

*Note: A sermon is not a sermon until it is preached. Hopefully, by the time you read this, the Holy Spirit has taken this manuscript and turned it into a message for the people of Englewood Baptist Church. Feel free to print these notes and use them in any way to advance the kingdom of God.*

**Praying Yourself Out of A Pit**  
**James 5:13-18**  
**Englewood Baptist Church**  
**Sunday Morning, July 25, 2010**

Please open your Bible to James 1.

Growing up, I was a video game guru. Long before Super Mario Bros., there was a game that I loved to play. It was called “Pitfall.” Do you remember that game? I remember the alligators down in the pit, and the rope that would swing back and forth, and my job was to jump at just the right time and to avoid the gaping mouths of those gators.

But no matter how hard I tried, sooner or later, I would make a fatal error and my man would go plunging down into a pit full of death.

I don’t mean to be gloomy this morning, but the truth is, sooner or later, you and I find ourselves in a pit. Life is full of disappointments, shattered dreams, and entanglements and no matter how strong you are, you will eventually face a season of struggle, or depression, or despair.

Look at the best Bible heroes and you will see that even they were not immune to discouragement.

- Abraham was the first patriarch of the faith, who left everything to follow God, but when his wife couldn’t get pregnant, it brought him to his knees.
- Elijah the prophet was an explosive man of God, defeating hundreds of enemies on a single day, but soon later, he was so depressed that he begged God to take his life.
- David was a man after God’s own heart, with courage the size of the globe, and yet his family had so many problems that he nearly lost his passion.
- Peter was the most gregarious guy in the flock of disciples, but when he failed three times in a row, he assumed that Jesus could never love a loser like him.

If you are flesh and blood, and you are, then be prepared: life has many pits and holes that we fall into. And one day, you may not be able to pull yourself out.

But thanks be to God that you are not walking this earth alone. With the power of the Holy Spirit, you have the most potent force available to man. And not only that, you have the life-saving power of prayer. You can pray yourself out of a pit.

In the book of James, James is writing to believers who have been “scattered abroad” and forced to flee from their homes because of the persecution described in Acts 8:1-4. These Jewish Christians were being abused because they claimed that Jesus is the only way to

heaven. Now, before I read today's passage from James 5, it's important for you to know the context in which these words were written. Listen carefully! James is NOT writing to people who are sitting in a hospital, he is NOT writing to people who are stuck in the First Aid unit. He is writing to discouraged, defeated, and deflated Christians who are struggling. That's why in chapter 1, he begins with these words...

He is writing to scattered, displaced Christians who are now watching their careers fall apart, their families pulled apart, their lives changed overnight as their faith was becoming known. To be a Christian was to invite suffering into one's life. These people are not so much physically sick as they are spiritually weak.

Do you ever feel that way? Do you ever feel weak? Have you ever felt so discouraged that you are numb, that you have lost your passion to persevere? If so, James wraps this letter up by offering these words to you! Listen to what he says about the power of prayer when we find ourselves in the pit...

Read James 5:13-18.

Before Dr. Adrian Rogers passed away, he recorded a series of messages for pastors to listen to. The DVD set has been one of my favorite resources that I have ever been given. In one particular message, Dr. Rogers lays forth the priorities of the preacher and he said this, which has stuck with me. *"Prayer is more important than preaching and preaching is more important than administration."* I believe that Dr. Rogers is right. Keeping my desk with clean piles is less vital than keeping my heart hot for preaching. And keeping my heart hot for preaching is less important than keeping my heart hot for the Lord. Prayer keeps me close to God and God makes me influential. A pastor's ministry depends on his prayer life.

And the same is true for all people. The most important ministry in any church is the ministry of prayer. And I want you to notice in this passage how James links prayer to the local church.

### **Prayer in the Local Church**

- **Individual believers are called to pray in v.13.**
- **Pastors are called to pray in v.14-15.**
- **The congregation is called to pray in v.15.**

So you can see that prayer is supposed to penetrate every program, and every person in the congregation. It is not solely the job of paid clergy; it is the responsibility of all.

Now, what James does in the following verses is sets out to persuade people like you and me that prayer works. V. 16 says that it's powerful and effective, no matter what pit you might find yourself in. He makes 4 points about praying yourself out of a pit.

