

The God-centered Life

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[0:00] James 5, 13-18. Please stand together with me for this reading from the Word of God. 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. Some passages of the Word of God are like a deep, deep mine, and you need to pull out the shovel and dig deep, as we sang in that last hymn before our prayer.

[1:11] And other times, the truths of God's Word are just laying scattered right on the surface of the text, and they're like flowers, and you just need to go and pick them. And our text is like that this morning.

It's not real deep. The gems, the truths, the beauties are lying right on the surface, but you know, unless Jesus opens our eyes, we'll miss them too.

Unless he shows us and teaches us. So it's good that we cry out before we even give attention to this one simple verse. Now there are only two ways to live.

There is a God-centered life, and there is a man-centered life. Either God or self is at the center of all that we do.

The focal point, the priority of all of life, the one who is lived for and who is pleased, and who is at the center makes all the difference.

[2:11] And as we come to the end, at least toward the end of James' letter, in which he urges us to be pursuing holiness, he sums it all up for us in a radically God-centered life.

Now some verses have long arms and reach all the way around everything that we do, and such is our text this morning. It gathers together in its two arms the full range of life's experiences.

You'll find them all right here in James chapter 5 and verse 13. Is any one of you in trouble? He should pray.

Is anyone happy? Let him sing songs of praise. Now James says quite simply here then this morning that there are two basic conditions of life.

And then he gives us two commanded responses to those conditions. One for each. Notice first how James sums up the two basic conditions of life.

[3:23] We are either in trouble or we are happy. There's the two arms. And whatever you're experiencing is found in one of those two arms.

Either in trouble or happy. Either in affliction or in prosperity. In difficulty or in ease. In sorrow or joy. Bane or blessing. Sunshine. Rain. And from a human standpoint, we could say you're either in bad times or good times.

In chapter 1 and verses 9 through 11, James has already summarized all of life into two categories for us there. And remember, he puts it all into poverty and wealth.

Humble circumstances or rich circumstances. Here, it's trouble or happiness. happiness. And so at any given point in our lives, we're in one of these two conditions.

[4:26] Or, even sometimes, a mixture of the two, isn't it? Life is never the same for very long. It's like Indiana spring weather. We quickly go from good times to bad times.

And then back to good times. And back and forth we go. Now happy. Now in some trouble. Even within the same week. Even within the same day.
Even sometimes, at the same time, we're going on vacation. Happy. We have a flat tire. In trouble. One of our children is walking in the truth.
Happy. Another is far from God. In trouble. And all of our life is gathered up then in this verse into these two categories.
Trouble and happiness. And James has a special word for each condition of life that we find ourselves in. Two basic responses to life's situation. When in trouble, pray.
[5 : 32] When happy, praise. Now let's look at each one. First of all, the first condition. Is any one of you in trouble?

The word there could also be translated suffering evils, hardships, pressures, afflictions, bad times. Remember, James is talking to the saints, to believers. And he asks here, is any one of you, he's talking to the church, is any one of you Christians, believers, in trouble?
And we're reminded by that, that believers have no exemption from troubles. In fact, besides all the troubles that come to everyone on earth, there are some troubles that come to him precisely because he is a Christian.

A follower of Christ in a world that hates Christ, his ways, and his truth. So, it's not a rare thing to find a Christian in trouble in this world. He's just spoken in verse 10 of the prophets.
[6 : 37] take the prophets as an example of those who are suffering or of patience in the face of suffering. And that word for suffering is the same word here for trouble.

You want an example of someone who suffers in the face of, or is patient in the face of troubles. Take the prophets. So, we find that suffering comes to Christians in this life.
Someone said, when I wake up in the morning, I'm in trouble because my flesh is also awake and it tempts me every waking moment. Temptations, threats, difficulties, hardships, pressures, these are the troubles.

And so, what is our basic response needed when we're in this condition of troubles? Well, it's just one word in the Greek. It's a very short verse. The responses are just one word in the Greek. But it's a command and so our translators show us it's a command. The answer is pray. But it's a command and so he should pray. This is your duty. This is a command that when you're in trouble you should pray.

