

# Sitting in the Gap Study Guide – September 30, 2018

## [James 5:13-20](#) & [Numbers 11:4-6, 10-16, 24-29](#)

(Click on scripture above to link directly to each passage in the *NRSV* on [biblegateway.com](http://biblegateway.com).)

### Suggested Study / Prep

1. Read the passage(s) in several different translations and/or paraphrases (e.g. *NRSV* and *The Message*)
2. Read the provided commentary(s) below
3. Visit and explore some of the additional resources links (and/or explore your own commentaries, resources, etc)
4. Reflect on the provided questions
5. Generate your own questions and “wonderings”

### Commentary on James 5:13-20 (From *Homiletics*; “This is Your Brain on Prayer”, September 27, 2015)

This reading closes the so-called “epistle” of James. Although the book began with a typical greeting (1:1), this conclusion does not have the closing greetings to the letter's recipients that are usually found at the end of letters (cf., e.g., Romans 16; 1 Corinthians 16; 2 Corinthians 13). Instead, the conclusion here ends on an anti-climactic note, not unlike the ending of Mark or 1 John. However, what this ending lacks in rhetorical punch, it makes up for in terms of offering practical advice and suggestions for life in the early Christian community.

Verses 13 and 14 open this text by making use of a *diatribe* style. This rhetorical device, which occurs elsewhere in James (cf. 2:18, 20; 4:4), constructs a dialogue with an imaginary interlocutor in order to prove a point. In the case of verses 13-14, the point is that many presumed problems can be overcome through prayer and participation in the life of the church. The verb for suffering that is used in verse 13 is a form of a similar noun that was used in verse 10. Likewise, the prophets mentioned in verse 10 may be a foreshadowing of the discussion of Elijah that will appear below in verses 17 and 18. Thus, one may detect both verbal and conceptual connections between this passage and what precedes it.

While the prayer mentioned in verse 13 may not immediately evoke a setting of communal worship, the singing of songs likely would. The use of music in the context of early church worship was common, and is hinted at elsewhere in the NT (1 Corinthians 14:15; Ephesians 5:19; Colossians 3:16). Thus, the mention of singing here in James is likely meant to evoke the singing that occurs in the context of worship.

The connection to the larger Christian body is continued in verse 14, as the author recommends that the sick person should seek the assistance of the elders of the church. It is not clear just how sick this person is imagined to be. If the person still has the strength to summon the elders, it is likely not meant to indicate a terminally ill individual. Nonetheless, regardless of the person's level of health, a multifaceted approach is recommended for treatment: prayer, anointing with oil and an invocation of the name of the Lord. It is unclear how all of these elements are imagined to work together. It is also unclear exactly what the role of the anointing with oil is to play in this treatment method. Oil was well-known for its medicinal properties in antiquity (cf. Luke 10:34), but it also evidently was used in the work of

Christian missionaries (cf. Mark 6:13). Thus, whether it serves a primarily medicinal or religious purpose is unclear, and is, perhaps, beside the point, if the author imagines it as serving both functions. It is also unclear what verse 14 intends by the invoking of the name of the "Lord." Whether the "Lord" should be taken to refer to Jesus or to God the Father is left unspecified. Indeed, the fact that James explicitly uses the name Jesus only twice (1:1; 2:1) has led to some speculation about the possibility of Jewish origins for the letter.

Verse 15 continues the theme of sickness found in verse 14 and suggests that the "prayer of faith" is the correct treatment. While the sudden switch to the forgiveness of sin at the end of this verse could seem odd to modern readers, in the ancient context, there was a widespread connection between committing a sin and consequently being afflicted with illness or infirmity (cf. Job 4; Mark 2:1-12; John 9:1-12).

Verse 16 marks a subtle shift in the text from the third person to the second person. Where verse 15 is for "anyone," verse 16 is for "you." The "you" here in the Greek is plural, and so, while the grammatical shift is noticeable, a change in the sense of the message is far less perceptible. Indeed, the instructions in verse 16 seem to be a summation of what followed in verses 14 and 15.

