

## **THE PRAYING CHURCH** **JAMES 5:13-18**

### **INTRODUCTION:**

Some of my earliest memories of church involve prayer. As a small child the church of my parents was a praying church. I have memories of the members of the church meeting in a home for a “cottage prayer meeting.” For an hour or two hours in an evening those present would involve themselves in seasons of prayer. They prayed for each other, for the sick, for the lost, for the church, for the needs of the world. These were during the days of the Second World War so there were many prayers for young men who had gone away to fight in a distant country and were in danger.

When I came to my teen years and the church of my parents became my church it was a praying church. God did something in the heart of my pastor during my teen years and it involved prayer. Because God had done something fresh in his heart he began to gather a group of teenage boys together for prayer. We met nightly at the church or in some home for months and we prayed. It was during that season of extended prayer that God began to do something in my life that ultimately resulted in my call to ministry. I am here this morning because in those early years, those formative years, I was a part of a praying church.

Then at the age of eighteen I became pastor of a church. I knew so little about being pastor, actually very little about anything. But over the months God began to do something fresh in the life of our church that involved prayer. We, too, began to practice “cottage prayer meetings.” For weeks we met every night in a different home for prayer. The agenda was very simple—we

would sing some songs, share prayer requests, read a few scriptures, and pray. We sometimes had someone to lead us in prayer and sometimes we all prayed in a concert of prayer. A concert of prayer is where everybody prays at the same time. For a stranger who comes into such a prayer meeting, it appears to be very confusing, but for those who are involved it can be a life transforming experience. The result of that was that little church became a praying church.

Across the years prayer has been a major part of my ministry. It is one part of my ministry that as I reflect back over the years I can honestly say I have no regrets. I have regrets that I had not been more successful in leading churches to be praying churches but I have no regrets for attempting to lead them to become praying churches. You will have to be the judge of how effective I have been in developing a praying church here at First Baptist.

It is of interest as we come to the close of my years of active leadership as your pastor, and we are completing the epistle of James, we come to the part of James that presents a praying church. While there are many references to the church at prayer in the book of Acts, and numbers of admonitions for prayer in the epistles, this is the most extended section in the New Testament about prayer in the context of a church. So today, and next Lord's Day, I want us to take a fresh look at these words from James about a praying church.

As we read these words together, it might be helpful to remember an interesting fact about the human author about these words. The half brother of our Lord, James, who wrote this letter, had become the pastoral leader of the church at Jerusalem. He had a nick name among the believers according to church tradition — he was called “Camel knees.” They gave him such a nick name

because he had prayed so much that his knees had become like camel's knees. He had calluses on them from having spent so much time on his knees. It is such a man of prayer who shares these practical words about a praying church.

### **I. IN THE PRAYING CHURCH THE MEMBERS PRAY ABOUT EVERYTHING.**

James opens this section on the praying church with these words: "Is anyone of you in trouble? He should pray. Is anyone happy? Let him sing songs of praise." With these two admonitions, James is describing the two extremes of life—times of trouble and times of joy. Prayer is to be the way we respond in both of these extremes and in everything in between.

#### **1. They respond to their troubles with petitions.**

The word translated "trouble" is a strong word. The word has in it the root idea of suffering evil or misfortune. It could be used of any of the hard and difficult experiences of life. It means that some kind of calamity has fallen upon you. When such calamities come upon you, what do you do? As a member of the body of Christ, you pray.

The word translated "pray" is the common Greek word for prayer. The word is made up of two words. The foundation of the word means to have a wish or a desire and it has a preposition attached to it that gives it an idea of going toward someone. So prayer is to present your desire or your wish before God. So, in times of trouble, you pray. Actually James uses the present tense verb in this statement which means you keep on praying. You don't allow the difficulties and discouragement that may come with the difficulties to turn you away from prayer. Instead you respond to the trials and difficulties with perseverance in your prayers.

