

THE "HOW DO I...?" SERIES, PART 1
"How should I pray about my problems?"

James 5:13-18 (NLT2) - Are any of you suffering hardships? You should pray. Are any of you happy? You should sing praises. ¹⁴ Are any of you sick? You should call for the elders of the church to come and pray over you, anointing you with oil in the name of the Lord. ¹⁵ Such a prayer offered in faith will heal the sick, and the Lord will make you well. And if you have committed any sins, you will be forgiven.

¹⁶ Confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed. The earnest prayer of a righteous person has great power and produces wonderful results. ¹⁷ Elijah was as human as we are, and yet when he prayed earnestly that no rain would fall, none fell for three and a half years! ¹⁸ Then, when he prayed again, the sky sent down rain and the earth began to yield its crops.

James mentioned "prayer" seven times in just six verses.

James had a reputation for being a man of prayer. In fact, his nickname was "Old Camel Knees." One of the ancient church fathers, Eusebius, wrote in 325 AD about James:

...He was in the habit of entering alone into the temple, and was frequently found upon his knees begging forgiveness for the people, so that his knees became hard like those of a camel, in consequence of his constantly bending them in his worship of God, and asking forgiveness for the people.¹

There is tremendous power in prayer:

- Prayer is the freedom to speak personally with the God of the Universe.

What prayer can do is what *God* can do.

John 14:12-14 (NLT2) – [Jesus:] "I tell you the truth, anyone who believes in me will do the same works I have done, and even greater works, because I am going to be with the Father. ¹³ You can ask for anything in my name [that's prayer], and I will do it, so that the Son can bring glory to the Father. ¹⁴ Yes, ask me for anything in my name [that's prayer], and I will do it!"

I want to attempt to answer three questions today.

Question 1. When should I pray?

¹ <https://christianity.stackexchange.com/questions/45451/origin-of-the-story-that-james-had-knees-as-hard-as-a-camels-because-of-prayin>

The Apostle Paul said:

1 Thessalonians 5:17 (NLT2) - Never stop praying.

But for those of us who like a little more information, James mentioned three specific times when we really need to pray.

A. I should pray when I am hurting emotionally.

James 5:13 (NLT2) - Are any of you suffering hardships? [The word in Greek literally means "to suffer misfortune, to be in emotional distress."] **You should pray...**

In Timothy, that same word is translated "*hardships*." He's talking about **internal** distress caused by **external** circumstances. It may be:

- A financial crisis.
- A relational crisis.
- Some kind of emotional pain.
- Something on the *outside* that is breaking your heart on the *inside*.
- It's a tension that is at an all-time high.

Psalm 18:6 (NLT2) - ...in my distress I cried out to the LORD; yes, I prayed to my God for help...

On the flip side, James also reminds us that when things are going well, we should pray! A lot of us fall into the habit of not talking to God unless we need something. **If you're like me, you know how old that gets, right?** We don't like it when people do that to us. Don't do that to God, either.

James 5:13 (NLT2) - ...Are any of you happy? You should sing praises [when you sing to God, you are praying].

Talk to Him when you don't need anything, too.

B. I should pray when I am hurting physically.

James 5:14-15 (NLT2) - Are any of you sick? [The Greek word literally means: "Without Strength." It means you are totally out of gas, fatigued, bedridden, unable to work. Not just a case of acid indigestion or postnasal drip. It's the word most frequently used for *illness*.

- It's the same word used to describe Lazarus when he got sick and died.

...You should call for the elders of the church to come and pray over you, anointing you with oil in the name of the Lord. ¹⁵ **Such a prayer offered in faith will**

heal the sick, and the Lord will make you well. And if you have committed any sins, you will be forgiven.

Let me give you a little trivia here: Not all physical ailments are associated with personal sin. The Scriptures teach that there are a few different kinds of sickness God uses. I'll discuss two of them this morning.

1) Sickness that is allowed for death.

Death came into the world through sin. That has tainted all of us.

The Bible tells us that before the Great Flood you know from the story of Noah and the Ark, everything was so pure that people lived for centuries. But people became so corrupt over their centuries of life that God decided to erase humankind with the flood, and to start over. After the flood, God limited humankind's life expectancy to limit the damage each of us could do through our sin.

There are some sicknesses that you never ultimately recover from because God has set a limit. No matter what your anti-aging cosmetics or health gurus tell you, we cannot live indefinitely in these bodies. There will be an illness or event someday where the purpose is to take you home.

2) Sickness that is allowed for discipline.

The purpose of a sickness for discipline is mentioned by Paul.

1 Corinthians 11:27-30 (NLT2) - So anyone who eats this bread or drinks this cup of the Lord unworthily is guilty of sinning against the body and blood of the Lord. ²⁸ That is why you should examine yourself before eating the bread and drinking the cup. ²⁹ For if you eat the bread or drink the cup without honoring the body of Christ, you are eating and drinking God's judgment upon yourself. ³⁰ That is why many of you are weak and sick and some have even died.

