions are or have been somewhat controversial as different believers or Christians have understood them in different ways. And in the face of a passage like this that is a little difficult, there are a couple of things that we do well to remember. So, even before we think about what

James is saying, just a couple of things to bear in mind as we approach a passage like this. The first thing is maybe a simple thing to say, but it's worth having very clear in our mind.

The text, what we have here, what's written here, is exactly as God meant it to be. So, we don't come here saying, oh, well, James, I'm not very sure about how you've expressed this, or this is all a little complicated, and, you know, it really would have been simpler if you'd said it differently. No, we don't come and stand in judgment over the text and say, well, let's kind of sort this out in a way that maybe suits us better. No, the text is exactly as God intends it to be.

Now, that doesn't mean we necessarily find it easy to understand, but it is there in the manner that it is there because that is how God intended. That is our conviction concerning the Bible, that God inspired men to write, and what is there is God's Word for us. So, let's be very clear about that.

[15 : 55] But another rule of thumb, I suppose, or a good thing to bear in mind when we do face a passage that's a little bit complicated, is that a difficult passage should be interpreted and understood in the light of clearer instruction elsewhere than the Bible. So, we don't look at this in isolation. We don't look at this one verse and say, okay, I really can't get my head around this verse and what it means, but I'll just do my best. We turn to the verse and we try and look at it in the light of the overall teaching of Scripture on this particular matter. Now, we're not going to look at all of the overall teaching of Scripture because that would take us too long, but we need to bear that in mind. So, these are just a couple of things to introduce what we're going to say. Is any of you sick? Now, what does the question imply? We pose that same question as we analyzed or thought about, is any one of you in trouble? And the answer is the same, really. What the question implies, what the question takes as a given, is that Christians get sick. That's normal. You know, we get sick. Now, I think most of us have worked that one out. You know, if you're alive today, if you're, you know, I can't imagine anybody here can look back in their life and say, well, I've never been sick. You know, we get sick. That's the way it is. It's normal. It's not unusual. It's not something that should surprise us.

Christians get sick. And we get sick, really, in the same way and with the same regularity as those who are not Christians. There's no discernible difference in terms of our health. We get sick.

That is normal. But the question and the answer also implies that God is able and willing to help us when we are sick. Now, what are we to do when we're sick? What are we to do? Well, let me try and answer that question by posing three subsidiary questions. You need to concentrate here to work out where the questions fit in. So, the question is, what are we to do? And we want to answer that question by asking three further questions. And the further questions are this. What is the sick person to do, according to James? What are the elders to do, who are made reference to and who are involved? And what will be the outcome? And as we answer these three questions, hopefully we'll get the bigger picture of what are we to do. We'll answer that question. So, what is the sick person to do? Well, what does it say? It says there in verse 14, is any one of you sick? He should call the elders of the church. So, what's a sick person to do? Well, he's to call the elders.

Now, that seems simple enough. But let's be honest, I don't think it's something that we tend to do. Like the last time you were sick, did you call the elders? Like, I haven't got my phone ringing at the man's, you know, every day. Oh, David, I'm sick. Bring the elders around. You know, like, maybe, maybe that's what should be happening. But let's be honest, it's not what's happening. So, that isn't what is going on. So, that's, I'm just stating that. I'm not making a judgment about that, but that's just the reality. But James says here that if you're sick, well, you should call the elders.

And as I say, it seems simple enough, but it's not something that we tend to do. Now, without trying to wriggle out of a simple instruction, I think we can make the following observations about this instruction. First of all, there's nothing in what James says here that would suggest that this is, this is mandatory on every occasion of ill health. Now, James isn't saying that whenever you are sick and in any situation of ill health, you must do this. That's not the manner in which he's presenting his guidance or his instruction. So, it's not mandatory. The other thing to bear in mind is that this instruction does not preclude other actions. It doesn't preclude calling for the doctor or getting an appointment at the GP or buying your paracetamol. You can do all of these things as well. Indeed, you can involve others in praying for you. You can pray for yourself without calling the elders to pray for you. So, this instruction doesn't preclude other actions. But having said that, it's also true that this is commended as something that we can do. When we are sick, we can call the elders and we can't get away from that. I wouldn't want to get away from that. That's what James very simply and clearly states. So, that's what we're to do, we who are sick. But then, the second question that I'm posing to try and draw out what James is saying is, what are the elders to do? Well, two actions are identified.

[20 : 20] The elders are to pray over the one who is sick and who has called them and to anoint the sick person with oil. First of all, they are to pray over him. I think it's implicit, though. James doesn't actually say it, but it's so clear that what the elders are doing is praying for healing. And when it says that they're to pray over him, that may simply suggest the physical position. You know, the guy is in his bed, and so they're there praying over him. It may suggest a laying on of hands on the sick person, possibly, though that's not stated. So, they're to pray over him. That's simply enough.

