



## THE KNEES SPEAK

*Jeff Peabody  
New Day Church  
Federal Way, WA  
August 27, 2006*

Today we are wrapping up our time with the book of James. Actually, that's not entirely true: We're wrapping up our sermon series in this book today. I've titled this series "Street Level Faith," and next Sunday we're going to attempt to move these truths to street level. We're going to get them out of the context of a sermon and have one of our extra interactive services that we have every six months or so. James is so intent on real world faith that it seemed like a fitting way to conclude our time with him. We'll hear stories from people's lives, we'll pray for each other and we'll praise God for what he's been doing. These are always great services, so you won't want to miss it.

This past week, our family finished reading a book together called Peter and the Shadow Thieves. It's a prequel to the story of Peter Pan. Technically, it's a sequel to the prequel, because it comes after another book called Peter and the Starcatchers. In any case, we finished up the book this week. It was no small task, because it was 556 pages long. But it was fun because it was a total page turner. It had us glued to it right to the end. We couldn't have stopped a chapter early, because the problems didn't get resolved until the very end.

James hooks us right to the very end as well. We couldn't walk away from his letter just yet without missing some of the most important details. He's given us a number of challenges to consider, and this morning we finally come to the conclusion of the matter. James has saved some of his most important words for last.

### **James 5:13-20**

*Is any one of you in trouble? He should pray. Is anyone happy? Let him sing songs of praise. Is any one of you sick? He should call the elders of the church to pray over him and anoint him with oil in the name of the Lord. And the prayer offered in faith will make the sick person well; the Lord will raise him up. If he has sinned, he will be forgiven. Therefore confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed.*

*The prayer of a righteous man is powerful and effective. Elijah was a man just like us. He prayed earnestly that it would not rain, and it did not rain on the land for three and a half years. Again he prayed, and the heavens gave rain, and the earth produced its crops.*

*My brothers, if one of you should wander from the truth and someone should bring him back, remember this: Whoever turns a sinner from the error of his way will save him from death and cover over a multitude of sins.*

James had a couple nicknames in the early church. One was “James the Just.” He was seen as such a righteous man that everyone respected him. Not just the Christians, but people outside the church as well. Even the Jewish community that didn’t believe Jesus was the Messiah still had great respect for James and referred to him as “the just man.”

His second nickname was Camel Knees. According to ancient historians, the skin on his knees was all knobby and thick, so they literally looked leathery like a camel’s legs. Now it wouldn’t be nice to call him that if he had been born with that as a deformity, or if he had suffered some terrible accident. But James got his camel knees of his own doing. Apparently the reason he developed such enormous callouses was because he spent so much time kneeling and praying for people. Having his legs pressed against the hard floor for hours and hours had taken its toll. It was a physical symbol of the man’s passion in life. His heart for prayer showed up on his knees.

So when James talks about prayer, there is a weight to the words. He is speaking out of experience. Prayer was the center of his world.

I’ve had my own share of nicknames in my life, but Camel Knees wouldn’t be one of them. I wish it were. Whenever I preach on prayer and I start to look at these giants of faith, like James, who were great prayer warriors, I feel very small and inadequate. My prayer habits are nowhere near where I would like them to be, and I’ve been at it for most of my life. Can you relate to that feeling? Prayer does not come easily for most of us.

On Wednesday, I had a couple appointments with just a little time in between, so while I was waiting I slipped into Borders to see what kind of books they carried on prayer. I came across this title: Christian Prayer for Dummies. A Reference for the Rest of Us! You’ve seen that series of reference guides that simplify everything from woodworking to the Internet. I had no idea they had one for prayer, so when I saw it I had to buy it to see what it said.

It’s actually a pretty well done book, very down to earth, and I think James would approve of something like it. Not because he thinks we’re dummies, but because he thinks prayer is for everyone – not just a class of super Christians. James is so practical. His prayer habits may have been legendary, but he writes about prayer in a way that makes it accessible for the rest of us.

He begins the same way he has tackled every subject in this book. He takes it out of the realm of theory and presses it into everyday life.

*Is any one of you in trouble? He should pray. Is anyone happy? Let him sing songs of praise. Is any one of you sick? He should call the elders of the church to pray over him...*

Do you remember going to the doctor when you were a kid and getting your reflexes tested? Another way knees enter the picture this morning. That was usually the only part of the check up that was fun – sitting there on the edge of the table and watching him tap my knee, then seeing my leg involuntarily kick. When it is a reflex you don't have to think about it or try to do anything – your body just reacts automatically. Reflexes are your body's way of protecting itself from various types of danger.