Sometimes – not all the time – God will use a sickness or injury to get your attention and turn your heart back toward Him.

C. I should pray when I am hurting spiritually.

James 5:16 (NLT2) - Confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed...

We live in a fallen world, and part of that challenge is there are hurts and problems – and we need others to pray for us.

Then the next question that arises in my mind is: Why isn't everybody healed? I don't know

The Apostle Paul explained how he saw it working in his own life. He had some kind of physical problem that plagued him, here was the perspective he chose to take:

2 Corinthians 12:8-9 (NLT2) - Three different times I begged the Lord to take it away. ⁹ Each time he said, "My grace is all you need. My power works best in weakness." So now I am glad to boast about my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ can work through me.

Question 2. Who can pray?

I know some people think that only spiritual giants can pray and have God answer their prayers, so they feel very much inferior and unworthy. But Jesus came and lived among us and offered His own life in our place so that we could be made worthy.

There was a prophet in the Old Testament named Elijah. God had told him to prophesy that there would be no rain in the land for 3.5 years. He did this, and the rain stopped immediately. The drought was so severe that King Ahab thought that killing Elijah would end it – so off Elijah ran to hide because he was afraid.

He ended up in a contest on a hill called Mt. Carmel. 450 prophets of the false god Baal plus 400 prophets of the false goddess Asherah met Elijah on that hill to have contest to see whose God was real.

Each team – Team Elijah on one side (by himself), and Team Ahab on the other side (with 850 false prophets) – was to build an altar, offer a sacrifice, and then call for their respective gods to accept the altar by miraculously setting it on fire.

Elijah let them go first. By noon, Elijah began mocking them and calling them names and asking them if their god was on the toilet and couldn't hear them. This made them mad, so they yelled louder and began cutting themselves and bleeding all over the ground and the altar.

Elijah then built an altar, dug a trench around it, and poured water all over it until the kindling was soaked and the trench was full. Elijah prayed, and fire from heaven so thoroughly burned the sacrifice that even the stones of the altar and the ground

inside the trench were burned into a crater.

*A little footnote here: Elijah then had the people kill all 850 false prophets. It was a messy place.

Let's go back to James 5. Here's what happened next:

James 5:17-18 (NLT2) - Elijah was as human as we are, and yet when he prayed earnestly that no rain would fall, none fell for three and a half years! ¹⁸Then, when he prayed again, the sky sent down rain and the earth began to yield its crops.

The lesson of Elijah's life is you don't have to be perfect to pray. You don't have to be perfect to see answers to your prayers. It's for ordinary people. (In fact, after Elijah's MASSIVE victory on that hill and the return of the rain, he ran and went into hiding because he was afraid Ahab would be so ticked at him for killing all those false prophets that he'd eventually kill him.)

God uses ordinary people to do extraordinary things through prayer. So connect with God by praying. By talking with him. By hearing what he has to say to you by reading the Bible.

Question 3. How can I pray effectively?

James mentions four conditions for praying effectively.

A. I must ask.

James 4:2 (NLT2) -Yet you don't have what you want because you don't ask God for it.

We fail to pray specifically. The more specific your prayers are the greater you're going to be blessed in the answer.

B. I must have the right motive.

James 4:3 (NLT2) - And even when you ask, you don't get it because your motives are all wrong—you want only what will give you pleasure.

If you're going to ask in prayer, make sure your motives are right. Not for selfishness, but for a genuine reason: the glory of God. Jesus talked about this:

John 6:38 (NASB) - "For I have come down from heaven, not to do My own will, but the will of Him who sent Me."

Our prayers should include our submission to God's plan. It's a demonstration that we trust what God is doing in our life.

C. I must live a clean life.

James 5:16 (NLT2) - ...The earnest prayer of a righteous person has great power and produces wonderful results.

Righteous does not mean living perfectly. It's not about perfection. Righteousness is about your heart and your standing before God when you became a believer.

Have you committed to follow God so that you can be righteous? This type of commitment is a "*I-surrender-my-everything-to-Jesus-and-trust-him-to-save-me.*" All in. Have your surrendered to God because you are a sinner in need of saving.

If I am willfully and knowingly doing something I know is displeasing to God and say, "God, I'm going to continue doing this thing you object to, but, by the way, help me out with this other thing." It's like saying "Dad, will you loan me the keys to the car, but just know that I'm going to break the law, tear up the car, and I'm never going to do a single thing you ask."

Proverbs 28:9 (MSG) - God has no use for the prayers of the people who won't listen to him.

Isaiah 59:2 (NLT2) - It's your sins that have cut you off from God. Because of your sins, he has turned away and will not listen anymore.

Talk with God by praying and listen to him by reading the Bible.

When is the last time you opened the good book? I'd encourage you to read 1 chapter in the book of Mark each day this week. When you sit down say "God help me to understand" and start reading.