

Scripture Reading for Sept 26, 2021

1 King 18:41-45 (NIV)

⁴¹ And Elijah said to Ahab, “Go, eat and drink, for there is the sound of a heavy rain.” ⁴² So Ahab went off to eat and drink, but Elijah climbed to the top of Carmel, bent down to the ground and put his face between his knees. ⁴³ “Go and look toward the sea,” he told his servant. And he went up and looked. “There is nothing there,” he said. Seven times Elijah said, “Go back.” ⁴⁴ The seventh time the servant reported, “A cloud as small as a man’s hand is rising from the sea.” So Elijah said, “Go and tell Ahab, ‘Hitch up your chariot and go down before the rain stops you.’” ⁴⁵ Meanwhile, the sky grew black with clouds, the wind rose, a heavy rain started falling and Ahab rode off to Jezreel.

Mark 4:26-29 (NIV)

²⁶ He also said, “This is what the kingdom of God is like. A man scatters seed on the ground. ²⁷ Night and day, whether he sleeps or gets up, the seed sprouts and grows, though he does not know how. ²⁸ All by itself the soil produces grain—first the stalk, then the head, then the full kernel in the head. ²⁹ As soon as the grain is ripe, he puts the sickle to it, because the harvest has come.”

James 5:7-8; 13-20 (NIV)

⁷ Be patient, then, brothers and sisters, until the Lord’s coming. See how the farmer waits for the land to yield its valuable crop, patiently waiting for the autumn and spring rains. ⁸ You too, be patient and stand firm, because the Lord’s coming is near.

¹³ Is anyone among you in trouble? Let them pray. Is anyone happy? Let them sing songs of praise. ¹⁴ Is anyone among you sick? Let them call the elders of the church to pray over them and anoint them with oil in the name of the Lord. ¹⁵ And the prayer offered in faith will make the sick person well; the Lord will raise them up. If they have sinned, they will be forgiven. ¹⁶ Therefore confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous person is powerful and effective.

¹⁷ Elijah was a human being, even as we are. He prayed earnestly that it would not rain, and it did not rain on the land for three and a half years. ¹⁸ Again he prayed, and the heavens gave rain, and the earth produced its crops.

¹⁹ My brothers and sisters, if one of you should wander from the truth and someone should bring that person back, ²⁰ remember this: Whoever turns a sinner from the error of their way will save them from death and cover over a multitude of sins.

Sermon: Patience, Providence, and Prayer

Over the last few weeks, we have been considering the letter of James. Today we come to his final words of wisdom and encouragement. One of the things he has stressed throughout his letter is God's *character*. He says that God is *generous* and that every *good* gift, including wisdom, is from God.¹ It follows, as James also states, that God is *not* the source of our trials or temptations.² Moreover, God has a passion for the poor and vulnerable,³ those who society neglects or deems as unworthy in some way.⁴ James also emphasises that God is *full* of compassion and mercy,⁵ and that God's character is constant and can be relied upon.⁶ And we have to pause and ask, do we recognize this description of God? Many people's image of God is as either uncaring and distant or as a stern rule-enforcer who demands obedience, which leads to a joyless, dutiful religion. That isn't how James viewed God. The *kind* of God we believe in really matters.⁷ James also provides us with many powerful ethical catchphrases and he would have approved of Amherstburg Community Church's sign as you enter town, which [currently] says: "What comes from your mouth reveals your heart."⁸ James also exhorts his readers to resist evil and come near to God, and in that process be confident that God will come near to you.⁹ And his key point is not to just listen to the gospel message but live it out - since faith without action is dead.¹⁰

Now, as is typical of such letters, James ends with final practical encouragement in pursuing spiritual transformation. His exhortations were not merely for individuals but for the all the Christian communities he was addressing. Imagine you were a teacher, what parting words of advice you would say to your students? Now what does James say? He focuses on two things: *patience* and *prayer*. James knows his readers are experiencing [unnamed] hardships¹¹ and therefore encourages them to *endure* until Jesus returns. James, like the writer of one of our earlier hymns, is convinced Christ will return and that it would be soon.¹² He presents this as a parable saying: "See how the farmer waits for the land to

¹ Jas 1:5, 17.

² Jas 1:13.

³ Jas 2:5; 4:6. See also Jas 5:1-6. (The sick can be included here and through healing God restores them into fellowship.)

⁴ This social justice aspect is evident in prophets repeated warning to the kings who failed to look after the needy.

⁵ Jas 2:13b; 5:11b.

⁶ Jas 1:17b.

⁷ See: <https://secureservercdn.net/198.71.233.235/a4s.655.myftpupload.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/Character-Matters.pdf> .