This is how the life of the church ought to be marked. The members of the church, one by one, respond to every difficulty that comes their way with prayer. They don't do it as a last resort when all other resources have been exhausted but instead it is their first response! The first thing they do and the last thing they do is to present the desire of their heart before the heavenly Father in prayer.

2. They respond to their blessings with praise.

The word translated "happy" is a word that means to have a good spirit, to be cheerful, to be in a happy mood. The implication of the word is that you are cheerful or happy because something good has happened in your life. Your heart within you is lifted up with joy. What do you do when good things have happened to you? You praise the Lord. Actually the word used by James for "sing songs of praise" could be translated simply "let him sing a psalm." The song to be sung could be sung with the accompaniment of an instrument or could be sung accuppella.

The thing that marks the song is that it is a song of praise to God. Another thing that marks the song is that it is sung to God continuously. It is to be habit and pattern of your life that when good things come your way you sing before the Lord songs of praise and thanksgiving.

We need to understand that this is also a form of prayer. Praise is prayer! Some prayers can be sung as well as said. The thing that is to mark the members of the church is that when good things come their way, they give thanks to God; they praise the Lord for His goodness! So this is

to be the mark of a praying church — they pray when trouble comes and they praise when joy has come.

How do we measure up by such a standard for our church? Are we a church where the members pray in their individual lives? Do our members respond to their troubles with prayer and blessings with praise? If we do not, we should!

## **II. IN THE PRAYING CHURCH THE LEADERS MINISTER TO THE MEMBERS WITH PRAYER.**

This is the third situation that James addresses and the one with which he spends the most time. I have separated it from the other two because this involves more than just an individual response — it involves the membership and leadership of the body itself. “Is any one of you sick? He should call the elders of the church to pray over him and anoint him with oil in the name of the Lord. And the prayer offered in faith will make the sick person well; the Lord will raise him up. If he has sinned, he will be forgiven.” This is the only passage in the New Testament that gives the church such practical instruction about its prayer ministry. I want us to look at the words in careful detail because they do address a recurring situation in the life of every local congregation.

What can we learn from this passage about a praying church?

1. The sick request the prayer ministry of the church.

The word that James gives is so practical. “Is any one of you sick? He should call the elders of the church to pray.” The word that James uses for “sick” has a root idea of being weak and without strength. It is the kind of sickness that has made a person incompatible for work and

even for prayer. It is noteworthy that James does not admonish the sick to respond with prayer. Rather, he admonishes them to seek the prayers of the church.

Those of you who have been through a time of serious illness know why this is so. If you are weakened by sickness, you may not have the strength and energy to pray. In our day in which you will most likely be medicated, prayer may become physically impossible. So your response to your illness is to reach out to the praying church for prayer.

It is also very practical that James put the responsibility upon the sick or maybe some close family member, to convey the request to the body. I have undergone more verbal chastisements than any pastor ought to ever have to undergo for not visiting ill member, or not praying for them, when I had no knowledge of their illness. People seem to assume that the body and the leadership of the body enjoy the gift of omniscience like their Lord. They seem to sense that we know that they have a need even if they have never shared with us that they have a need. So, it is a very practical matter when James admonishes the sick to send word for the elders to come for prayer, but it does a step beyond that. Even to reach out to the elders of the church in such a moment is an act of faith. While you in your illness may not be able to pray a prayer of faith, to just cry out to the members of the body, "Help! Pray for me!" is an act of faith. You exercise faith in the Lord and in His people when you request from them prayer for you in your time of need.

2. The leaders extend the ministry of prayer to the sick.

In the passage the burden falls upon the elders. Baptists drop the title “elder” some years ago, at least most Baptists did. However a careful study in the New Testament would indicate that elder was a term that was used synonymously with pastor, teacher, minister, or spiritual leader. It was a term of dignity and honor given to those who are spiritual leaders, pastoral leaders in the congregation. I have always interpreted it to include myself and the ministerial staff of the church and the good, godly deacons who serve in a leadership role in the life of the church. It is this group that has responsibility to respond to the appeal from the sick in their time of need. They extend the ministry to the sick.