[7 : 51] Now, praying is not always our first response to trouble, is it? Sometimes we rather would lean on our own strength and wisdom to finagle our way out of the trouble.

That's our first response. And other times we become despondent and depressed and grow lethargic under our troubles and maybe even wallow in self-pity.
Poor me, I'm in trouble again. We can worry and fret about our troubles, can't we? We can complain about them.

We can even grow bitter against God for sending them. And we can grumble against each other that James warned us against in this chapter.

We can blame each other for our troubles. Troubles have a way of derailing us from the Christian life. A temptation to set aside the pursuit of holiness when we're in hard times.

[8 : 52] What do you do when you're in trouble? Perhaps some of all the above. Well, here's the way to avoid them all. The basic remedy for all of our troubles is pray.

Pray. First response. Now, obviously, this is not the only time that we pray, but this is the response that is especially needed in trouble.

To make a beeline to God, to go tell Jesus to spend some time with our Heavenly Father and to do so as our first resort. Troublesome times should be praying times.

Isn't that what we just read in Matthew's Gospel, chapter 9? People were in trouble. They're sick. They're demon-possessed. They're loved ones. And they come to Jesus, don't they?

They bring them to Jesus. When John the Baptist was beheaded in prison, his disciples, that is, John the Baptist's disciples, came and took his body and buried it.

[9 : 51] And then they went and told Jesus. Some loss has invaded your life. Some trouble has me upset.

Well, then I must go and tell Jesus. I must make a beeline for the throne of grace. Is anyone in trouble? He should pray.

The point is rather simple, isn't it? Oh, that we would live this way all day, every day, to have our troubles send us running to our great God and Father in heaven.

And when we go to God in prayer, we have many reasons for praying. Many different purposes. We go just to pour out our hearts before him. Psalm 62, verse 8.

Just to take our hearts and empty them like you empty a pitcher of lemonade on a hot day. You just let it all be poured out before the Lord in prayer.

[10 : 51] You tell him all your troubles. Tell him all about it. You unburden your heart. You spread your fears before him and you cast your cares on him knowing that he cares for you.

Or you go in prayer to him to find comfort and encouragement. Are you in trouble? Spend some time with the God of all comfort. The Father of compassions.

Maybe you go to cry for help. Lord, help me in this trouble. Deliver me from the trouble. Hezekiah is king in Judah.

And he receives a threatening letter from Sennacherib, conquering king of the Assyrians. And he's on a roll and wherever he goes, the nations just topple like dominoes.

And now he's on Jerusalem's door. And he sends this letter threatening Hezekiah and the people of Judah. Do you think that your God will be able to save you from me?

[11 : 54] Look at all the other gods of the nations. Look what I did to them. Don't put your trust in him. Don't think you'll be any different. Hezekiah is in trouble.

What does he do? He reads the letter and then he went up to the temple of the Lord and spread it out before the Lord and Hezekiah prayed to the Lord.

There's the letter and it spread out to the Lord. Lord, see, see what they're saying about you. You're no different from the other gods of the nations. Do you see how they're insulting you?

Listen to what they're saying. Look, Lord, read. And then he prayed. Now, O Lord, our God, deliver us from his hand so that all the kingdoms on earth may know that you alone, O Lord, our God, that these gods are no gods, but you are the true and living God.

He cries for deliverance and just one angel sent from this living God slays 185,000 soldiers during the night and they retreat.

[13 : 03] So we go for help. We go for deliverance. For is that what you do when some piece of bad news enters your life?

When you get a word of something that causes worry, do you run to your Father in heaven and cry for deliverance? They cried to the Lord and he saved them out of all their distresses.

Psalm 107, four times in the chapter. They cried in their distress, their trouble, and he delivered them. You might go to make your requests known to God.

It's through prayer that we receive God's strength and wisdom to persevere in trouble. Lord, give me help, give me wisdom in this trial, give me power. You see, God's power to live the Christian life is received through prayer.

