

"Prayer offered in faith" – 'prayer of faith', ESV, implies more than asking God (supplication) but a more authoritative declaration (e.g. "Your kingdom come!") based on precedents and promises drawn from Scripture. The prayer of faith goes with the prayer of agreement, Matt. 18:19 in Jesus' words, "Where two on earth agree... it shall be done for them."

16 Therefore confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous person is powerful and effective.

"Confess your sins" – the Bible teaches that there can be a cause-and-effect relationship between sin and physical sickness, John 5:14, but by no means necessarily, John 9:1-3. Community repentance is a prelude to healing in the community, 1 Cor. 11:30.

"Prayer of a righteous person" – allied to the prayer of faith. For this kind of prayer to be powerful and authoritative, those praying need to be sure of their position in Christ and in right standing without unconfessed sin issues. This verse is about preparation before praying for healing.

17-18 Elijah was a human being, even as

**IN PRACTICE** The Good News of Jesus is not just the promise of eternal life after death, as has been taught. Any study of Jesus' words and the life and teaching of the Early Church points to the life of the kingdom of God starting at the point we accept Jesus as Saviour, allow Him to be Lord and come to know the Persons of the godhead, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, in a personal and intimate way. Jesus' teaching about avoiding sin and living righteously was spoken into the dying days of the Old Covenant – the disciples were learning from Him before His resurrection. Later they would be impacted by the Spirit of God at Pentecost and the New Covenant, spoken of by Jesus, would make sense to them as they learnt that the Holy Spirit empowered them to go beyond any human attainment. Physical, emotional and spiritual healing are all part of this new life. For us it is unpredictable and non-empirical which feeds all our doubts, but James encourages all, not just leaders, to be able to pray the "prayer of faith", to facilitate an openness in confessing sin, and inviting the Holy Spirit to come and do His work. This is choosing the Life of the Spirit and embracing the breadth of the life-giving which God bestows to all who will trust Him and receive.

**QUESTION** We can all share stories about longed-for healing that hasn't worked out as we hoped. What stories can you tell of when God did show up and heal – perhaps unexpectedly?

**PRAYER** Lord, looking onto Your eyes is looking into life itself. Help and empower us to be people of the New Life – and life-givers to others who in their pain may need us to exercise faith on their behalf. I pray this in and through Jesus. Amen

we are. 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.

"Elijah... even as we are" – revered as one who worked signs and wonders but here depicted as a regular person with an outstanding prayer life. The drought of "three and a half years", 1 Kings 17-18 is symbolic of judgment (half of seven, Dan. 7:25, 12:7, Rev. 11:2; 12:6,14). The point James makes is that we, not necessarily elders, can pray bold prayers and be heard in heaven.

19-20 My brothers and sisters, if one of you should wander from the truth and someone should bring that person back, remember this: Whoever turns a sinner from the error of their way will save them from death and cover over a multitude of sins.

These verses seem to present a logical jump; they are 'bookends' which close the letter and relate to the opening 'bookend' verses of James 1:2-4.

Revised Common Lectionary readings for **Sunday, Sept 30** in Bible order

Prepare for Sunday by reading the Bible passages beforehand – read again to reflect on Sunday's teaching

Theme: **The Lord of life, eternal life and abundant life**

Esther 7:1-6, 9-10; 9:20-22 – God grants His people life instead of death

Alternative OT reading (C of E option) Numbers 11:4-6, 10-16, 24-29

Mark 9:38-50 – Give others the instruction that leads to life

James 5:13-20 – Choose the abundant life of the kingdom now

Also in this Sunday's readings: Psalm 124

**Esther 7:1-6, 9-10; 9:20-22** – God grants His people life instead of death

## God's deliverance for His people from Haman's death sentence

1-2 So the king and Haman went to Queen Esther's banquet, and as they were drinking wine on the second day, the king again asked, "Queen Esther, what is your petition? It will be given you. What is your request? Even up to half the kingdom, it will be granted."

"What is your petition... it will be given..." – Esther's delaying tactics had overcome the king's royal indifference and secured his interest.

