

092621 James 5:13-18 "Prayer's Predictable Power"

A pastor was preaching his sermon one Sunday. Suddenly, a loud whistle came from one of the back pews. A little boy named Gary sat there smiling proudly. Gary's mother was horrified. She shushed him into silence, and after church chided him. "Gary, whatever made you do such a thing?" Gary answered piously, "I was praying, Mother. I asked God to teach me how to whistle, and just then he did!"

The power of prayer is unpredictable, isn't it? We pray for this, we pray for that. We ask God, as we should, for all kinds of things. The Bible encourages God's people to pray about anything and everything. But, ultimately, the answers to our prayers are only in God's hands. In the end, we all have to lift up our prayers the same way Jesus did, praying for God's will ultimately to be done, not ours. "Thy will be done, not my own," we have to pray.

We read about prayer today from the Epistle of St. James. In chapter 5, James is mentioning four different types of prayer: prayer in suffering, prayer for the sick, the prayer of confession, and the prayer of the righteous. The Bible describes many other types of prayer, too. For today, though, let's just focus on the first type of prayer that James mentions: prayer in suffering.

Because that's a very familiar kind of prayer for most of us, isn't it? The world we live in is home to so much suffering. And many of us here in this room have been through it. Some walked in the door this very morning with a heavy load of suffering. We've all prayed to God, as James urges us to do, when our loved ones, or when we ourselves, suffer. Do we always get what we want, when we pray? No. Can we always predict the outcome of our prayers? No.

But this beautiful gift of prayer that God gives us is such a precious, invaluable thing, nonetheless. The power of prayer

is not so much in the particular words we use, the style of prayer we employ, or the level of faith we muster up when we pray. Prayer's power really comes from what God is doing in our humble prayer time. God, the King of the Universe, is making himself present and available to us. God is listening and attentive. God is pledging to answer our prayers, using his divine, limitless wisdom and power.

When God invites us to pray to him, especially when we're suffering, God is not just imposing his sovereign will upon us. God is calling us into a dialog, a conversation. Through prayer, through conversing with him, God affords you and me the opportunity to explore his will, to come to grips with his plan, to better understand his ways, and in time to perhaps even accept his will.

Sometimes, though, when life takes a harsh turn, we're tempted to cut off communication with God. We get angry at God. We can't understand why he allows certain sufferings to happen. We shake our fist at him. We stop talking to him.

We only make our suffering worse, when we act like that. When we stop utilizing that powerful gift of prayer, we're preventing God from providing all those blessings that he shares via prayer. It's so important, especially in our suffering, to open our heart to God, to share our pain and anger and confusion, to keep him in the picture. We can't handle the world's hardships all on our own. We need God by our side. We need his wisdom. We need his care.

Even more, when we're suffering, we need the power that God conveys through prayer. Prayer, in some ways, may seem unpredictable. But when we open ourselves up to God, when we allow our spirits to connect with his Spirit, when we talk and listen to God in prayer, we can be 100% confident that something specific, something very important and needful in our times of suffering, will happen. Let's talk about prayer's predictable power.

And here it is. Prayer in suffering empowers us to recognize the reality of God's love and care. Sometimes the pains and hurts we experience are just overwhelming. The reality of suffering in our life consumes our thoughts, our emotions, our attitudes. But when we pray, we're acknowledging God again. We talk, we connect, we converse with the God who knows all about suffering and loss and pain. When we pray in the name of Jesus, we're remembering the holy Son of God who took our sins on the cross. We're calling on the Savior who suffered more deeply than any human ever could, the one who endured the full wrath of God for all the world's sins in order to win our forgiveness. When we pray in our suffering, we're talking with the God of our salvation, the God who has such love for sinners that he gave his only Son to suffer for us.

This precious gift of prayer, this communication with our God, has real, tangible power. Prayer empowers us to recognize the reality of God's love and care, not just the reality of our suffering.

I remember several years ago I was in Florida, attending a National Youth Gathering with 40 youth from my former church in New York. I was enjoying the Gathering one afternoon, but then I started to feel ill. I grew more and more uncomfortable, and felt more and more pain. Before long, I was really suffering; and I ended up being rushed off to emergency surgery to remove my inflamed appendix, which was about to burst.

When I woke up from surgery, I remember seeing several people standing at the foot of my bed, looking at me. It turns out that they all had helped me, in one way or another, before my surgery. One had got me to the hospital, one had checked me in, one had called my wife, one had arranged for a place for me to stay when I got out of the hospital. I slowly realized that I had been in such rough shape that I

didn't even know that they had all been present, what they all were doing, and how they all had cared for me, until after it was all over.

I tell you that story because, sometimes, we lose sight of how loving and caring our God is. The reality of our suffering can be intense. Suffering can overshadow our view of what God is doing. But God is always at work. God's love never fails, and never ceases. God's care is constant, reliable, and trustworthy. In our times of suffering, prayer is such a potent, priceless privilege. Talking to God, acknowledging his presence, calling on the name of Jesus our Savior, reflecting on the sacrificial suffering Christ endured because of his love for us – prayer, like nothing else, can help us to recognize the reality of God's boundless love and care.

When you're laying on a bed of suffering, your loving God is standing there, looking at you with affection and concern. Talk to him. Converse with him. Connect with him. Pray. And what, exactly, will happen next? I can't promise that suffering will suddenly cease, or that your life will never again know pain. But here's a safe, confident prediction. God will empower you through prayer to recognize, even in the midst of your suffering, his love and care for you. And that's something we all need, especially when we're down and out.

"Is any among you suffering?" James asks. "Let him pray."
Amen.