A. They pray the prayer of faith.

The words of James in this passage challenge our ability to interpret the scriptures. “He should call the elders of the church to pray over Him and anoint him with oil in the name of the Lord. And the prayer offered in faith will make the sick person well; the Lord will raise him up.” There may be a hint about the posture of the elders as they pray in this passage. You will notice that they are to “Pray over him.” This could involve the laying on of hands or it may simply mean that they stood around the sick person and prayer quiet literally over him. At least we can be confident that they were standing beside, or kneeling beside the sick person. If the sick person was conscious the sick person would be able to enter into the prayer as they prayed over him.

However, the think that challenges us most is the nature of this “prayer” offered in faith.

Literally, the Greek text reads, “The prayer of faith.” The prayer is an expression of the strong faith of this group of elders. This is not the prayer of an individual, but the prayer of a group of

elders. Their faith in God joined with the faith of the person who sent for them ascends to the Lord as a prayer of faith.

B. They anoint with oil in the name of the Lord.

What are we to understand concerning this anointing with oil in the name of the Lord? Many evangelical scholars associate this anointing with oil with doing what ever you can medically to help the person. The sick were often anointed with olive oil medicinally in that New Testament world. Many scholars feel that this is a call for the prayer of faith and utilization of the best medical means available.

The fact that James associates the anointing with “in the name of the Lord” seems to add another dimension to it. I do not see this statement as being an authorization for the elders to practice medicine. Rather, I see it as a spiritual act. They were to take some olive oil and to place some of it as an act of faith upon the head of the sick. Is there power in such oil? It is interesting that James does not indicate that the anointing of oil will make the sick person well, but rather the prayer offered in faith. My own understanding of this anointing with oil is that it is a means of encouraging the faith and confidence of the person who is sick. It is a physical act that can provoke in the heart of a person a confidence. It brings to them the assurance that they have done what God instructed them to do and that now their case is in the hands of a gracious God. It would be my impression, however, that we have not made enough of the phrase “in the name of the Lord.” This would convey the idea of doing something in the authority and in the power of the Lord. Where ever the name of the Lord is invoked, and the power of the Lord is present, miracles are possible, even miracles of healing.

Does this mean that a praying church will have healing services in which they anoint the sick? It would seem to indicate in this text that the healing prayer took place in a home and not in a public place of worship. A home setting provides a much better spiritual setting for such a prayer or maybe a hospital setting. Across the years as a pastor I have been requested to anoint some with oil in their time of sickness. On the bases of this passage I have always responded to such requests positively. I have taken with me elders of the church and we have assembled around that person after sharing with each other and we have prayed, and we have taken some drops of olive oil and anointed the person. I cannot report to you that in every case every person has been healed. I can report to you that in every case the sick have been blessed. Some later died, but they seem to die with an awareness that their case had been submitted to the great physician and their trust was in Him.

### **III. THE LORD HEALS THE SICK.**

There is no mention in this text of some member of the body exercising a gift of healing. There is a listing of such a gift in the Corinthian Letter, but James makes no reference to it. It is rather simply, “the Lord will raise him up.” When the prayer of faith lifts the sick into the presence of the Lord, as it pleases Him, God will lift them up. The great physician is indeed able to heal the sick. And in some cases the sickness may be caused by disobedience to the Lord. James refers to such when he says, “If he has sinned, he will be forgiven.”

This is only part of this passage about the praying church, but it is enough to give us a sense about what it means to be a part of a praying church. A praying church is a church where the

members individually practice prayer in all the circumstances in life. A praying church is a church where the body corporately ministers to the needs of the congregation through prayer. This ought to be the pattern that we seek to follow. Prayer needs to be a prominent and consistent part of our individual lives. We need to see this body where we are members as a praying body. We need to believe that our church, particularly its spiritual leaders, can be heard in heaven when they pray and that their prayers can make a difference in our lives.

I want to call on you as I challenge my own heart to renew your commitment to be a person of prayer. I want to call on you to renew your commitment to help your church be a praying church.