3-4 Then Queen Esther answered, "If I have found favour with you, Your Majesty, and if it pleases you, grant me my life – this is my petition. And spare my people – this is my request. For I and my people have been sold to be destroyed, killed and annihilated. If we had merely been sold as male and female slaves, I would have kept quiet, because no such distress would justify disturbing the king."

"Have been sold" – Esther refers to the huge bribe Haman offered to the king to approve the decree, Esther 3:9, 4:7. She then refers to the exact terms of the decree: "destroyed, killed and annihilated".

"Merely... sold as... slaves" – appealing to the

King's self-interest. Killing the Jews instead of enslaving them would be a loss of valuable free labour. For comparison, "Our affliction is not to be compared with the loss to the king." (ESV)

5 King Xerxes asked Queen Esther, "Who is he? Where is he – the man who has dared to do such a thing?"

6 Esther said, "An adversary and enemy! This vile Haman!"

A fitting retort to Haman's invective, "that Jew Mordecai", Esth. 5:13, 6:10. Later (verse 8 omitted by lectionary) Haman falls before the Jewess Esther, ironic because the plot to exterminate the Jews stemmed from Mordecai's refusal to bow down before Haman, Esth. 3:1-6.

Then Haman was terrified before the king and queen.

"Terrified" – a word for intense, paralysing fear, as when King David encountered a sword-bearing angel at Araunah's threshing floor, or Daniel saw the angel Gabriel, 1 Chron. 21:30, Dan. 8:17.

9 Then Harbona, one of the eunuchs attending the king, said, "A pole reaching to a height of fifty cubits stands by Haman's house. He had it set up for Mordecai, who spoke up to help the king."

*“Harbona” – the courtier’s intervention introduces a second charge against Haman, conspiring to kill the king’s benefactor. Earlier in the story Mordecai was revealed as the person who had revealed an earlier plot against the king’s life, Esth. 6:1-3*

The king said, “Impale him on it!”

10 So they impaled Haman on the pole he had set up for Mordecai. Then the king’s fury subsided.

*“On the pole he had set up” – a vivid illustration of contemporaneous cause and effect, Job 4:8, Psalm 7:15-16, Proverbs 26:27 and NT reference Gal. 6:7-8. A different view, that this symbolises God’s retribution at the final judgment, is Obadiah 15, Revelation 20-11,15.*

20-22 Mordecai recorded these events, and he sent letters to all the Jews throughout the

**IN PRACTICE** The enduring Jewish festival Purim in late winter/early spring celebrates the nation’s deliverance from a death sentence. Persian astrologers used the pur, lot, to choose the most opportune time to do something, in this case, Haman, who had favour at court, being able to offer a huge bribe to the king to issue an edict calling for the destruction of all the Jewish exiles (this was in the year 474 BC). But God ultimately determined the decision of the lot in a deliverance that echoed the passage through the Red Sea. We draw from this that God’s purposes are good, He holds His people in His hand – and acts to give life to His own.

**QUESTION** *What helps you, and what hinders you, from trusting that God is for you?*

### Mark 9:38-50 – Give others the instruction that leads to life

**The choice to be left for eternal torment or deal with sin to gain eternal life**

38 “Teacher,” said John, “we saw someone driving out demons in Your name and we told him to stop, because he was not one of us.”

*The disciples’ preoccupation with status had already been confronted by Jesus in verses 33-37. It was a Jewish trait to be self important, seen most strongly in the Pharisees and teachers of the Law, leading to a narrow view of discipleship and judgment about who ‘belongs’ and who does not.*

39-41 “Do not stop him,” Jesus said. “For no one who does a miracle in My name can in the next moment say anything bad about Me, for whoever is not against us is

provinces of King Xerxes, near and far, to have them celebrate annually the fourteenth and fifteenth days of the month of Adar as the time when the Jews got relief from their enemies, and as the month when their sorrow was turned into joy and their mourning into a day of celebration. He wrote them to observe the days as days of feasting and joy and giving presents of food to one another and gifts to the poor.