But also, they're to anoint with oil. Now, that's when we start thinking, ooh, I don't know about that. And what is that about? How are we to understand that? Well, this instruction that James gives has been variously understood. And let me just mention one or two of the possibilities that have been suggested. It's often suggested that this was medicinal, that the oil referred to had some medicinal purpose. Now, it's true that there were some medical conditions that would have been treated with oil of one kind or another. But to suggest that this is principally what James has in mind does seem like a bit of a strain interpretation, because oil would not have been suitable for most ailments.

Another problem with understanding this purely as a medicinal act on the part of the elders would be to say, well, are the elders even equipped to administer medical care? Is that not what doctors and nurses and mothers are for? You know, you don't call the elders around if you need somebody to work out, you know, what your ailment is. They're not best equipped to help you. So, that does make it, it seems to me, unlikely that James principally has in mind that this anointing with oil has some medicinal end. We don't have time to go into all the different suggestions that have been made, but just very quickly in the passing, I can mention, if you want to explore this further, do so in your own time. But in the Roman Catholic tradition, this passage serves as the basis for the sacrament, what they understand to be the sacrament of extreme unction, usually administered when somebody is thought to be at death's door. But in theory, it can be administered at times of ill health that is not thought to be immediately life-threatening. Without going into the reasons why, I think it's difficult to draw from this verse such a conclusion, which leads me to what I think to be the most likely understanding of what James is saying here, when he encourages the elders to pray over the man or the woman and to anoint the sick person with oil. I think this anointing had, indeed, would continue to have a symbolic significance. To anoint with oil in the Old Testament, and let's not forget that James is writing largely to a Hebrew audience. Throughout the letter, we've seen how there's constant references to the Old Testament, the language is very much Hebrew language. And to anoint with oil served to symbolize consecration of the one anointed. Now, in this case, the elders would be both consecrating the sick person to God's care, in that sense they're consecrating them, but also consecrating the sick person to God's service once restored. And that in itself is significant because, you know, if God grants us health, it's for the reason, it's to serve Him. If God grants us health, it's so that we can show our gratitude for that health by using our health in His service. And so, the oil symbolizes this consecrating of the one for whom prayer is being made. Or at least,

I would suggest that's the way to understand this. Now, another question, a practical one, is, is this something that we can and should be doing today? My answer, somewhat tentative, but my answer is yes, I think so. There's nothing that I can see in this passage that suggests that this was a practice that should be viewed as limited to the apostolic age. You know, the elders here are not endowed with some gift of healing. They're praying. There were those who had a gift of healing, but that's not what this is talking about. They're praying. They're praying for somebody who is sick.

Well, surely we can do that today, and why not, in the manner that James suggests in God's Word. I think a balanced perspective that does justice to the text is to say that elders may act in this way, in the manner described, but that they don't have to do it just as described. If, for whatever reason we dispense with anointing with oil, what certainly should be present is what that symbolism represents. And so, as we pray for the one who is sick, then we should be praying with that sense that we are consecrating them to God's care and consecrating them for God's service if and when health is restored. But then there's a third question that I said we'd pose to try and get to grips with what James is saying here, and that is, what is the outcome? When the sick person does what they have to do, when the elders do what they're instructed to do, what is the outcome? Well, James identifies two outcomes, and we'll look at both very fleetingly. Well, the first outcome is stated there very clearly, and the prayer offered in faith will make the sick person well. That's the first outcome. The sick person is restored to health. Now, let's just think a little bit about what James says here. First of all, it's very clear that it is God who does the healing. This is not a gift that has been exercised by the elders, as I commented a moment ago. What the elders are doing is praying, and in answer to prayer, God heals. Prayer is the means whereby the sick person is restored. It is interesting that in verse 15, having said that the elders should pray and anoint with oil, in verse 15,

[26 : 31] James says, and the prayer offered in faith will make the sick person well. There's no reference to the anointing with oil. James focuses very clearly that the means that God has employed to heal this person is the prayer that was offered, and that prayer used by God is prayer offered in faith. That's the language James employs. Now, we do need to ask a question because, in a sense, it could be the elephant in the room. Is healing always and necessarily the outcome for those who follow the instructions given by James? Well, a somewhat mischievous comment could be, well, if we've never followed the instructions, how can we know? But nonetheless, I think it is reasonable to acknowledge that healing is not always God's intended outcome for all of us. Now, if the only teaching on healing that we had in the Bible was this passage, then we might have to conclude that healing ought always to be the outcome. But this is not the only relevant passage on the subject. And as we look at the whole teaching of the Scriptures on this matter, it is very clear that God does not always heal physical ill health, even when we pray and pray with faith, asking Him so to do. That is not always the outcome.