James is tapping away, testing our prayer reflexes, seeing what our instincts are when we face all kinds of scenarios in life. What is our automatic reaction to various events? Do we naturally start praying? But James does more than just test our spiritual reflexes – he encourages us to improve them, to cultivate our prayer life until it does become more automatic. Only instead of the impulse to kick, it's the impulse to bend our knees and bow before God.

James shows how all these ordinary situations we find ourselves in are opportunities to develop our prayer life. He brings up several different kinds of prayer that are worth a closer look. The first he mentions are the

### **“Help Me” Prayers**

*Is any one of you in trouble?* James asks. *He should pray.* The word for trouble there is a broad word. It can include just about any kind of hardship. Is anybody struggling? Is anybody going through it right now?

Is anybody NOT in trouble? That includes pretty much all of us, I think. We're all struggling with something, and whatever that something is, James says it is a cause for prayer.

That's probably one of the easiest times for us to think of praying, because that's when we're feeling desperate. Abraham Lincoln once said, “I have been driven many times to my knees by the overwhelming conviction that I had nowhere else to go.”

When we're in crisis mode and we don't know where to turn, we turn to God. That's the strongest kind of prayer reflex we have. So why does James see the need to encourage it? If it's what we tend to do anyway, why make a point of saying it's a good thing?

There are two good reasons that I can think of. The first is that we get a little sheepish about asking God for any more help than we already have. We sometimes say to ourselves, “Wow. It seems like the only time I pray is when I need God to do something for me. I feel bad, like I'm just using God when I need him and forgetting him the rest of the time.”

Or maybe we look at other people having their own crisis and we feel a little skeptical about their sudden interest in praying, because it sure seems like they don't have any need for God the rest of the time. We start to feel judgmental of them for making what seem like self-centered requests.

James says, “If somebody’s in trouble, let them pray.” Don’t hesitate. God invites our neediness. God welcomes our petitions. We act sometimes as though God is the genie from Aladdin who has told us we can make three requests, so we better choose carefully what we ask for. But he’s infinite, and his concern for us is infinite. We don’t need to sift through our requests to decide what is important or not important. God can do that in the way he responds. Our job is just to come to him when we’re in need.

Jesus said, “Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest.” The only self-assessment you need to do is say, “Am I weary? Am I burdened? Am I in trouble?” When the answer is yes, then it’s time to pray, to go to God with your need – no matter how many times you’ve gone before, no matter how small or silly you think the request may be. If you’re hurting it’s okay – it’s more than okay, it’s GOOD – to go to God.

I think there’s a second reason James encourages us to pray “Help me” prayers. We are to pray them because they’re effective. When the Olympics were in Nagano, I heard an interview with one of the athletes’ parents. He had taken a tour of a Buddhist temple there and had rubbed the Buddha’s belly for good luck for his daughter. He wasn’t Buddhist, but he told the reporter, “Hey – it can’t hurt.”

Too often, that’s how we approach prayer. We aren’t really sure we believe God will do anything, but hey – it can’t hurt. We treat him like a good luck charm that may or may not work. James wants us to know that prayer is far more than that. We can have solid faith and assurance that God hears our prayers. He’s not a statue – he’s the living God. James says a little later on that prayer is powerful and can accomplish great things.

We aren’t praying to a God who is off up in heaven paying attention to other matters and ignoring us. He’s right here in the middle of our problems. He’s attentive and ready to act. I like what Psalm 46 says:

**Psalm 46:1**

*God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble.*

God isn’t like I can be sometimes – physically in a room but mentally a million miles away. He is VERY present. He is fully in the moment, fully aware of our need, fully engaged in the struggle alongside us. Our prayers to him don’t have to reach far at all. And when we pray, we can know that he hears and is prepared to act.

Many times, Karin and I have been stressed out and overwhelmed by some situation. Suddenly it will hit both of us that we haven’t prayed about it yet. So we’ll stop right where we are and say a quick prayer on the spot. Most of the time the circumstances don’t change and we don’t get a flash of insight. But God meets us there just the same, reminding us that he is in control. He gives us new strength and alters our perspective entirely. When you pour out your heart to God, even the prayer itself changes you.

When we cry out, God may not always put an end to our struggle immediately. Prayer won't magically make everything better. One writer put it this way: "Prayer may not remove the affliction, but it most certainly can transform it."