Verses 17 and 18, then, mark a more noticeable shift as the author provides an example that will aid in illustrating the point. The author holds up Elijah as a worthy model. The text notes that Elijah was "a human being like us." The word used here may be literally translated "like-natured," and it is used elsewhere in the NT only in Acts 14:15 where it is also meant to convey the force of a human as being nothing more than another human. While the author is correct about Elijah's humanness, things get a bit fuzzier in the details. Where James notes the period of the drought as being three and a half years, 1 Kings 18:1 only mentions three years. Despite this issue with the details, however, the point is clear: Just as Elijah, a fellow human, could pray effectively, so, too, can the audience of this letter.

Verses 19 and 20 appear to introduce a rather new topic. This introduction so close to the letter's conclusion seems rather odd. Nonetheless, the practical topic of restoring a wanderer to the community could be well-placed here at the end of a letter that often deals with larger matters of theology and philosophy.

Verse 20 presents a rather perplexing question. Where the NRSV conceals the problem by translating the problematic phrase "will save the sinner's soul," the Greek text leaves the owner of the soul less specific. The grammatical masculine gender is used throughout the verse in the Greek, yielding a literal translation along the lines of "The man turning a (male) sinner ... will save his soul." It is unclear, then, whether the pronoun "his" should be taken to refer to the individual performing the turning or the sinner. While the NRSV's choice to assume that it is the sinner who will be saved is probably wise, the possibility that it is meant to indicate the one performing the turning should not be overlooked too quickly.

This final section of James addresses several practical matters that have not been addressed previously in the letter. By emphasizing the need of individuals to stay connected to the life of church, the author is able to use these practical instructions to undergird the larger point that the Christian community is to be one marked by interdependence on one another and on the power of prayer.

## **Commentary on Numbers 11:4-6, 10-16, 24-29**

(by Margaret Odell for *workingpreacher.org* – September 27, 2015)

No sooner have the Israelites set out from Mount Sinai than the complaining begins.

There is a memory of Egypt -- a false one, perhaps, since there's no mention of backbreaking slave labor or drowning babies, but it's a memory all the same -- of fish they could eat for nothing, and of flavorful cucumbers, melons, leeks, and garlic. Compared to this memory, the present reality of "nothing but all this manna to look at" is dull and uninteresting. What's more, it cannot sustain them: "our strength is dried up." We've heard this complaining before. In Exodus, the same complaint sounded like vulnerability; here it smacks of rebellion. By the end of the

chapter (and outside of this lectionary selection), God will respond to the complaint by sending so much quail it will come out of the Israelites' nostrils. God judges complaining Israel with a blessing -- or blesses them with judgment; it's hard to tell.

But what's surprising about this version of the story is that it draws equal attention to Moses' disenchantment. Like the Israelites, Moses complains: his burdens are too great, and he questions whether God is really with him. A number of interpretive questions arise. What is the gist of Moses' complaint? Is he, like the Israelites, wrong to complain? And what are we to make of God's response to his complaint? By distributing some of Moses' spirit among the 70 elders, God ensures that Moses doesn't have to bear his burdens alone anymore. But is this redistribution of the spirit, like God's gift of quail, an ambiguous blessing that is really a punishment? If Moses must share the spirit, is he diminished in some way?

It's possible that Moses is wrong to complain. After all, by complaining he is failing to do his proper job of interceding for the Israelites. But Moses does recognize their plight. At the very least, he hears it: "Moses heard all the people weeping throughout their families, all at the entrances of their tents" (v.10). Because hearing often has the connotation of heeding and understanding (cf. Exodus 2:24-25), Moses' hearing may well be an act of empathy and concern.

Something else blocks his intercession, and this is what provokes his complaint. What displeases Moses is not the Israelites' complaining but God's anger. In the aftermath of the Golden Calf incident, only Moses had found favor with God, and he relied on that favor to intercede for Israel. At that time, Moses argued that having God's favor counted for nothing if God would not also accompany them: "For how shall it be known that I have found favor in your sight, I and your people, unless you go with us?" (Exodus 33:15). Moses now faces a similar crisis, and if anything, God's anger with Israel now casts doubt on God's favor with Moses.