*“Mordecai recorded these events” – in the official letters he sent. Perhaps with other recollections they became the Book of Esther.*

*“Celebrate... the fourteenth and fifteenth days” – today Purim (lots) is celebrated on the 14th, but the 15th in Jerusalem, when the rural Jews celebrated deliverance, a day later in the city of Susa.*

for us. Truly I tell you, anyone who gives you a cup of water in My name because you belong to the Messiah, will certainly not lose their reward.

*The context here is someone who has already welcomed Jesus and is in sympathy with Him and therefore able to minister in His name. The saying in Matt. 12:30 is not contradictory – the context is different, those who are in opposition to Jesus.*

42-43 “If anyone causes one of these little ones – those who believe in me – to stumble, it would be better for them if a large millstone were hung around their neck and they were thrown into the sea. If your hand causes you to stumble, cut it off. It is better for you to enter life maimed than with two hands

to go into hell, where the fire never goes out.

*“Millstone” – used to grind grain, usually turned by a donkey. A small one would weigh half a ton.*

*“Thrown into the sea... cut it off” – figurative exaggeration to make a memorable point. Dealing with sin calls for radical ‘spiritual surgery’.*

45 And if your foot causes you to stumble, cut it off. It is better for you to enter life crippled than to have two feet and be thrown into hell.

*“Enter life crippled” – repentance, like all change, brings loss and pain but it avoids the prospect of hell.*

47-48 And if your eye causes you to stumble, pluck it out. It is better for you to enter the kingdom of God with one eye than to have two eyes and be thrown into hell, where “the worms that eat them do not die, and the fire is not quenched.”

**IN PRACTICE** The preoccupation with who was ‘in’ and who was ‘out’ led the disciples to view some righteous people as ‘outsiders’ who would enter the kingdom of heaven, while they had let the side down in squabbling about who among them was most important, Mark 9:33-35. Our role as followers of Jesus is to push back against all that is selfish and dishonest or immoral. Such tendencies have to be addressed, and sin radically renounced and removed. Scandals in parts of the church today which have been covered up bring this home. We, who are believers, are trusted to be good mentors of others who are finding Jesus and His way. To have a position and ‘talk the talk’ while failing to ‘walk the walk’ will bring its own judgment.

**QUESTION** *What in my life is causing the ‘salt’ of Jesus truth and nature to become denatured?*

### James 5:13-20 – Choose the abundant life of the kingdom now

**Confess sins and pray for each other with the Spirit of Elijah**

13 Is anyone among you in trouble? Let them pray. Is anyone happy? Let them sing songs of praise.

*“In trouble” – or ‘suffering’ in some versions, but the meaning is broader than physical sickness.*

14 Is anyone among you sick? Let them call the elders of the church to pray over them and anoint them with oil in the name of the Lord.

*“Thrown into hell” – thrown into Gehenna, the ravine valley of Hinnom, the putrid maggot-infested garbage dump outside Jerusalem where refuse burned continually, historically a place of pagan human sacrifice, Jer. 7:30-34. A powerful image of the horror of eternal damnation.*

49 Everyone will be salted with fire.

*Every believer will “come through fire” in life’s trials which purify and deepen faith. Unbelievers will face the eternal fire of God’s judgment.*

50 “Salt is good, but if it loses its saltiness, how can you make it salty again? Have salt among yourselves, and be at peace with each other.”

*“Salt...saltiness” – genuine Christian character has a purifying influence anywhere, unless it loses its distinctive edge. Salt mined from the Dead Sea often contained gypsum that looked like salt but lacked the taste and characteristics of the real thing.*

*“Call the elders of the church” – the presumption in the early church is that there are several persons of spiritual maturity and wisdom to call on.*

*“Anoint... with oil in the name of the Lord” – oil was medicinal but this is about setting the sick person apart for the Lord’s special attention and healing, Mark 6:13, not a ritual of imminent death.*

15 And the prayer offered in faith will make the sick person well; the Lord will raise them up. If they have sinned, they will be forgiven.