⁸ See Matt 15:18.

⁹ Jas 4:4-7. James also says don't boast about your future plans when you don't even know what will happen tomorrow (Jas 4:13-16). James' ethics is based on the Old Testament principle of "loving your neighbor as yourselves," which includes not being envious of them or having favourites (Jas 2:1-11. Paul also says that God has no favorites: Rom 2:11; Gal 3:28).

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¹⁰ Jas 1:22; 2:26.

¹¹ Jas 1:1-4. He sees such struggles as means to develop the virtue of perseverance. Some of their suffering could be due to the rich oppressing the poor (a theme in James) as well as the church suffering various kinds of religious oppression beyond their control.

¹² Jas 5:7-8. This ties with this letter having an apocalyptic flavor, as mentioned last week with his used of "devil" and his black and white thinking/contrasts. See: <https://secureservercdn.net/198.71.233.235/a4s.655.myftpupload.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/Wisdom-and-Humility.pdf> .

yield its valuable crop, patiently waiting for the autumn and spring rains. You too, be patient and stand firm.”¹³ This reminds me of the farming parables of Jesus, like the short one from Mark’s gospel that we heard earlier about a farmer planting the seed and patiently waiting for the outcome.¹⁴ In the 1st century, much of the crop productivity was outside of the farmer’s direct control. In addition to miracle as to how the seed germinates and grows, the rains and the sunshine are not fully predictable and so the farmer must trust in God’s providence that the harvest will eventually come. And that reference to harvest was also a common Jewish metaphor for the culmination of history on the “Day of the Lord,” which Christians adapted to Christ’s coming.¹⁵ The resurrection of Jesus was understood a definitive firstfruit of the final harvest. Consequently, James encourages patience and to have confidence in God’s providence, just as a farmer does. That patience does *not* mean passivity or resignation, rather a tough-minded confidence that the present order of things is not ultimate, and therefore we live in the sure hope of the final culmination of God’s Kingdom. Don’t forget God’s big picture, says James.

In addition to patience and endurance, James encourages the faith community to *pray*¹⁶ because that is a sign of our faith, that God is *not* distant but, like the growing seed, is mysteriously active in the world, and that he cares for you and me as individuals and for us as a community. “Is anyone among you in trouble?” says James, “Let them pray. Is anyone happy? Let them sing songs of praise.”¹⁷ Note that singing songs – psalms or otherwise – is considered prayer too. Prayer is to surround *everything* we do, whether life is happy or sad, says James. Why? Because prayer is simply conversation *with* God. When we pray, we are actively including God in our lives. It’s a sign that we are *trusting* in God’s providence – even if we can’t pinpoint God’s actual involvement. In contrast, to *not* pray is saying that we don’t need God, that we can manage on our own – thank you very much. And to pray *only* when we’re in trouble and to *not* sing God’s praises when life is good is to treat God like more like a lucky charm. One further thing: for followers of Jesus, our prayers must be followed up with an appropriate response.¹⁸ Yes, James encourages patience and endurance, but he has already said that “faith without good deeds is dead.”¹⁹

James then says, “Is anyone among you sick?”²⁰ Interestingly, in this case, the call is *not* to personal prayer, but a call to the elders - to the leaders of the congregation - to come and pray. These leaders are to pray and to anoint with oil in the name of the Lord. With this action comes a promise, “the prayer

¹³ Jas 5:7-8.

¹⁴ Mark 4: 26-29. See: <https://secureservercdn.net/198.71.233.235/a4s.655.myftpupload.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/06/The-Kingdom-of-God-is-like.pdf> .

¹⁵ Greek “*parousia*.”

¹⁶ James has stressed controlling the tongue ([7]), not swearing (Jas 5:12), but prayer is always appropriate speech!

¹⁷ Jas 5:13. James has warned of the negative aspects of speech; in contrast, prayer is positive.

¹⁸ An American minister friend of mine from Troy MI, Rev. Dr. Robert Cornwall, writes: “In recent years we’ve heard politicians (US especially) and others address all manner of suffering with the offer of ‘thoughts and prayers.’ By this, they really mean, ‘We’re not going to do anything, so you’re on your own! Hopefully, God will take care of what we are *not* going to take care of” (for example, gun violence).

¹⁹ Jas 2:14-26, esp.26.