Is anyone in trouble? Let him pray. There is no need to apologize for coming to God and asking for help – over and over and over again. James goes on to say

*Is anyone happy? Let him sing songs of praise.*

These are what I call

### **“Hallelujah” Prayers**

When something good is happening in our world, when we have cause to celebrate, James tells us to not hold back – we are to recognize God for his role in giving us everything that's good.

This is in many ways the flip side of being the person who is in trouble. Now we're looking at when times are great, the bills are paid, the kids are healthy, nobody's fighting, your boss likes your work and the house is clean. Life is good.

Usually it's a mixed bag. We have a little hallelujah and a little help me side by side. We're never in a spot where everything is perfect. But James encourages us to look for the good we do have and thank God for it. We're to thank God in all circumstances.

John Calvin said, "There is no time at which God does not invite us to himself." Just as each crisis is an opportunity to pray, each blessing is an opportunity to pray. We can make more of the good gifts God has given us by using them as doorways to praise.

We're always telling our kids, "Say thank you." When they go to a friend's house, or grandma gives them a cookie, we'll prompt them with, "What do you say?" hoping they don't say, "Can I have another one?"

There's a sense in which we can think of James' instruction to sing praise songs as a responsibility – that we must thank God for his good gifts. That's why I'm glad he specifically mentions singing. Singing rarely comes out of a sense of duty. People sing because they're happy. People sing because they enjoy it, and I think James is saying we will find more joy in the good things in life when we praise God for them. We will savor them more deeply when we celebrate them with God in mind.

Think of a lighthouse. When it's stormy, you definitely want to climb up inside it for safety, so you're not knocked over by the waves. It's a refuge. But when the storm passes and the sea calms down, the lighthouse is still the best place to be to enjoy the sunset. You get better perspective from up there.

God is like our lighthouse, our refuge from the storms. But we also run to him to enjoy the view – to take in the beauty of life. Praying to God in good times not only honors him for what he has done – it blesses us as well.

### **Ephesians 5:19-20**

*Sing songs from your heart to Christ. Sing praises over everything, any excuse for a song to God the Father in the name of our Master, Jesus Christ.*

Any excuse, Paul says. Just like with the “help me” prayers, we don’t have to be selective. If something puts us in a good mood, that’s reason enough to praise God.

So there are “Help me” prayers and there are “Hallelujah” prayers. James also talks about

### **“Heal This Pain” Prayers**

*Is any one of you sick? He should call the elders of the church to pray over him and anoint him with oil in the name of the Lord. And the prayer offered in faith will make the sick person well; the Lord will raise him up.*

The picture James paints for us is of a person who is so sick they can’t even get out of bed. They can’t go pray with some church folk – they have to have the church people come there way. With the elders praying over this person, it sounds like they may even be too weak to get out of bed.

There are occasions in our lives when we don’t even have the strength to pray for ourselves. We need to enlist the faith of other people and ask them to come alongside us. Isn’t it great that God is willing to answer our prayers and heal us up even when we don’t have it in us to believe for ourselves. He can work through the prayers of other people on our behalf.

I just read a magazine article this week about Christians in Nepal, the country where New Day is supporting a Bible translation project. The article said that since people don’t have health care there, they gladly accept Christian prayers for healing instead of going to see their witch doctor, and many people have put their faith in Jesus because they have been miraculously healed. God still works through prayers for healing even today.

Each of the types of prayer we’ve looked at so far has a difficult side too it. The “Help me” prayers are hard because we don’t like to ask God for favors. The “Hallelujah” prayers are hard simply because we don’t remember to thank God for the good things. And the “Heal this pain” prayers are tough because we don’t like to ask other people to pray for us. Either it feels too personal and we don’t want to let anybody that close, or we feel like too big of a burden to other people. And if we’re honest, a bigger fear may be that God won’t answer our prayer. We’ll get our hopes up and then nothing will happen.

Yet James wants to see “Heal this pain” prayers happen on a regular basis. This is the one where he gets his most specific in the instructions. First he says to ask a group of people to pray. This is not about one person having some special gift of healing, although there can be people who have that gift. Here the emphasis isn’t on any individual’s abilities, but on the prayer itself, and he says “Ask several of the church leaders to get involved.”

He then tells those leaders to lay hands on the sick person and pray for them. If you’ve never had anyone pray for you in that way, let me tell you it is a profound experience. Because when you have all those hands on your shoulder or head, you get a physical connection with prayer that tells you in a tangible way how much other people care about you and how much God cares about you. It is humbling and powerful to be prayed for in that way.

