CLOSING WITH PRAYER AND COMMUNITY

James keeps his focus on practical Christianity up until the last word of his letter. Departing from his longer-winded explanations, he finishes with some bite-sized pieces of practical advice.

The majority of this closing section centers on prayer. His overarching point is that there is always a great reason to talk to God. In the throes of despair and in the heights of joy, both give ample opportunity to commune with God in prayer. When courage fails, reach out to others to help pray and leave all burdens and needs at the feet of Jesus.

James emphasizes that there’s nothing special about Elijah that made God listen to Him more than He will listen to His children today. His very being—his nature—was no different than ours, and we don’t need another human in order to commune with God.

James finishes his book by sharing the far-reaching impact of accountability in godly community. Love is sometimes used as an excuse to avoid confrontation and instruction; but James paints the eternal positive consequences of bringing someone back to the truth after they’ve wandered.

With no explicit goodbye, James leaves his readers to live the practical wisdom he has shared, all in the power of and glory to Jesus Christ.
Write out James 5:13–20 from the translation of your choice. If you’re pressed for time, write out James 5:16, 17. You may also rewrite the passage in your own words, or outline or mind-map the chapter.
ALWAYS A REASON TO PRAY

In quick succession, James shares seven times that believers should pray and how they should pray:

1. When suffering. This Greek word (kakopatheō) is broad in its application and encompasses many kinds of affliction or suffering. Any kind is a good reason to pray. Instead of allowing it to separate the sufferer from the Redeemer, it should serve as an opportunity for them to grow close in faith and trust. The instruction is beautiful in its simplicity: “Let him pray” (James 5:13).

2. When cheerful. When happy or joyful, it’s an opportunity to express oneself in psalms, songs of praise to God. Often God is only remembered when pain reminds us of our need. However, it both glorifies God and elevates our own spirits when we remember God in the good times too.

3. When sick. When they are in need of extra prayer, or the idea of praying seems overwhelming, James urges the sick one to not neglect prayer. Instead, ask others to pray. Notice the detail that the sick one is to reach out and ask for help in their dark time. Sometimes the only way someone else will know of a need is if they’re told directly—and asking for help is encouraged here.

4. When sinning. Sin hurts the sinner. Confessing these trespasses to safe fellow believers and uniting with them in prayer is a beautiful and healing part of community. Instead of wallowing by oneself or denying that there are any issues, James invites the believer to seek healing in the ways God has provided.

5. With fervency and righteousness. Jesus told His disciples a parable with the explicit purpose of encouraging them to persist in prayer (Luke 18:1). It is the fervent, repeated prayers of a righteous person that “avails much” (v. 16). Often, the believer does not see the answers to their prayers for lack of persistence, or even for lack of walking according to what God has revealed (that is, they lack righteousness).

6. When you need something that’s impossible. Elijah, though having the human nature of all humanity, asked for something impossible according to the laws of nature: to determine when it would stop raining and when it would resume. It was through prayer that this was done, as a witness to the power of God (1 Kings 17–18). Prayer is not just to bolster up what you can already do in your own strength; through prayer, the impossible can happen.

7. When someone is straying. Though these two verses do not explicitly mention praying, the context and biblical principle of intercessory prayer can be seen (e.g., 1 Tim. 2:1; Phil. 1:19). When seeing someone wander from the truth, it’s not a time to look the other way. Instead, the believer should do all that is in their power (especially prayer!) to turn them back to the truth.

In one way, this passage could be seen as an expansion on Paul’s shorter version: “Pray without ceasing” (1 Thess. 5:17).
WHY ISN’T EVERY PERSON HEALED?

This question should always be approached with humility and care. Though theological ideas can be shared, it’s important to remember that this is often asked with names and faces in the mind of the asker. The short answer is, humanity cannot fully articulate why not every person prayed over is healed.

That said, there are some helpful answers that can be found. Jesus was clearly in support of healing—He spent more time doing that than preaching, and even sent out His disciples to do the same (Matt. 10:1). So why not everyone?

First, not everyone wants to be healed. Whether it’s because the pain has become too familiar to part with, or it provides some other pseudo-comfort, some people simply don’t want the change. Jesus even asked a man if he wanted to be made well before healing him (John 5:6).

Second, not every prayer for healing is in faith. Jesus repeatedly praised the faith of those that He healed (Mark 5:34; 10:52; Luke 7:50). When His disciples were unable to cast a demon out of a child, Jesus told them it was due to their lack of faith (Matt. 17:19–21).

Third, humanity occupies a world of sin. This sin has infected our genetic makeup, habits, choices, environments, and lives. It is painful evidence of a great controversy raging in this world between good and evil. Jesus did not come and heal to make a utopia on earth where all were made well. He always pointed to the kingdom to come, even to those He healed. Disease—physical, mental, and spiritual—is a result of sin.

Fourth, it’s not always what’s best. Ellen White shared how her own life was plagued by disease, and how God allowed it as a means of keeping her close to Him. (Ellen G. White, Early Writings, 21.) Sometimes the disease comes as a result of harmful habits and choices, and God is choosing not to interfere with natural consequences, lest that person be encouraged in such a harmful direction. (Ellen G. White, Counsels on Health, 373, 374.) Other times, sickness draws the individual closer to God and healing would only harm their connection with Him: “He who is acquainted with the hearts of all men knows whether the person, if raised up, would glorify His name or dishonor Him by backsliding and apostasy . . . . If the Lord sees it will best honor Him, He will answer our prayers.” (Ellen G. White, Testimonies for the Church, vol. 2, 147, 148.) In the light of eternity, is not eternal life more precious than a few years on earth? It is only with deep trust in God and an eternal perspective that this is seen as merciful as it is.

