

Prayer

When we are faint-hearted, Almighty God, lift us up.
Lift up our senses so that we may see and hear You,
Lift up our bodies so that we may strong in You,
Lift up our feelings so that we may be encouraged,
Lift up our hearts so that we may praise You forever.
For You are our salvation, throughout time, and beyond. AMEN

Prayer Suggestions

Prayer ideas

Tell the Lord what you feel about the people who are closest to you at home and at work

On-going prayers

- **This week, pray for prisons.** *Pray that the system of justice in your own country will use prisons carefully, to protect everyone from danger*
- *Pray for renewal within the church of God, in our time*
- *Pray for the country of India and its many peoples*

Meditation

(A reflection on Isaiah 40:12-23)

To whom can you compare the Lord our God?

A craftsman who works with exquisite beauty and skill ...

A parent who rears a child with great care and tender love ...

An engineer who knows the finest details of how things work ...

A young person who is full of potential, energy and drive ...

A great leader who has the humility to love and serve ...

A child who challenges us with truth and perception ...

A professional who is knowledgeable and competent ...

A farmer who gives all to the work that must be done ...

To whom can you compare the Lord our God?

Have you not heard?

Have you not known?

He was there at the beginning,

and He is the Lord!

Bible passage – James 5:17-20

¹⁷ Elijah was someone just like us: he prayed earnestly that it might not rain, and no rain fell for three and a half years. ¹⁸ Then he prayed again, and the rain fell from the skies and the earth produced its harvest.

¹⁹ My friends, if one of you is led away from the truth and is then brought back to it by someone, ²⁰ know that whoever brings a sinner back from the path of error will save a soul from death and cover many sins.

Bible Study

Review

James has just taught about healing prayer. He emphasised the role of leadership and fellowship in healing, and he spoke about the importance of confession to the general health of God's people (5:16). In the end, James describes healing as a miracle of grace in which God breaks through into this world to help people in their distress. In our passage today, James gives a scriptural example of God's miraculous intervention in people's lives by quoting from the life of Elijah (5:17,18). He then concludes his letter, rather abruptly, by reminding his readers of the most important miracle of all, which is the miracle of salvation. Healing is of little value unless it reflects the love of God that saves a sinner from death (5:19,20).

We may not immediately see a connection between healing prayer and the story from the life of Elijah quoted here by James; surely, James might have quoted the raising of the widow's son (1 Kings 17:17-24) to greater effect. James' choice, however, says much about the purpose of his letter, and we need to understand why he quoted from Elijah's prayers for rain found in 1 Kings 17:1f.

Elijah's prayers were part of his prophecy, and they occur at the beginning of a cycle of stories about Elijah in 1 Kings (1Kings 17:1ff). Drought was a sign of the desperate state of Israel, at a time when Ahab's queen, Jezebel, had introduced the worship of 'Ba'al' gods back into Israel (1 Kings 16:31-34). Elijah confronted this royal religious 'coup' with his famous challenge to the prophets of Ba'al on Mount Carmel (1 Kings 18). Elijah prevailed against these false gods and dealt a blow against the evils Ba'al worship; for a brief time, he rid the country of this sin. Through Elijah, the people of Israel and the land were cleansed and made whole again (1 Kings 18:39ff), and the sign of this success and blessing was the coming of rain to water the land after drought (1 Kings 18:41ff). In this way, James reminds us that our ultimate healing lies in being pure before the Lord, in facing our sins without hesitation and in handing them over to Him.

Salvation means everything, as is clear from the last two verse of James' letter. James has written a letter that has attacked sinful behaviour amongst God's people, that is, wickedness (1:21); the evil use of the tongue (1:26, 3:5ff); favouritism (2:1ff); cursing (3:10); envy and ambition (3:16); conflict (4:2ff); and speaking evil against others (4:11ff). Such sin leads people away from the path of true discipleship and ultimately from their salvation (5:19), and for James, this was a serious matter. We can see why he felt like this, for today, Christians will often refuse to accept that the small sins they commit are serious enough to lead them away from God and compromise our salvation. James resolutely believes that all sin does this, and his example of the people of Israel is important because all who read the Bible know that despite Elijah's work, the people of Israel became worse in their sin as the years went by (as Amos describes in his prophecies).

However, James concludes his letter with a message of hope, that believers may be led back into faith (5:20) by other Christians who make it their business to do just that. His words suggest that the greatest healing is the return of a sinner to the pathway of faith, indeed, to assist this is itself a deed that will 'cover many sins!' This phrase is slightly awkward, because the Greek text does not make it clear whose sins are covered, the person who has been saved, or the person who has helped a sinner. It is entirely consistent with the Gospel to suggest that he means the sins of the one who has been saved, and it makes little sense of the rest of the New Testament if James' letter were to say that someone could get their sins 'covered' by doing evangelism! This would be a new teaching in the New Testament that has no other support in scripture!

The whole letter of James is filled with straight talking, and it is not surprising that it ends abruptly in this manner. The last few verses of his letter contain a number of great treasures of the New Testament, for they place healing ministry in its proper context of the salvation of souls.

Discipleship

Questions (for use in groups)

1. Read back over some of the stories of Elijah in 1 Kings 17 and 18 to check out what James says about him in his letter.
2. To what extent is the church of today effected by sins which people try to ignore as not being bad enough to worry about?
3. Have you any experience of helping other people to come to terms with their sin, so that they return to a path of discipleship? How may we gain this essential skill?

Topics covered by text

- *Healing and salvation*
- *The work of evangelism*
- *Salvation and the covering of sins*

Personal comments by author

This passage of scripture reminds me that sin is a community matter as well as an individual one. People tend to join in the sins they see other people do, just as the Israelites 'joined in' the worship of Ba'al under the reign of Ahab and Jezebel. We need the Elijahs within our communities to rise up and confront our irreligion and false gods today!

Ideas to explore discipleship

- *Reflect on the communal sins of society today. How can they be confronted? Take the time necessary to pray through what God is calling you to do.*
 - *Write a resolution to your church council which suggests that your church should properly explore the use of healing in its services.*
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Final Prayer

Great Creator;
Powerful Lord!
Glorious Redeemer;
Wonderful friend!
You are worthy
Of our highest praise;
I give you my all,
To follow You always.
AMEN
