



# Digging Deeper

August 24, 2025

## What is “The Prayer of Faith?”: Understanding James 5:13-20

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What Is “The Prayer of Faith?”

“I believe that it’s always God’s will to heal,” my friend stated earnestly.

We sat together in a small room, the winter sun streaming through the windows, holding steaming cups of tea.

“But what about people who die of cancer, even after much prayer? What about those who are not healed after a tragic accident?” I protested.

“They just didn’t know how to receive the healing,” my friend said matter-of-factly. “James 5:15 tells us ‘the prayer of faith will save the one who is sick.’”

My mind flooded with questions and concerns, as my heart began to beat faster. I realized this wasn’t going to be a quick conversation. And I desperately needed God’s wisdom to guide me.

The prayer of faith in James 5:13-20 is a powerful, and often misunderstood, passage. Are we really promised healing if we just have enough faith to believe? Or could God be talking about healing in eternity, when we’re finally free of all sin, disease, and sadness? What is God trying to tell us through this important passage on prayer? Here are a few questions and main points we can understand about prayer from this passage.

### 1. When are we to pray?

James exhorts us to pray all the time! We’re to pray when we’re suffering. We’re to sing praise when we’re cheerful. We’re instructed to call the elders of the church to pray over us and anoint us with oil when we’re sick. Whether we’re walking through hills or valleys, we are to remain dependent on the Lord. “Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances” (1 Thess. 5:16-18, emphasis added).

### 2. Does the prayer of faith promise healing?

At first glance, verse 15 looks like God promises healing to the one who has prayed in faith: “And the prayer of faith will save the one who is sick, and the Lord will raise him up.” But we know that other passages of Scripture, such as 2 Corinthians 12:7-9, prove otherwise. The apostle Paul, a man of great faith, pleaded with the Lord three times for the thorn in his flesh to be removed. Yet God didn’t grant his request. Instead, God supplied Paul with His all-sufficient

grace, so that Paul would learn to boast in his weaknesses as he depended on God (2 Cor. 12:9–10). Even Jesus Christ, the God-man, asked the Father three times to take away His suffering (Matt. 26:39–44). Yet the Father willed for Jesus to suffer and die a brutal death so that we might be forgiven of our sin.

God offers us something so much greater than physical healing. He offers us spiritual healing, forgiveness of our sins. He may choose to heal our physical bodies on earth, or He may choose to let his glory be displayed in our suffering. But one day, we will be free from all sin, sickness, emotional stress, and death. God will raise us up with new bodies after our souls depart from this world. Our hope is not in earthly healing, but in spiritual healing and eternity to come.

### 3. How does spiritual healing happen?

James reminds us that the Christian life is not to be lived alone. Healing comes through confession of our sins. We're instructed to confess and pray for one another (5:16). Do you have friends or accountability partners you can openly confess sin to? I've heard it said that if you want to stay stuck in your sin, don't tell anyone about it. But those who desire healing and joy will take seriously the command to confess their sins to others. God has provided the church body as a beautiful means of grace in our lives.

### 4. Do you have to be extraordinarily blessed or gifted for God to hear and answer our prayers?

James encourages us that Elijah was a man with a nature like ours (5:17). That means he was a sinner, just like you and me. But he was a man who believed in the power of prayer. He prayed fervently that it not rain, and God held off the rain for three years. Then he prayed for rain, and God graciously answered his prayer with rain for the harvest. We're not told that his words were eloquent or that he had an extraordinary gift of faith, but that he was righteous, faithful and diligent in prayer. This should encourage us. God hears our prayers. He may not answer them the way we want, but we can always trust that He is good and will answer according to His perfect will.

### 5. Why should we pursue someone who has wandered from the faith?

God desires us to love our neighbor. And this includes loving the person who is wandering from the faith. Instead of throwing our hands up in despair or being indifferent, we're to go after them, to lovingly pursue them with truth and grace. Maybe that means asking them to meet you for coffee, sending them a text with Scripture, or continually praying for them. There are a multitude of ways we can seek after lost sheep. God promises that whoever brings a sinner back from his wandering will save his soul from death and will cover a multitude of sins (James 5:19–20). We're our brothers' keeper. It shouldn't be a burden to pursue them in love.

I didn't convince my friend that God doesn't always heal on this earth. But I pray that seeds of truth were planted in our conversation, and that as she studies the Scripture, the Holy Spirit will illumine her mind to discern truth from error. And I can trust that as I keep praying for her, God hears my prayers and will answer them in His perfect way.