So when we're in trouble, we go to God for power. We pray, we ask. Thomas Manton says, if God lays on you a great burden, cry for a strong back.

[14 : 13] That's what we're asking, for strength, to be held up in this trouble. Sometimes God removes the trouble, other times he strengthens you under it and transforms that trouble into something that works for your good.

We go to ask him to keep us from sin in trouble because trouble sometimes can be tempting times and we cry, Lord, don't let me respond to this trouble in a sinful way.

Lord, would you help me to count it all joy because I know that you're using this to make me more holy and to glorify yourself in some ways that I don't even understand.

We watch and pray that we not enter into temptation. Are you in trouble? Then pray. We pray that we might be sanctified under this trouble. Do you know that's God's plan for us in trouble?

That we actually come out the other side better for having gone through it. And so we pray for that. Or don't let me waste this trouble. Don't let this trouble come and me come out the worst for it.

[15 : 18] No, if I'm under trouble, Lord, take it and sanctify me in this trouble. Teach me the lesson you have for me. It's at the throne of grace that we find grace to help us in our time of need.

A grace that is sufficient in every trouble. is anyone in trouble? Let him pray. There's Jonah and he's being thrown overboard and the seas are stormy and he's sinking for the last time and he's going way down there and a big fish has swallowed him and he's now in its stomach.

That's trouble, isn't it? Jonah does Jonah do? From the stomach of this living submarine we read Jonah pray to the Lord his God.

When my life was ebbing away I remembered you O Lord and my prayer rose to you to your holy temple. Jonah sees himself very deep in trouble below sea level in trouble and yet he says my prayer rose all the way into your very holy temple where you dwell.

If Jonah can pray in the belly of a fish then we can pray in a place like this wherever we are there is a way to reach this God it's called prayer we do so in trouble David was a man often in trouble with King Saul hunting down his life and David says in my distress I called to the Lord that's it trouble pray I called to the Lord I cried to my God for help from his temple he heard my voice my cry came before him into his ears no one was in trouble as much as our Lord and Savior Jesus what does he do in trouble you know he didn't just pull out his divine powers and just ditch the trouble but he rather showed us how as men we are to what we're to do in our troubles he prayed he prayed [17:33] John 12 verse 27 now my heart is troubled you ever have a troubled heart Jesus did too my heart is troubled and what shall I say father save me from this hour no it was for this very reason I came to this hour father glorify your name it was instinctive to the Lord that when he was in trouble to go have a talk with his heavenly father about his troubles and here he's in Gethsemane and on the eve of his crucifixion when all the wrath of God is to be poured out upon the sins of his people that he would bear to the place of punishment and he's beginning to see that cup of God's wrath that he's about to drink and he's got his three closest disciples with him and Mark 14 tells us he began to be deeply distressed and troubled my soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death stay here and keep watch and he goes a little farther and falls to the ground and prays is anyone in trouble pray and he prays to be upheld in the coming ordeal of his trial his crucifixion his death and he prays with strong cries and tears and he was heard by his father and he was helped!

In his trouble and angels came and strengthened him sent by his father what a friend we have in Jesus all our sins and griefs to bear what a privilege to carry everything to God in prayer we like that hymn don't we we little know the troubles that went into writing that hymn some eight times we are reminded take it to the Lord in prayer take it to the Lord in prayer the man who wrote those words was a man who had seen much trouble in his life Joseph Scriven was born in 1820 in Dublin Ireland he fell in love with a woman there but his bride to be accidentally drowned on the night before their wedding we gathered here Friday night for a wedding it was a joyous happy time can you imagine the trouble the heartache the grief if on

Thursday night on the way home from the rehearsal the bride's life would have been taken and snuffed out this was Joseph Scriven's reality so at 25 grief stricken he migrated to Canada where he devoted the rest of his life to helping the poor and needy doing menial tasks for them cutting firewood whatever they needed done he later fell in love again planned to marry a Canadian woman but tragically she too would contract pneumonia and die before they could be married and it's this man who later writes have we trials and temptations is there trouble anywhere we should never be discouraged take it to the Lord in prayer can we find a friend so faithful who will all our burdens share