That is not always the answer. And the examples of that are multiple. You remember Paul advised Timothy to drink a little wine for his many ailments. We read of Paul when he's writing to the Christians, or to Timothy rather, the second letter to Timothy speaks of Trophimus, who he had left sick, and Miletus. And you say, well, why did he leave him sick? Why did he pray for him? He'd have been restored. And yet, Paul mentions this in a most matter-of-fact way, as if it's nothing unusual, that this saint, this Christian, should be sick and be in a seemingly continuing state of ill health.

And we could multiply the examples. I think the key is to understand what is implied by the expression, the prayer offered in faith. This is faith that not only, or faith, not only that God has the power to heal, but faith in God's wisdom to determine what is best. And that may be to heal, and on occasion, it may not be to heal. To pray, if it be your will, it's not in the text, but to pray using that language, be that audibly or implicitly, is not to lack faith, but is actually to exercise a more mature faith.

And we ask for that which we seek, but we leave it to God's gracious and all-wise prerogative to do as He sees fit. So, that's the first outcome that is mentioned. The prayer of faith will make the sick person well. But there's a second outcome. If he has sinned, he will be forgiven. Now, again, this generates a problem for us. Why does James identify this as an outcome to prayer for healing? It seems out of place. It seems incongruous. Why is he talking about sins being forgiven? That's not what he's been on about. So, why does he mention it? It would seem that the context is the widespread and mistaken belief that sin and sickness were causally connected in the experience of the believer. And in this context, this misunderstanding that somehow if you were sick, ah, it must be because of some sin you had committed that was widely believed to be so. In this context, James very carefully does two things. He calls out that error by stating, there in the passage we see it, if he has sinned, he will be forgiven. Saying he may not have sinned. His sickness may have nothing to do with sin. But if he has sinned, well, he will be forgiven. He will enjoy physical restoration to health and the sin that he was guilty of, that in some way was connected to his ailment, will be forgiven. So, there will be a treatment that is holistic to this believer's situation. But it's atheist sin. So, he calls out the error. But he does also acknowledge the possibility of a link between sin and sickness.

And we shouldn't be so careful to call out the error of saying that sickness is always a result of personal sin, which is a heinous error and a very cruel error. And we need to call it out. But in calling it out, we shouldn't make the mistake of going the other direction and denying the possibility that on occasion, physical illness can be the consequence of or a consequence of sin that we are guilty of and that we have not repented of. And again, in the Bible, we find examples given of that in the passage where the Lord's Supper is instituted. You know, Paul says, and many of you are sick and you need to have fallen asleep. And he connects that illness, physical illness, with their sin. We don't have time to go into that. Perhaps James in this passage is contemplating such a scenario and so sets out this quite particular approach that would not be appropriate for most cases of sickness, but is appropriate for this case of sickness. I just throw that out there as a possibility.

[31 : 53] But let's finally note what James also says in verse 16, or the first half of verse 16. Therefore, confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed.

In this final statement that we're going to look at, James encourages the believers to cultivate fellowship life where believers know each other, where believers trust each other to the extent that they can share with each other their spiritual struggles and physical needs. So this isn't just about elders and not just about leaders. It's about all of us cultivating a fellowship where those conversations, those relationships are built where we're able to share with one another. And we do so carefully and we seek to do so wisely and all the other caveats you want to throw in there. But the point is that this is the kind of fellowship we need, where there is that confidence, where there is that trust that we can share with each other our spiritual struggles and our physical needs and pray for one another and support one another. And maybe out of all that we've said, this is the biggest challenge that we need to rise up to. Well, let's just draw the threads together. Do you do God in every circumstance? Are you in trouble? Go to God. Are you happy? Go to God. Are you sick? Go to God as you enlist the help of others to pray for you. Let's pray. Heavenly Father, we do thank you that you are indeed the God that we can go to in any and every circumstance. We thank you that you are the God who knows us and who cares for us, the God who is able and willing to hear and answer our prayers.

We thank you that in the midst of all manner of trial and trouble and affliction, we are not alone. We can turn to a God who hears us. We thank you for the measure of happiness and contentment and cheer that we can and do enjoy.

And we acknowledge that to be a gift from yourself, a gift from your gracious hand, and help us to be grateful and to sing our songs of praise and gratitude to you. And we pray that in the face of illness and sickness, be that physical or mental ill health, we would know what it is to enjoy the support of fellow believers, be that the elders of the church, be that our fellow believers who can come alongside us and pray for us. And we thank you for those occasions when those prayers are indeed effective to the raising up and the restoring to health of those we love and indeed of ourselves.

But we also acknowledge and thank you that even when that is not the outcome, we acknowledge your gracious hand and your great and good purposes for our lives, even when we don't understand them.

[34 : 43] And we pray all these things in Jesus' name. Amen.