Caught in a triangle between God and Israel, Moses refuses to claim sole responsibility for "this" people. They are, after all, God's people, and Moses reminds God, sarcastically, that he was not the one who conceived them, who bore them in his bosom, who and nurtured them "as a nurse carries a sucking child," and, not least, who promised on oath to give land to their ancestors. In all of these charges, Moses evokes well known traditions about God's care and concern for Israel. And in the present context of complaining about food, it is no accident that the maternal imagery emphasizes Israel's utter dependence on God. Moses is not these things to Israel; God is (Genesis 12:1-3; cf. Deuteronomy 32:18). At the heart of Moses' complaint, then, is a complaint about the divine character. What does divine favor mean, after all, if only Moses receives it? At the beginning of the long trek through the wilderness, Moses legitimately asks what is in store for him as the sole bearer of this people who were supposedly the apple of God's eye.

Fortunately, God does not respond to Moses' actual request -- "let me die!" but to the substance of his complaint -- that he is all alone with this burden. In verses 16-17, God instructs Moses to gather 70 of the elders at the tent of meeting, where God will talk with Moses and take some of the spirit that rests on Moses and distributes it among the elders. In this way, the elders will bear the burden of the people with him. Verses 24-25 describe that event, noting that the elders "prophesied" when the spirit came on them.

But is this redistribution of the spirit, like the gift of quail, a kind of punishment? After all, Moses must now share a sign of divine presence and favor that had once been exclusively his. The episode about Eldad and Medad answers that question. The narrative does not explain why these two elders were not at the tent or meeting, nor does it explain why the spirit also rested on them. But it does draw attention to ordinary human concerns: what is Moses going to think? Shouldn't they be stopped?

Moses' response sets aside the zero-sum game of prestige and honor for the far more gratuitous calculus of the Holy Spirit: "Are you jealous for my sake? Would that all the Lord's people were prophets, and that the Lord would put his spirit on them" (11:29). Moses had, after all, asked for divine favor, and he had also equated it with God's care and concern for the community. If that favor was bestowed upon the community in an entirely unexpected way, Moses could at least recognize the moving of the spirit within the community. Sharing burdens requires the recognition of shared gifts, and Moses was all too happy to share.

## Additional Resources

- [The Text this Week](#) – a huge archive of commentaries, blogs, sermons, etc. Note – this site collects resources related to ALL of the lectionary texts for a given week...not all will relate to the passage(s) being studied, but many will. You will have to sift!
- Check out other commentaries available for these texts (and others!) at [WorkingPreacher.org](#).

## Reflection Questions on James 5:13-20:

1. This passage contains the words traditionally read by Brethren at home and bedside anointings. What experience have you had with this tradition of anointing? How do you understand the promises and potential of this distinctive Brethren practice? Does reading the passage in a fuller context, with the reference to Elijah, change or challenge your understanding
2. Ever seen the movie *Bruce Almighty*, where a regular guy is given the power of God for a brief period of time? Is this the kind of "powerful and effective" prayer that is being talked about in this passage (v. 16)? After all, the example held up here is Elijah, whose prayers seem to wield control of the rain over the course of four years! If this isn't the kind of prayer power that James is talking about, then what is?

## Reflection Questions on Numbers 11:4-6, 10-16, 24-29:

1. Consider the questions from Margaret Odell's commentary above: *What is the gist of Moses' complaint? Is he, like the Israelites, wrong to complain? And what are we to make of God's response to his complaint? By distributing some of Moses' spirit among the 70 elders, God ensures that Moses doesn't have to bear his burdens alone anymore. But is this redistribution of the spirit, like God's gift of quail, an ambiguous blessing that is really a punishment? If Moses must share the spirit, is he diminished in some way?*
2. Re: v. 29 – "*Would that all the Lord's people were prophets*" – what does it mean to be a prophet in this context? Is Moses' exclamation a hope that would be resonant in the church today?

**What questions do you have?**

**What do you "wonder" about when reading these passages?**