Jesus knows our every weakness take it to the Lord in prayers any one of you in trouble let him pray let him pray and if our troubles have brought us to Jesus they have done us a great service indeed Matthew Henry says that this is one of the reasons why God sends troubles to us quote that we might be engaged to seek him early and that those who at other times have neglected him may be brought to inquire after him and what do we find when in trouble we pray we find that we have a God for the times of trouble Psalm 46 1 God is our refuge and strength and ever present help in trouble trouble trouble a God who specializes in trouble how about that isn't that good to have well then go to him with all your troubles your big troubles your little troubles yes especially your little troubles we more readily go to

God with our big troubles don't we but for some reason we don't think to bother him or we don't think to go to him with our little troubles troubles and we have a whole lot more little troubles than big troubles and what we find is that it's our little troubles that eat away our peace and joy why would you not take those to the one who is the God who is the help in trouble who specializes in trouble if your trouble is big enough to rattle your peace it's big enough to take to the Lord in prayer so if you're in trouble pray he invites us he commands us to go to him Psalm 50 and verse 15 call upon me in the day of trouble I will deliver you and you will honor me so this God really means for us to seek him out in prayer in all of our troubles everyone you may not feel like praying in your time

of trouble but when the disciple ever live by feelings do we not live by the word of our master and so to the grave with our feelings my

[23:48] Lord says John if you're ever in trouble pray and so we pray you know this is nothing new is it and every believer here praying when in trouble is nothing new to you you've already done that and remember that just now just think for a moment just now believer remember when we first came to understand the great trouble we were in we had sinned against God we disobeyed his commandments and yet we didn't think that much about it we did it often and we didn't realize the trouble we were in just cruising along living our own man centered self centered life but then God opened our eyes to the trouble that we were in and we realized that the God that we sinned against and that we are sinning against every day of our lives the

God that we have pushed out of the center and put ourselves in is a God who is too holy to not punish every sin and God opened our eyes to his word where we see that the punishment for sin is death the second death the lake of fire death eternal hell death and we came to see that we were just a breath away from eternal torments and for the first time in our lives we saw we were in big trouble and then God opened our eyes further and showed us that there's a savior for sinners in trouble that he had put all the sins of his people upon his own son and sent him into the world as a man so that as man he could die representing sinful man and he punished the son of God never was one in more trouble than Jesus when he took all of our sins upon him and suffered God's wrath upon them in our place on the cross and

God opened our eyes to this wonderful savior and to the offer of his gospel that says whoever you are whatever you've done I now command you to repent to get yourself out of the center and to bring me there and the promise is that if you believe on the Lord Jesus you will not perish but have everlasting life for whoever calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved and oh did we call and we cried and we prayed!

Lord save me! Have mercy on me the sinner! and he heard our cry and he saved us and we joined millions upon millions of people who have been in this great trouble and who have cried to the Lord and he heard them and saved them some of you still don't get it you still don't realize the trouble you're in oh I invite you to this book that tells you of your trouble and then send you running to the only savior for sinners in big trouble the Lord Jesus Christ he'll save you today call on him take him at his word is anyone in trouble let him pray well believers you've done that haven't you that's why you're a Christian you've called on the Lord and he saved you now just go on living that way that's the message

James given you every time you meet trouble call pray and know that this one who saved you out of your greatest trouble is the God who helps us an ever present help in any trouble!

[28:22] cheerful in good spirits encouraged and he puts the happiness for the condition that brings it and it may be holding your newborn baby for the first time and you're happy it may be seeing that spark of excitement in your five year old son's eye as he discovers some new reality in God's world and you're happy may be seeing them perform in some athletic field or in some concert and you're happy may be the sighting of an indigo bunting and you're happy the blossoming of a flower exquisite in beauty and you're happy may be finishing a job well done may be observing the wedding of two believers starting a new family under God's kind blessing maybe the answer to some prayer maybe one of those prayers when you're in trouble and you prayed and he answered and you're happy about that maybe some promise some insight into

God's word maybe it's the testimony of a brother or sister of their conversion to Christ and you're happy you have made me glad by your deeds oh Lord and so we're glad we're happy what is the needed response when we're happy well response is let him sing songs of praise it's just one word in the Greek again very crisp praise sing songs of praise it's a command now obviously this is not the only time to praise the Lord but this is our needed response especially in times of happiness just as trouble is sent to send us running to God in prayer so happiness is to send us running to God in praise!

may Their lives.