### **Praying Yourself Out of a Pit**

## 1. When you feel defeated, don't stop praying. (v.13)

Prayer is like insulin to the diabetic; it is the only thing that can keep you alive in times of trouble. Don't cut off communication with God because you resent your present circumstances.

Look at v. 13...

Now it's important to know that: *The present tense of the verb translated "he must pray" suggests a continual pleading with God in prayer; it could be translated "let him keep on praying."*

So there's an old saying that reads, "When the going gets tough, the tough get going." That's not in the Bible—that's man-centered motto, but let me tell you what IS in the Bible: "When the going gets tough, the tough get on their face before God in prayer."

A few weeks ago, I was working out at the gym and I decided that it was time for me to really test my bench pressing power. So I threw more weight on the bar than I ever have and I said to my spotter, "If I push this bar all the way to the top, I want you to call me "Samson" for the rest of the day." And so I got down on my back, I lifted that mass off the rack, and instantly, it went "Whooooom! All the way down on my chest. I could not move, all I could do was beg for help." How humiliating! And when I got up from that bench, I had been humbled. The truth came crashing home: I am not as strong as I think I am.

And neither are you.

Prayer is the chain that connects you to God, who is all-powerful. And James called out to these Christians saying, "Are you weak?" Then beg for strength. Now notice, James doesn't leave out those Christians who are getting along just fine. To those who were happy in heart, he says, "If you are happy, then sing songs of praise."

Praise is a form of prayer. It is singing to God and connecting with God. And so you get the point, ALWAYS KEEP THE LINE OF COMMUNICATION OPEN WITH GOD. When you marry, you pledge to your spouse, "I will love you in sickness and in health." That means, no matter what life brings, this relationship will remain strong. The same must be true with your connection with God. Whether you are up or down, KEEP ON PRAYING.

## 2. When you feel defeated, pray with a pastor/spiritual leader. (v.14-15)

Look at the next verse...

Now most translations render this verse as "sick." Is any of you "sick," but its important to realize that this word often refers to those who have hit rock bottom on a spiritual and emotional level as well. 14 times in the New Testament, this word is used to refer to

those who are discouraged and feel weak. They have caved and collapsed and they have no desire to get out of bed in the morning to face the future.

And what the Bible teaches here is that pastors and spiritual leaders are to do the work of restoration by praying with/for the people who have been placed under their care. So one of the most powerful things that I can do for people at Englewood is not to counsel them, but to call out to God in their behalf. To beg God to bring a wave of renewal and revival. The strong should carry the weak. This is not an idea that is confined to the book of James. Look at these verses:

***And we urge you, brothers, warn those who are idle, encourage the timid, help the weak, be patient with everyone. 1 Thess. 5:14***

The idea captured in that verse is that the brethren, the strong believers in Christ, should reach out and help those who are weak. That's the beauty of the body of Christ and that's why you and I should not forsake the assembly of the church. We should not skip church even when we feel weary, because when you are weak, others are strong, and when others are strong, you might be weak. We encourage and lift up one another.

Galatians 6:1 says it this way...

***Brothers, if someone is caught in a sin, you who are spiritual should restore him gently. Gal. 6:1***

Again, the idea is that the sheep draw strength from the shepherds. And prayer is the strengthening force of the church. The wounded, exhausted, and broken sheep are to go to their pastors who will intercede for them and ask God for renewed spiritual strength on their behalf. This is why I am so thankful that God has gifted some on our staff with administrative skills. The pastors must keep on praying for people!

Now, notice what it says in the remaining portion of v.14-15...

When the pastors pray over people, in the name of the Lord, the person is made well. Much has been made of the use of oil, but the emphasis here is not on the oil as if God gives pastor's magic liquid that makes cancer and clinical depression dissolve like a wart.

No, the idea is that the prayer is made in faith. It is made in the name, that is under the authority and power, of God, and it is the believing spirit that sets a person free. Does this always result in instantaneous, physical healing? Of course not. You and I both know that not even Billy Graham himself could visit Regional or Jackson General hospital and send everyone home with a squirt of oil and a ceremonial prayer. God doesn't always heal us of our physical afflictions, but I do believe that prayer always brings strength. It may not bring immediate healing, but it will bring motivation and determination to stay strong in the battle. And it will also lead us to feel forgiven. The end of v.15 says, "If he has sinned, he will be forgiven." He will feel at peace, with a clear conscience before God.