²⁰ Jas 5:14a.

of faith will save the sick, and the Lord will raise them up²¹; and anyone who has committed sins will be forgiven.”²² Wow! What are we to make of this? My guess is that many an elder would want to ignore this verse, perhaps many a minister too! Yet James is serious. Let’s not simply dismiss his words but consider carefully what he has to say. Yes, it’s true that the medical profession then was very different from today; there was no healthcare or welfare system. It was therefore common for rabbis to pray for healing, with the anointing of oil, and this was simply adopted within Christianity.²³ People brought the sick to Jesus not just because he had a reputation as a healer,²⁴ but because he was a *rabbi*. It’s also true that we have a much better understanding of illnesses and their cause, and so James’ instruction seems outdated. These days people seek a doctor for healing and a priest for forgiveness! We have completely separated the physical from the spiritual, and for many the latter is an irrelevancy. Moreover, even for many Christians, prayer is the *last* resort to be invoked once the medical profession has done its best and the prognosis isn’t good. But don’t we believe all healing ultimately comes from God? The medical profession, with their skills and their medicines, are therefore to be seen as providential. It seems to me that to deliberately ignore what they can provide for us and instead expect God to do something miraculous is *not* really a sign of faith, it’s to reject God’s provision.²⁵

It’s also important to recognize that James links physical healing with forgiveness, and that’s because in Jewish thinking salvation is *holistic*.²⁶ As Isaiah says of the suffering Servant, “By his wounds we are *healed*.”²⁷ Christ not only came to forgive sin but to make us whole. And that’s another reason why the miracles of Jesus are so important. The kingdom of God was breaking into this world in an unprecedented way, as demonstrated through those miracles *and* with the forgiveness that Jesus pronounced.²⁸ Sickness often means social exclusion, especially so in the 1st century, so physical healing brings restored relationships and joy. And let’s not undervalue forgiveness as mere words, it’s also a liberating experience that can bring joy, restored relationships, and wholeness. Moreover, these days we hear an awful lot about mental health, and we acknowledge the link between psychological and physical wellbeing. But more than that, many are also recognizing that we are *spiritual and physical* beings and body, mind, and spirit all need to be in harmony, and in tune with God.

I *do* believe that salvation is holistic. When we come to God for forgiveness, I believe we need have a greater expectation that God is powerfully at work in our minds and bodies too.²⁹ Now that doesn’t

²¹ See also Matt 9:5-7; Mark 6:13; Luke 7:14; 10:34; John 5:8.

²² Jas 5:14-15. In John 20:21-22, Jesus commissions his followers to forgive sins. See also Luke 24:44-49.

²³ See Acts 3:6; 4:10. The use of oil for medicinal purposes was also widely used in the Greco-Roman world.

²⁴ Evidently many were healed, but not everyone (see John 5:1-15; Mark 6:5; Matt 13:58).

²⁵ I acknowledge that I am assuming that the medical provision is *freely* available, and that may not be the case.

²⁶ However, Jesus rejects the traditional connection of sickness to sin (John 9:1-3). James is *not* suggesting that the two are linked in any way. Forgiveness and healing both result in restoration within the community. Those who are sick are to be restored to the community by means of healing, not forgotten or left behind – or perceived as out of favor with God.

²⁷ Isa 53:5, or “by his stripes” (KJV); other translations use “bruises.” (The “suffering servant” is also seen as a messianic reference.)

²⁸ See Mark 2:1-12.

²⁹ In other words, God wants us - as John’s gospel puts it - to have “life in all its fullness.”²⁹

mean that God is going to reverse the aging process! After all, those whom Jesus healed later died. But unexpected healings are a powerful sign that God's kingdom is still "breaking" into today's world, and I know of no theological or scientific reason to think that the Holy Spirit, who descended upon Jesus at the time of his baptism and who is also upon and among us too, has changed the way he works in the world. I confess, as a minister, I find all this is hugely challenging! We affirm forgiveness as God's gracious gift week by week. It would be nice to experience more holistic healings within our minds and bodies, and to have a broader awareness of God at work behind the scenes of our life events too. This passage is therefore not only very practical, it's also troubling!

Before continuing on, let's read what else James had to say: "Therefore, confess your sins *to* one another, and pray *for* one another, *so that* you may be healed."³⁰ Again you see the linking of healing and forgiveness, but more than that, we see context of *community* – of praying *for each other*, of confession and reconciliation *within* the Christian community. The opposite, as James has already mentioned, is to hold grudges, to show favoritism, to judge others, having uncontrolled speech, not caring for each others practical needs, and more generally to not "love your neighbor as yourself"³¹ I suggest the *quality* of the communal life of the early church in Acts³² contributed to their witness and God's power being evident amongst them. James agrees and, as I said, his words are without doubt a challenging exhortation for the church then and now.