Unbelievers are happy too. Did you know that? God feeds them too. God fills their hearts with gladness too. But they don't connect it to God. They just enjoy the happiness as if God had nothing to do with it.

We little know how wicked a thing that is to live that way. To take his gifts and not to return him praise for having given them to us.

[32:06] And oh, so often sinners, they're not doing anything bad. They're not out robbing banks. They're not out killing and committing adultery. But they just live enjoying their pleasures as if God did not give them.

They don't glorify him and give thanks to him and praise him for their happiness. They live without thought of God, without praise to God.

And believers, we can do the same for a moment. God blesses us and oh, we enjoy the gift and we're so wrapped up in it that we forget God. There were ten lepers that Jesus cleansed in the Gospels, weren't there?

But only one returned to praise God. You see, that's the thing James is fighting against. How can that be?

These men had to live excluded from family and civilization because of their leprosy and Jesus heals them all. And only one finds his way back to Jesus to praise the Lord.

[33:12] I should think hardly one in ten. Today returns praise to God for his mercies.

Children, you eat at the cafeteria. Do one in ten bow their heads and give thanks to God before they eat his mercies? Or afterwards? Or ever? Do I return praise to God for one out of ten mercies that I receive?

That's the tendency, James, is after. When you're happy, praise. The Israelites were warned over and over, be careful that you do not forget the Lord who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery.

Why would they ever forget him who was so kind to them? Because happiness has a tendency to make us forget the one who gave it. And so in Deuteronomy, eight and verse, the whole chapter really, the Lord tells them, I'm bringing you into the promised land.

You've been out in 40 years in barrenness and I fed you with manna but now I'm bringing you into this land flowing with milk and honey where water is plentiful and crops will be lush where you will have lack of nothing.

[34:31] Now that's the sort of thing to lift one's spirits to happiness, isn't it? And so he says to them, when you've eaten and are satisfied, praise the Lord your God for the good land he's given you.

There it is. When you're happy, praise. Be careful that you do not forget the Lord your God.

Otherwise, when you eat and are satisfied when you build fine houses and settle down and when your herds and flocks grow large and your silver and gold increase and all you have is multiplied, then your heart will become proud and you will forget the Lord your God who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery.

You may say to yourself, my power and the strength of my hands have produced this wealth for me. But remember the Lord your God for it is he who gives you the ability to produce wealth.

You see, the covenant of people people of God were prone to live no better than that pagan king of Babylon, Nebuchadnezzar, who walked out on his palace roof that day and looked over Babylon and says, is this not the great Babylon that I have built as the royal residence by my mighty power and for the glory of my majesty?

And that's why when you eat and are satisfied and when you are enjoying any happiness, you need to praise. You need to get to God quick and return the praise to him.

[36:00] Lest you forget him. Lest you grow proud. Lest you think that you are the reason for your happiness. What happened to Israel?

Well, just what he warned them against. They got into the promised land. They were very happy and they forgot God and did not praise him. What's the antidote to that sort of thing?

Praise the Lord your God. Every bit of happiness is meant to turn our eyes heavenward and open our mouths with praise to God. Every new mercy deserves a new song.

Streams of mercy never ceasing call for what? Songs of loudest praise. Is anyone happy? Let him praise.

Let him sing songs of praise. This is the counter for this wretched pride and self-sufficiency that often follows success. to return praise and thanksgiving to him.

[36:57] Because praise acknowledges God as the source of all my success. It acknowledges God as the giver of every good gift I have. It acknowledges him as the dispenser of every mercy.

As the first cause of all my happiness. You see, we are not the creators of our own happiness. and God means to be recognized as such.