James also says the elders should anoint the sick person with oil. I don’t want to get sidetracked on that thought, but people ask about that and wonder what he meant. There are two possible interpretations. Oil was used medicinally in the first century, as a treatment for various ailments. Some people suggest that what James meant is that we should apply the best medical remedies AND prayer when someone is sick. God is certainly not opposed to traditional medicine. He created the chemicals of the universe that make us well, and all healing is from him. So prayer is not always supposed to substitute for going to the doctor.

But it’s not clear that James had medicine in mind when he talks about the oil. Instead, I think it is more likely that the oil is symbolic of God’s hand or Spirit on the person. The act of anointing is what happens in the Bible when God sets someone apart to do a special work in them. That touch of oil is another physical way to represent God to the sick person.

Sometimes that symbol is used in churches today and sometimes it isn’t. At New Day, when people ask for oil, we use it, and when they don’t, we don’t. James would tell you oil or no oil isn’t the point – it’s the prayer that is important. We are to cry out to God for healing. God himself said, “I am the LORD who heals you.” It’s part of his identity.

With the other two prayers, James doesn’t indicate there will necessarily be any results. But here, he says that the prayer will make the person well, that God will raise them up. He puts this seed of expectation in our hearts and gives us the hope that our prayers will be answered when we follow his instructions.

There are people in this church who have been prayed for and know exactly what James is talking about. God brought them physical healing. But there are also people here who went through the same process and who still are suffering. Although James doesn’t address it, there are many times when the results are not what we would like them to be. What do we say when God chooses not to heal?

I don't have a good answer for that, other than to look at Paul's experience. He had some physical ailment that was chronic. He didn't just pray and ask God to take it away once – he asked over and over.

## **2 Corinthians 12:8-10**

*Three times I pleaded with the Lord to take it away from me. But he said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may rest on me. That is why, for Christ's sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong.*

I take comfort knowing that the most famous of all the apostles didn't get physical healing when he asked for it. That tells me that whether or not I get healing has nothing to do with my status or influence as a Christian. Paul recognized that he grew through having his prayer request turned down. He quit fighting it and embraced it as a gift in disguise.

If God refuses to answer you when you beg him to heal you up, it could be because he is wanting to show you something about himself through that weakness. He can make you well, or he can make you strong even though you're not well. In that sense, he can "raise you up" in the way James talks about, even if he doesn't heal you physically.

James says something else will take place in addition to the physical healing.

*If he has sinned, he will be forgiven.*

James isn't saying that people get ill because they did something wrong. Sickness and disease isn't always caused by sin. It's human nature to think, "I must have done something bad to deserve what I'm going through." But even Jesus pointed out that disease isn't necessarily linked to my sin. Sometimes pain and suffering is part of life with no cause.

But on some occasions, there is a real connection between what's happening in our bodies and in our souls. In his book, *Christianity with Power*, Chuck Kraft tells the story of a woman who came to him for prayer. She had a lump in her throat that had been giving her trouble for about a year and would not go away, so she came to him to pray for healing. Chuck felt at the time that God was prompting him to find out if this might be more of a spiritual issue than a physical one. So he asked her, "Are you holding anything against someone who has hurt you?" The woman burst into tears. It turned out she had been full of bitterness toward this other person. When he brought that to her attention and she gave up that bitterness, the lump miraculously disappeared.

Whether or not there's a direct connection between a particular sickness and a sin, there is always a need for healing of our inner person. We need to know and receive forgiveness. Our internal struggles and guilt are far more serious than our physical

battles. God offers healing for both our physical wounds we can see and the spiritual wounds we can't.

And that brings us to the fourth and final type of prayer, which I call

### **“Here You Go” Prayers**

*Therefore confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed.*

James makes a slight shift here. Now instead of elders praying for a sick person, you have congregation members praying with and for each other. Healing isn't just a ministry for church leaders – it's a job for all of us.

A big part of that is confession. That is the “Here you go” part – saying to God, “Here you go – you can have this. I admit to you who I am and what I've done. Please forgive me.” It is letting go of the secrets inside.

Some scholars think James is talking about public confession of sins. They do this at the Promise Keepers conferences. Men who don't even know each other will tell one another their sins and then pray for one another.

Other scholars think James is saying to confess your sins to the people you have hurt. Let there be healing in broken relationships by being willing to come clean and apologize.

Personally, I think there are times when both are appropriate. In either case, getting ourselves to admit out loud to someone what we've done, what we're trapped in is the first step toward breaking the power that sin has over us. Once it's out there in the open, we can see it for what it is, we can deal with it, and we can start to heal.