There can be other reasons too. God knows. God still desires to heal His people, and He does in countless ways still today. Like Jesus in Gethsemane, we may pray for deliverance, and in the same breath, ask for it according to His will.

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What relationship do the following verses have with the primary passage?

Psalm 50:14, 15
Philippians 4:6, 7
Jeremiah 33:3
Ephesians 6:18
Proverbs 28:13

What other narratives come to mind in connection with Hebrews 12:18–29?

THE POWER BEHIND THE PRACTICAL

Aside from John 17, most of Jesus’ prayers are recorded in snippets or simply as observations that He was praying. When taken together and observed, both still reveal much about His prayer life.

Jesus prayed often (Luke 5:16), sometimes continuing in prayer all night (Luke 6:12). He told His listeners that God’s ears were open to all of their needs, even knowing them already, and that our heavenly Father could be reached by the simplest of prayers (Matt. 6: 5–13, 25–32). When raising Lazarus from the dead, He thanked His Father for hearing Him, gladly admitting that He knew, “You always hear me,” (John 11:42). While in the worst agony ever endured by a human, Jesus prayed to His Father both in the Garden of Gethsemane and while on the cross (Matt. 26:36–44; 27:46; Luke 23:34). It has been said before: if Jesus saw prayer as such a necessity in His own life, how much more should His children feel their need of prayer?

Jesus even saw prayer as a way of ministering to His disciples. After warning Peter that He would deny Him before the next morning, He followed it with, “‘But I have prayed for you, that your faith should not fail; and when you have returned to Me, strengthen your brethren,’” (Luke 22:32). He spent a large portion of His final prayer time for His disciples, both present and future (John 17:6–26). This redemptive and prayerful spirit of Christ is expressed in the last two verses of James. Jesus turned many people back from wandering from the truth, and He continues to be the reason people can be turned back at all. Jesus saves the souls of all who come to Him from death, and it is His blood that covers all the multitudes of sins.

Furthermore, He is the power behind the entirety of James’s practical letter, and He is a perfect example of all of its counsel fulfilled in the life. Jesus extends His ministry of reconciliation to all who claim His name (2 Cor. 5:18). “The strongest argument in favor of the gospel is a loving and lovable Christian,” (Ellen G. White, The Ministry of Healing, 470) and James has simply given practical examples of what that looks like, day in and day out. It looks like having faith in Jesus, loving Him more than this world, and this love showing up in one’s words. It looks like treating others the way we would want to be treated. It looks like prioritizing character over worldly possessions. Quite simply, it looks like Jesus.
UNENDING COMMUNION

Through nature and revelation, through His providence, and by the influence of His Spirit, God speaks to us. But these are not enough; we need also to pour out our hearts to Him. In order to have spiritual life and energy, we must have actual relationship with our heavenly Father. Our minds may be drawn out toward Him; we may meditate upon His works, His mercies, His blessings; but this is not, in the fullest sense, communing with Him. In order to commune with God, we must have something to say to Him concerning our actual life.

Prayer is the opening of the heart to God as to a friend. Not that it is necessary in order to make known to God what we are, but in order to enable us to receive Him. Prayer does not bring God down to us, but brings us up to Him.

Jesus Himself, while He dwelt among men, was often in prayer. Our Saviour identified Himself with our needs and weakness, in that He became a suppliant, a petitioner, seeking from His Father fresh supplies of strength, that He might come forth braced for duty and trial. He is our example in all things. He is a brother in our infirmities, “in all points tempted like as we are;” but as the sinless one His nature recoiled from evil; He endured struggles and torture of soul in a world of sin. His humanity made prayer a necessity and a privilege. He found comfort and joy in communion with His Father. And if the Saviour of men, the Son of God, felt the need of prayer, how much more should feeble, sinful mortals feel the necessity of fervent, constant prayer. (Ellen G. White, *Steps to Christ*, 93, 94.)

Keep your wants, your joys, your sorrows, your cares, and your fears before God. You cannot burden Him; you cannot weary Him. He who numbers the hairs of your head is not indifferent to the wants of His children. “The Lord is very pitiful, and of tender mercy.” James 5:11. His heart of love is touched by our sorrows and even by our utterances of them. Take to Him everything that perplexes the mind. Nothing is too great for Him to bear, for He holds up worlds, He rules over all the affairs of the universe. Nothing that in any way concerns our peace is too small for Him to notice. There is no chapter in our experience too dark for Him to read; there is no perplexity too difficult for Him to unravel. No calamity can befall the least of His children, no anxiety harass the soul, no joy escape the lips, of which our heavenly Father is unobservant, or in which He takes no immediate interest. “He healeth the broken in heart, and bindeth up their wounds.” Psalm 147:3. The relations between God and each soul are as distinct and full as though there were not another soul upon the earth to share His watchcare, not another soul for whom He gave His beloved Son. (*Steps to Christ*, 100.)
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Share insights from this week’s memory verse and Bible study as well as any discoveries, observations, and questions with your Sabbath School class (or Bible study group). Consider these discussion questions with the rest of the group.

When do you pray to God easily, and when is it harder for you? Why?

Share an experience of God answering a prayer of yours in a memorable way.

Share an experience of how community has helped you in your spiritual walk.

What experience have you had with praying for healing? What did you learn from the experience?

How have you seen James 5:19, 20 played out in real life?

How would you like to enhance your prayer life?

What usually prevents us from pouring out our thoughts to God in prayer?