James concludes by stating that "The prayer of a righteous person is powerful and effective."³³ We typically understand that to mean that the prayer of a *holy* person is powerful and effective. That's because James then illustrates this by saying that Elijah was a person just like you and me³⁴ - and when I read that I have to laugh out loud and say, "You're kidding!" After all, at the transfiguration it was Israel's lawgiver, Moses, and great prophet, Elijah, who were present with Jesus.³⁵ And this is where I have a problem with what James is saying, for who would claim to be in Elijah's league?

On reflection, I think James' point is *not* about the holiness of Elijah, but that he was a man of *prayer*, and that God powerfully answered his prayers, even apparently to the point influencing the weather – as we heard in our Old Testament reading.³⁶ Unfortunately, James' brevity gives the impression that it's the *holiness* of the individual that results in the *effectiveness* of the prayer. For that reason, people ask their minister³⁷ to pray for them as if God is *more* likely to answer a minister's prayers. I just don't believe God has favorites and I think God hears *all* our prayers. I like the tone reflected in *The Message*

³⁰ Jas 5:16.

³¹ See Jas 2:8. The quality of the life of the early church in Acts 2:43-47 contributed to their witness and God's power being evident amongst them.

³² See Acts 2:43-47.

³³ Jas 5:16b.

³⁴ Jas 5:17-18.

³⁵ See Matt 17:1-8; Mark 9:2-8; Luke 9:28-36; 2 Pet 1:16-18.

³⁶ See 1 Kings 17:1-18:45.

³⁷ Or an elder or someone else who is regarded as a "prayer warrior" or mature in the faith.

translation of this verse which says: “The prayer of *a person living right with God* is something powerful to be reckoned with.” It is not so much about the perceived holiness of the individual but, rather, that they are simply in a meaningful, dynamic, relationship with God – a partnership that includes regular conversation with God, just like Elijah did. As I said at the beginning, the character of God we believe in matters, and that affects many things – including our prayers.

To help illustrate all this, let me give you an example: 18 months ago, just before the first COVID lock down, Stan Dobias was very seriously ill in Leamington hospital and Angie asked me to come and pray for him. He was having major trouble breathing - although it wasn't COVID - and the doctors told Angie to gather the family members around to say their final farewells to Stan. As you can imagine, Angie was beside herself praying earnestly for Stan when I arrived. He was barely conscious and obviously on oxygen and all sorts of tubes were attached to his body. I prayed for Stan and for Angie, not knowing whether I should be praying for a peaceful death or for Stan to make a full recovery. I invited Jesus the healer to be in this moment, for God to be gracious with both Stan and Angie, for the Holy Spirit to work in power in this specific situation, without demanding what the outcome should be, and for God's deep peace to replace fear and anxiety. I then went home with the human expectations of those doctors in my ears and anticipating that I would be doing a funeral soon. Yet slowly Stan recovered. Within a few days he was sent home with extensive medical care because, given COVID, it was medically safer for him to be there than in hospital. That Stan survived that near-death experience after family members had already said their “goodbyes” is - I believe - a miracle. Now Stan still has ongoing serious health concerns, nevertheless God has graciously given him and Angie more time together. The first point I want to make is that *God* was the source of that healing. And second, it's just as likely that it was in response to Angie's prayers as my own. Divine grace is *not* based on merit. In my opinion, it's not so much about the person who prays as the reliable character of generous God, the source of every good gift. And it would have been helpful if James could have explained more fully what he meant!

I said last week that although we believe the scriptures were *inspired* by God, we still need to be discerning and wise in how we read and apply those texts today. One thing we need to do is to compare what James says with all the other New Testament writers – and there are subtle differences.³⁸ Even so, the call for patience, persistence, and prayer is widely emphasized, as is nurturing the relationships within the congregations. Praying for each other, forgiving each other, and reconciling damaged relationships are all signs of God's kingdom being present amongst us.³⁹ While God's grace can always surprise us in response to our prayers, James states that when a faith community are actively living in a right relationship with God, their prayers are powerful and effective. Therefore, after Matthew's postlude today, there will be an opportunity for prayers for healing for those who so desire. Please remain in the sanctuary and I will quietly pray with you. I will simply ask, “What would you like Jesus to do for you today?” No huge story or details are needed, God knows the situation, and I will briefly pray with you in faith about that concern. Prayer, say James, is powerful. Do we believe that? Let us pray.

³⁸ Paul speaks of healing as a *gift* of the Holy Spirit (1 Cor 12:9) that God gives to some within the Christian community.

³⁹ In an individualistic society we value our privacy, I get it! But this can create unhealthy barriers within a faith community.