I don't think I need to say why this kind of prayer is hard. We are so afraid of what other people will think of us. What we don't realize is that we almost always gain more respect for our honesty than for trying to hide something or pretend we're okay.

James wraps up his discussion of prayer and this entire book with a little story about Elijah the prophet.

*The prayer of a righteous man is powerful and effective. Elijah was a man just like us. He prayed earnestly that it would not rain, and it did not rain on the land for three and a half years. Again he prayed, and the heavens gave rain, and the earth produced its crops.*

If James hadn't been the one to say it, I don't think I would ever claim that Elijah was a man just like me. He was spectacular character. Someday we'll do a study of his incredible life. He had amazing answers to prayer – raising people from the dead, calling fire down from heaven.

But to James, there is no reason why we shouldn't expect equally fantastic miracles. It wasn't Elijah who made them happen – it was God. And we serve the same God today.

The incident James chooses to share about Elijah is the one where he prayed for God to teach the people a lesson by stopping the rain and God did that. Then he asked God to let the rain come again, and he did that, too. I would just like to make two observations about those prayers as they relate to us.

The first one is this: Elijah was sensitive to the Lord's leading. He prayed two completely opposite prayers at different times, and God gave him what he wanted both times. God may choose to start rain or stop rain, depending on where it fits in his timing. Elijah knew when his own will was in line with God's and he could ask confidently.

Anything we ask in the name of Jesus needs to be something that Jesus himself would ask. Prayer forces us to examine our own motivations, our own desires for wanting God to act. Are we at a point where we're willing to line ourselves up with God's agenda, rather than ask him to fit our own?

Secondly, Elijah asked for something only God could do. Only God could change the weather. Elijah made a God-sized request and saw God-sized answers.

J.B. Phillips wrote a book called "Your God Is Too Small." We often expect too little of God. It's been said that if you bring God a thimble, he'll fill it up, and if you bring him a five hundred gallon drum, he'll fill that up, too.

James encourages us to not limit God. Ask for the world. Ask for things only he can do. Our preschoolers sing, "Our God is so great, so strong and so mighty – there's nothing our God cannot do." Do we believe that? Can we live like that's true?

Immediately after talking about Elijah's miraculous, incredible answer to prayer, James concludes the whole book with this sentence:

*My brothers, if one of you should wander from the truth and someone should bring him back, remember this: Whoever turns a sinner from the error of his way will save him from death and cover over a multitude of sins.*

That's the best kind of answer to prayer – seeing someone's life turn around. We think of stopping the rain or physical healing as being a big deal, but in God's eyes, the real miracles happen when lives are transformed.

George Mueller was a man known around the world for the incredible answers to prayer. We've talked about him here before. When he traveled to Africa, they called him, "the man who got things from God." He ran orphanages in the 1800s, and God regularly provided stunning solutions to his problems. Unexpected money would pour in at the last minute before bills were due. The orphans would sit down to the table with no food to

serve, only to have a bread truck break down right outside the door and have the driver offer them the bread. His entire ministry was one miracle after another.

But he had one prayer that he prayed over and over that never seemed to get answered. He spent his whole life praying that a friend of his would give his life to Jesus. For 63 years he prayed that prayer. All these other amazing things happened, but that one seemed to go unanswered. He kept praying though, literally praying for that man right up until the day of his death.

Right after he died, even before the funeral, that friend of his finally gave in to God, turned his life around and put his faith in Christ. God honored George Mueller's lifelong desire. I have no doubt in my mind that if George were here today, he would say that was the best answer to any prayer he prayed in his life.

We can ask God for many things. He's fully capable of doing it all. But if we're going to ask for big things, why not ask for the impossible: Why not ask him to grab hold of the people you think are beyond his reach. That, James says, is the real prize.

It was his passion to pray for people that put the callouses on his camel knees. He didn't spend those long hours praying for more money or better circumstances. He prayed for God to change hearts and lives.

God is looking for a new herd of camels – people willing to hit their knees for the sake of the world. A world crying “help me.” A world needing healing. A world ready to say “here you go – I need you.” Wouldn't it be great to see those kinds of big miracles here? That would be cause for more hallelujah prayers. Not because we were part of it, but to see God get the glory for his awesome power. He can do anything. And he invites us to take part in what he's doing, through the simple act of praying.

As we say goodbye to James, I'm sure he would want you to think about how this applies to your own life. So here are some questions to help you:

What reflexes do I need work on?

What is my 500 gallon prayer for God, this morning?

Who am I committed to praying for?