OPENING THE SCRIPTURES

"Let Us Pray" — An Overview

David Anguish

Richard Wells once took note of the fact that many systematic theology texts give little attention to the subject of prayer, often devoting only a page or two to the topic and subsuming it under another heading such as providence. He called the neglect "one of the strangest and saddest omissions in modern theology." He also noted the same omission in studies of James. Introductions to the book routinely include discussions of the letter's major themes but typically do not include prayer as one of them (Wells 1986, 85–86).

Wells is generalizing; multiple writers do mention James's prayer emphasis (that several were written after Wells's 1986 article may be telling). But his assertion that prayer ought to be included in lists of James's major topics is well taken. Other New Testament writings address the matter of prayer, of course (cf. Rom 15.30–32; Eph 6.18; 1 Thess 5.17–18; Heb 13.18–19), but "James's exhortation is notable for its length" (McCartney 2009, 251). But that exhortation, which occurs at the end of the letter, is not all James says about the matter.

Trials, Faith, and Prayer: Interconnected Themes

James is well known for his emphasis on trials and faith, or, to state it more precisely, for his emphasis on maintaining faith while enduring trials. He begins his letter with an appeal to wavering faith as evidence of obedience to the command to face trials with joy (Jas 1.2–8). Trials,

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especially those that result from mistreatment by others, is a recurring theme throughout the book (cf. 1.9–11; 2.1–7; 3.15–16; 4.1–3; 5.1–11).

As we review those texts, it is interesting to notice how often James connects prayer to faith in trials. In 1.2–8, the strength for coping with trials and enduring without wavering is found in wisdom, which is ours for the *asking* from God who gives without hesitation. In 4.1–10, the conflicts, which demonstrate both trials and faithless living, result from "the self-seeking [who] may not pray at all; and if they do pray, they pray only to gratify the lusts which orient their lives" (Wells 1986, 98). Verses 1–6 implicitly make an appeal for right asking, right motives, and the right aim. Verses 7–10 use language (e.g., "draw near") that is often associated with formal religious activities, and especially as a synonym for praying (Wells 1986, 100).

In 5.13–18, James again brings the ideas of trials, faith, and prayer together. The trials mentioned are suffering (v. 13), sickness (vv. 14–15), and sin (v. 16). The expected response is "the prayer of faith" (v. 15), part of a lifestyle that demonstrates unwavering allegiance to God. The entirety of 5.13–18 recapitulates the major themes (trials and faith) even as it calls for prayer as a specific faith behavior, an action that is "another revolutionary tactic, *not* a passive resignation to a situation" (Blomberg and Kamell 2008, 241).

"Let Him Pray" — Some Questions

That prayer is the theme of verses 13–18 is evident from the fact that words that mean prayer appear in every verse:

- "Is anyone … suffering? Let him pray [προσεύχομαι, *proseuchomai*]" (v. 13).
- "Is anyone … sick? … pray [*proseuchomai*]" (v. 14).
- "And the prayer [εὐχή, *euchē*] of faith will save the one who is sick" (v. 15).
- "Therefore, … pray [εὔχομαι, *euchomai*] for one another, … The prayer [δέησις, *deēsis*] of a righteous person has great power as it is working" (v. 16).
- "Elijah … prayed [προσευχή, *proseuchē*] fervently …" (v. 17).
- "Then he prayed [*proseuchomai*] again …" (v. 18).

As we prepare to think more specifically about these verses in future installments, we should keep in mind that they do not deal with every aspect of prayer or provide an answer to every question we might ask about prayer. In fact, they present us with several puzzles. As McCartney observes, "this brief passage is remarkably full of difficult problems" (McCartney 2009, 251).

What kinds of suffering are in view (v. 13)? What is involved in what the elders are to do when they are summoned by the sick (v. 14)? What is meant by "anointing" (v. 14)?

What is meant by the promise that "the prayer of faith will save the one who is sick and the Lord will raise him up" (v. 15)? Is the sickness physical, spiritual, or both? Is the promise that the sick person will get well? If so, is that a guarantee? If he does not recover, was the prayer bad? Or the

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faith? Or is the promise that he will emerge spiritually stronger through and in spite of his sickness?

What is the connection between sickness and sin (v. 16)? What is involved in confessing to one another (v. 16)? Some sins? All sins? How often? When? And what is meant by the promise that confession leads to healing (v. 16)?

How is Elijah a model for prayer (vv. 17–18)? Is the emphasis on his prayer or his character? What is the significance of each? In light of Elijah's example, if we should pray for a specific outcome like rain, or for it to cease, and what we pray for does not happen, has prayer failed? Or have we? Or is the explanation to be found elsewhere?

Let Us Pray

It is likely that James's readers grasped some of the specific details of his instruction more readily than we can. It is also reasonable to assume that, if we could talk or correspond with him directly, he could answer them for us and eliminate our need to dig into them more.

But given his emphasis throughout the writing, it's also reasonable to think that he might tell us to take a step back and simply do what he commands in verse 13.

- As you deal with life, pray.
- If life deals you a bad hand, pray.
- If, like the prophets, you are suffering (κακοπαθέω, *kakopatheō*; cf. κακοπάθεια, *kakopatheia* in v. 10), pray.
- If you're pleased with how things are going, don't forget God; sing praise.

That was evidently James's practice. Eusebius, in a report he attributes to the second century *Memoirs* of Hegesippus, says that James "used to enter the temple alone and was often found kneeling and imploring forgiveness for the people, so that his knees became hard like a camel's from his continual kneeling in worship of God and in prayer for the people" (*Hist. Eccl*. 2.23; in Maier 2007, 71).

Reflecting on the things we can learn from James's emphasis on prayer, Wells observed that, "Skeptics are not the only people who wonder about the necessity, the efficacy, or the rationality of beseeching a Being who presumably knows and wills the best for his creatures, comprehensively and ceaselessly.… James will have none of this. His theology of prayer, like every element of his Epistle, is pragmatic-practical" (Wells 1986, 107).

Works Cited

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An Additional Thought on James

"Oath-taking is popular because people are liars. It's that simple. Dr. Helmut Thielicke, the scholar and pastor who resisted compromising his integrity during the Hitler era, put it like this:

'Whenever I utter the formula "I swear to God," I am really saying, "Now I'm going to mark off an area of absolute truth and put walls around it to cut if off from the muddy floods of untruthfulness and irresponsibility that ordinarily overruns my speech." In fact, I am saying even more than this. I am saying that people are expecting me to lie from the start. And just because they are counting on my lying I have to bring up these big guns of oaths and words of honor.…'

"Jesus and James are telling us we must never use 'big guns' like 'on my mother's grave' or 'as God is my witness.' Everyday speech and pulpit speech and courtroom speech are all to be the same—radically true!"

~ R. Kent Hughes. 1991. *James: Faith That Works*. Crossway Books, 248; quoting Helmut Thielicke. 1980. *Life Can Begin Again.* Westminster, 55

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