

## **A PRAYING CHURCH**

James 5: 13-18

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June 2, 2024

In 1989 the church I was serving decided to celebrate their one hundredth anniversary. As a part of that celebration one of the members wrote a history of the congregation from its establishment as a chapel on the outskirts of Portsmouth, Virginia to its present day life and ministries. One particular chapter captured my attention. The year was 1912 and the church was in trouble. There was strife and discord among the membership. There was no money in the church's banking account and the pastor had resigned. The future of the church was in serious jeopardy. In response, the church did what God's people have always done when they were in trouble. They prayed. The church's records state, "There was a motion made that the Church have a week or more Prayer Service for the purpose of getting in a better spiritual condition and to pray for a shepherd to lead our Flock." Evidently this was a prayer that the Lord wanted to answer almost immediately. He sent them a pastor the very next Sunday who received their unanimous support. Under his leadership the church experienced dynamic growth and built a brand new sanctuary. Without a doubt the Lord answered their prayers.

The same was true for the early church. They were a people of prayer. For example, in chapter twelve of the book of Acts there is a remarkable story about answered prayer. Peter had been arrested by King Herod along with some of the members of the church. In fact, James the brother of John and one of Jesus's disciples had already been put to death. Now, Peter, the leader of the church was in prison, awaiting trial. In response the church did the only thing they could do. They prayed. They had to place this situation entirely into the hands of God because they were powerless to secure Peter's release. Guess what happened? On the night before Herod was going to bring Peter to trial, an angel awakened him as he was sleeping chained between two guards. Immediately the chains fell off his wrists and he was led by the angel right out of the prison. Peter thought he was dreaming until the angel departed and he found himself standing on a street corner, a free man. Arriving at the home where the followers of Christ had been meeting, Peter knocked on the door. One of the servants, a girl by the name of Rhoda, hearing the knocking and then recognizing Peter's voice, was so overjoyed that instead of unbolting the door, she ran to tell everyone that he was outside. At first they didn't believe her. They said, "It must be his angel," but the knocking continued, until they at last opened the door and were astonished to see Peter, both alive and in the flesh. Their prayers had been miraculously answered, even while they were praying.

Remembering that experience, because he had been informed of what had taken place, James knew the power of prayer and that's why I believe he included it in his remarks as he concluded his letter, the passage of Scripture that was read for us this morning. So let's turn our attention to two words within this passage of Scripture and to one prophetic reminder that James shares with us. The first word is **faith**. After being anointed with oil by the elders, James says that "the prayer offered in faith will make the sick person well" (James 5:15). What does he mean? Have you ever been to the beach and seen a life guard? Their job is to rescue swimmers in distress. When that happens what do they do? They swim out to the person who is drowning and they say in words and in action, "Stop splashing around. You cannot save yourself. You must have complete trust and faith in me. I will carry you safely to shore." That's the kind of faith that James is talking about. It's the kind of faith that places a person's reliance completely and absolutely upon the Lord, looking nowhere else for relief and help. It's the kind of faith that those early followers of Christ were exhibiting when they prayed for Peter and it's the kind of faith that the Christians in Portsmouth possessed when they earnestly prayed that God would send them a new pastor.

The second word that James shares with us is **righteous**. He says, "The prayer of a righteous man is powerful and effective" (James 16). Once again, what is James telling us? He is certainly speaking about the kind of person who is living a moral and upright life, a life that reflects what the Bible says in terms of how we should treat one another. But the word "righteous" has a much deeper and more significant meaning. It describes our relationship with the Lord. One Biblical commentator expresses it this way, "The 'righteous man' is the one who is committed to doing God's will and to cultivating a relationship with God that knows God's heart."\* God is willing and able to do great things through the lives of those who are truly dedicated to him, who are willing to follow His bidding, whatever that might be. Take for example, the lives of men like Abraham, Moses and King David. None of them were perfect. Each possessed significant character flaws and made serious, sinful mistakes. Nevertheless, they had a heart for God. When they prayed they were asking for the kinds of things that they knew God would grant unto them. That truth is summed up by these words in 1 John 5:14-15, "This is the confidence we have in approaching God: that if we ask anything according to His will He hears us. And if we know that He hears us—whatever we ask—we know that we have what we asked of Him."

This brings us to that concluding prophetic reminder, a man by the name of **Elijah**. Do you know what his name means? It literally means "my God is the Lord." In other words Elijah's name was a declaration of identity. He belonged to God and that was the way he lived, even when he had to face the fact that many people in his country, including King Ahab, had turned away from the Lord and were now worshipping Baal. Confronted by that fact, he knew that something had to be done to prove to everyone that his God was the real God. For the people of Israel that meant a display of

divine power over the forces of nature, specifically rain. Rain in the fall and in the spring was essential for the crops. No rain, the people starved. So that's what Elijah prayed for and that's what happened according to 1 Kings, chapters 17 and 18. Summing up this Biblical account James tells us that Elijah "prayed earnestly that it would not rain, and it did not rain on the land for three and a half years. Again he prayed and the heavens gave rain and the earth produced its crops" (James 5:17-18). What is this Old Testament account telling us? It's telling us that prayer advances the kingdom of God, prayer that reveals the presence and the power of God, prayer that draws people back to God and to a personal and life changing relationship with Him, that's the kind of prayer that God will answer. It's the kind of prayer that shows the world, especially the unbelieving world, that God cares about His people and is willing to protect them and bless them in ways that unmistakably declare His greatness, goodness and majesty.

Finally, there's one last thing that we need to focus upon this morning. Speaking of Elijah, James says he "was a man just like us" (James 5:17). Yes, Elijah was a prophet, but he was also a human being. He too had his limitations. Scared of Jezebel, King Ahab's wicked queen, he fled all the way back down to the mountain of God and hid in a cave. Tired, worn out, doubting that anyone back up north in Israel really believed in the Lord, he was a sad sack until confronted by God at the mouth of that cave. So the truth of the matter is this. If we know the Lord and are righteous in His sight because of an abiding personal relationship with Him, then in faith, relying upon Him and upon Him alone, we, like Elijah, can call upon Him. We can pray and if we are assured by His Word and by the indwelling presence of His Holy Spirit that what we are asking for is within His will and within His purposes for us and for those for whom we are praying, then our requests will become a reality. But make no mistake, Elijah prayed earnestly, long and hard with great fervor, before he told the king and the people of Israel that the rains would not come. He had to make absolutely sure that was what God wanted him to do. According to the Scriptures, 1 Kings 18:41-46, he had to pray just as earnestly to bring the rains back. So, with regards to being and becoming a praying church, let each of us believe and put into practice this admonition, "The prayer of a righteous man is powerful and effective" (James 5:16).

\*David P. Nystrom, *The New Application Commentary, James*, page 307