John Blanchard says, one of the surest antidotes to pride is to praise the Lord. True praise is a humbling activity. It always points away from ourselves and ascribes all of our good things to God. It lays the trophy of praise at his feet where it belongs. Not unto us, O Lord, not unto us, but to your name be the glory because of your love and faithfulness.

Praise is a pride withering activity. Praise is a self-renouncing activity. Praise is a God remembering activity. Praise saves us from that superficial happiness that unbelievers have that stops short of God that is unrelated to God the giver.

[38 : 14] And on the contrary, praise connects the dots between my happiness and my God. It traces the gift back to the giver and so we are to enjoy the giver with the enjoyment of every one of his gifts.

He's not to be left out in any celebration of any of his gifts. Let any happiness in your heart tune your heart to praising him.

Notice our praises are not only to be spoken, but they're also to be sung. Is anyone happy? Let him sing songs of praise is the meaning of this one word. God would have his praises sung, celebrated in music.

Sing to him, sing praise to him. So a healthy Christian is one who sings out of a glad heart. Joyful songs of praise should characterize the life of a healthy church.

Singing to him with full heart of thanksgiving and praise. Not only just here, but in our homes and in our cars and yes, in the shower and out in the backyard.

[39 : 27] Is anyone happy? Let him sing songs of praise. Concluding remarks and we're done. There are the two conditions that you will be in in life.

Trouble and happiness. And there are the two commanded responses, prayer and praise. Now, the two responses are not exactly the same, prayer and praise. But one thing they have in common is that they lift our heads to God.

Don't they? Both of them. James is summing up his letter by commanding a Godward response to every situation in life.

This is the God-centered life that I spoke of at the outset. Both conditions, good and bad, are meant to send us running to him. When in trouble, run to God in prayer.

When happy, run to him in praise. But always, in every circumstance, go to him. So you visit the Christian at any point in his life and he should never be far from prayer or praise.

[40 : 38] Always having dealings with God. The God-centered life is the shared life. We share everything in life with our Father in heaven. Our joys, our troubles. As John Calvin says, there is no time when God does not invite us to himself.

Is anyone in trouble? Come on. Come and pray. Is anyone happy? Come on. And praise. And our troubles are cut in half when we share them with God.

And our joys are doubled when we enjoy God in them. So sanctify every joy with praise and every trouble with prayer. Don't waste your troubles.

Improve them by prayer. Don't waste your happiness. Improve them by praise. Rather simple, isn't it? I told you it's lying right on the surface this morning.

But oh, if we would just live like this every day, all day. I challenge you, brothers and sisters, to live this way this week, every day.

[41 : 44] Starting now. Starting now. That at the first sign of trouble, you run to God in prayer. And at the first taste of happiness rising in your heart, you run to God in praise.

And if you'll do that, you will never, ever be far from God. You will live near to the heart of God.

And friend, that is the good life. It is the Godward life. It is the God-centered life that focuses on God in trouble and in happiness and finds him to be our all in all.

It is good for me to be near to God, the psalmist said. Most people don't live this way, but this is what our Jesus has won for us by his precious blood.

Sweet privilege to live near the heart of God in every circumstance of life. As the gospel of Jesus Christ made anyone here happy, well, then let us stand and sing praise to God.

[42 : 59] Number 133. Let's stand and use these words to sing our great Redeemer's praise.

Our Father in heaven, thank you for our Savior. We sing our praises gladly to him. There's none like him in mercy to have forgiven us all of our sins, to heal us from that sinful heart, to plant it a song of praise in our mouth.

And we wonder why we stayed away from you so long in our troubles when you had just the Savior for us. We wonder why others this morning stay so far away from Jesus when he comes to do them such good.

Oh, that your word would speak new life, Lord Jesus, today and heal sinful hearts this morning and draw us all heavenward. Would you help us this week, given us that grace that in our troubles we might look up and pray and in our happiness we might enjoy you in the midst of it.

Do it for your name's sake. Make our lives God centered. For the praise of our Savior's name we ask. Amen.