Now, I want you to know that one of my favorite moments every single week is when I get the privilege of praying for people. I pray countless people every week. I pray in various places. I pray in various postures. Sometimes, I anoint people with oil. Other times I don't. I have prayed with people face on the floor. I have prayed with people standing up in a hallway. There is no magic formula for intercession, but one thing is clear: pastors must pray with and for their people. It will "raise them up."

Now notice what James says next...

### **3. When you feel defeated, pray with other people. (v.16)**

Look at v.16 again...

He begins this verse with the word, "therefore." What he's saying is, "Therefore, since prayer is so powerful, so effective, so lifechanging...stop spending all your time socializing, and stop being so superficial, and get to the heart of the matter" Pray together, and be open about your struggles. Confess your sins. Tell other people where you're frustrated, how you're hurt, why you're angry, lay hands on each other and pray for Holy Spirit renewal. Jesus said "when two or three are gathered in my name, there I am in the midst of them." He loves to see his people praying together, and he always brings reward.

Let me give you three reasons why people don't pray together like they should.

#### **Why People Don't Pray Together**

- **They don't plan on it.** Life is so full and action-packed that there aren't free hours in the day when people get together and say, "So, what should we do?" That so rarely happens. One of the most powerful things you can do, though, is to set a time every week, or every other week, when you and another call out to God on behalf of one another. Plan on it.
- **They are afraid their prayers will sound silly.** This is one of the most common fears in the church, that a person will have to pray publicly. People assume that when they speak out loud, they should always sound intelligent, and they should pray in such a way that it actually sounds like a sermon, that it is somehow instructional, and challenging to the hearers. That's nonsense. Sometimes, the most powerful prayers are made by people who struggle to put words to their longings. It's that sincere, desperate heart for God that makes prayer sizzle, not eloquent words and smooth sentences. Get past your pride and talk to God in front of other people, and be yourself.
- **They say they believe in prayer, but they really don't.** I can talk all day about how much I believe in physical training, but it's not true if I never do it. The same is true of prayer. If you don't pray much, it's because you don't think prayer matters much. Make it a priority! Pray with other people. And what will happen? You will be healed, restored, and renewed.

This leads me to my final point. James says this:

#### 4. *When you feel defeated, pray like Elijah.*

notice what he says about Elijah in v.17, “Elijah was a man just like us.”

In other words, Elijah was not just like Jesus. He woke up some days, like us, with a chip on his shoulder. He was prone to depression and burnout. In fact, we know from 1 Kings that he was at the end of his rope when he called out to God and asked for the rains to stop. He had been so down in the dumps that he had convinced himself that he was the only one in Israel that even cared about the Lord. He was an up-and-down, normal guy. He was “just like you.”

Now, what does the text say next? He prayed earnestly. That means, he prayed from the bottom of his heart, with intensity, and with faith. He made a choice that he would trust in God no matter how bad life seemed at the moment. He would prevail through prayer.

And that’s exactly what he did.

John MacArthur is a well-known, highly intelligent pastor in California. His commentaries are among the best of the best on the shelves today. At the very end of his section on James 5, he tells this story about prayer. Listen to it:

*One of the most memorable experiences of this ministry occurred when a student came to see me. He had been studying for ministry, came from a strong Christian home, was very skilled as a student, and had all the characteristics for leadership and effective service to the Lord. But he had often lost the struggle to some recurring temptations and had suffered some rejection and unjust criticism. He was struggling and losing. He confessed to me that he had lost the will to read the Scripture and had no heart for prayer. Finally, he sought me out to pray with and for him, that through my prayers God might grant him the power and victory he longed for, but had no heart to pursue.*

*I asked him to kneel with me side by side, using two chairs. I will never forget what he did. As I knelt with my arms and head down on the chair, he laid himself, not on his chair, but across my back, placing all his weight on me. This was a humble gesture of the dependence he was placing on me to be his strength. Tearful prayer and confession were followed by much joy as God heard my prayer, and in the days to follow he testified to strengthening grace. He completed his course nobly and went on to serve the Lord.*

What a beautiful picture of prayer in a pastor’s life. When we pray together, like this, we have power and strength and Holy Spirit renewal as we face a world full of trials and tribulations.

So as we finish our time together this morning, here are a few questions that I want you to consider this week:

1. Am I a prayer warrior? Do I pray fervently?
2. How can I give prayer greater priority in my personal life?
3. Have I lost my faith in the power of prayer?