



Message **Transcript**

Strong to the Finish

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Pastor Jeff:

Our Father in heaven, we give you all glory, all honor, and all praise you and you alone are worthy of it. Lord, as we sing praise to your name this morning, we're reminded that you are the king of kings and you are the lord of lords. And Lord, we gather now to hear you speak. This is your time to talk to us and we believe that every time your Word is faithfully and accurately proclaimed that you speak so our prayer this morning as a body is speak, Lord, for we are ready to hear what it is that you have to say. And so, now, for all those who have gathered today who desire to hear the Lord Jesus Christ speak directly to you, who will believe what He tells you and who will by faith put into practice what He shows you, will you agree with me very loudly this morning by saying the word amen.

Congregation:

Amen.

Pastor Jeff:

Amen. In our culture, we often say it's not how you start, it's how you finish. And it's true, it's really true when it comes to sport like in running a race, it's not where did you start, it's at the finish line, where did you arrive. Or if we watch golf, it's not who is ahead on Thursday or Friday, but on Saturday but especially Sunday afternoon, who's in the lead and who's going to win. In different seasons, we don't take a look at the beginning of the season what the team's record is, we look at the end of the season and we measure, did they really have a good season? And the same is true for us

spiritually. It's not how you start, it's how you finish.

Jesus Christ came to this world. He died on the cross for the sins of humanity. He was buried. He rose from the dead so that anyone who repented and believed could have life in His name, but that's called new birth. That's just the beginning. And Jesus doesn't just want to save you, Jesus wants to live in and through you in this world so that you not only get to the finish line, but go through the finish line.

I had good high school football coaches, and in high school, they used to shout at us all the time, "Don't run to the line, run through the line." It was you got to finish well, you got to be accelerating towards the end. The same is true spiritually. We don't get to take time off. When we listen to the apostle Paul, he said in Philippians 3, "One thing I do, forgetting what is behind and straining towards what is ahead, I press on toward the goal of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus." The end of his life, he said, "I have fought the good fight. I have finished the race. I have kept the faith."

There's something about not just ending our life knowing that we know Jesus, but finishing well, crossing the finish line of the faith and meeting Jesus Christ face-to-face only to see Him say, "Well done, good and faithful servant." It's not just about making it across, it's about thriving through. As we've been studying the book of James, we've been talking about how it is you can walk your talk. How do you walk your talk during trials and tribulations and temptations? How do you walk your talk with your tongue and with wisdom and how do you not show favoritism to other people? How do you become doers of the word, not just hearers of the word? And we took a look last week as we were culminating this story where He was telling us, "Here's a checklist for

Christ's return. Christ is coming and here's five things you can do to get ready."

This week continues that thought, but it's not just getting ready, this is what you can do to be strong all the way through the finish. How can you finish strong as a believer in Christ? Let me tell you why we need to talk about this. Because there are so few believers I find that finish strong. I'm not just talking about pastors who love the Lord and then have some moral failure, I'm talking about people who are naming the names of Christ that at some point in their life when they die, it's just like I don't know where they were at. If you want to be a person that finishes strong all the way to the end, I believe God has a word for you this morning. I'm going to ask you to open your Bibles up to James 5 starting in verse 13. I'd like to read through the end of this chapter really the end of this book and then unpack this and talk about five ways that you can stay strong through the finish.

He says this, "Is anyone among you suffering? Then he must pray. Is anyone cheerful? He is to sing praises. Is anyone among you sick? Then he must call for the elders of the church and they are to pray over him, anoint him with oil in the name of the Lord and the prayer offered in faith will restore the one who is sick and the Lord will raise him up and if he has committed sins, they will be forgiven him. Therefore, confess your sins to one another and pray for one another that you may be healed. The effective prayer of a righteous man can accomplish much."

"Elijah was a man with a nature like ours and he prayed earnestly that it would not rain and it did not rain on the earth for three years and six months. Then he prayed

again and the sky poured rain and the earth produced its fruit. My brethren, if any among you strays from the truth and one turns him back, let him know that the one who turns a sinner from the error of his way will save his soul from death and will cover a multitude of sins."

Here, God is telling us as he finishes up this book that he's used James, the half brother of Jesus, to pen through the power of the Holy Spirit, how it is that we can remain strong through the finish and what we need to be taking a look at. And notice what he says first, I'm going to give you five. The first way to be strong to the finish is that you must engage God first. If you're going to remain strong through the finish, you have to engage God first. God needs to be a priority in your life. This is not the only text in the Bible that would highlight that, but notice what he says, "In the context of all that you're going through, trying to walk out the faith, allowing Jesus to do his work in and through you, as difficult as it gets."

Here's what he says. He says, "Is anyone among you suffering? Then he must pray. Is anyone cheerful? He is to sing praises." He's talking to the whole body. He says, "Is there anybody here who's suffering at all? Is there anybody here who's trying to walk with the Lord? Is there anybody here who's allowing the spirit of God to work in and through you and you're going through a difficulty?"

Last week, I asked you to raise hands, everybody raised their hands. Anybody had any... We all raised their hands because there's different seasons, and some seasons more than others. When we go through suffering, what does he say? He must pray. She must pray. It's a reflexive response that what your first knee-jerk reaction is

when suffering happens, seek the Lord. When suffering happens, pray to God. When suffering happens, invite God into the situation. When something happens, let the Lord be the Lord of your life in that situation.

He goes, "What about for those that are cheerful? What about for those that are happy? Anybody here happy? Anybody cheerful? God doing anything good? Then he's to sing praises." Now, I don't think this is highlighting that if you're suffering, you can't sing, or that if you're doing good, you can't pray. He's saying prayer and praise are essential in the life of a believer that it should be the reflex that we have no matter what's going on in our life, that we engage God first. Bad things happen. God, I know you're sovereign, I know you're in this, I need you right now. Good things happen. I'm singing to you God because it's all about you. You may have chosen to use another resource like my boss, my spouse, my kids, whatever it was, but I'm celebrating you and I'm praising you.

He must pray. He has to sing praises. Well, I'm not that good of a singer. Well, take that up with God because He told you He wants you to sing. He wants you to sing to Him. It's interesting if you go to a rock concert, even people that can't sing, sing. Why can't you sing to the Lord? Just so you know, the reason that we spend time and invest in people who are gifted and give money to our worship team is not so that it prepares you for the preaching. It's not warmup so that you can get coffee or talk to your friends. It's giving you the opportunity to tell God by singing to Him why He's so worthy of the depth of your heart.

And there's something different between speaking and singing, isn't there?

Singing something different. Singing comes from a deeper depth. That's why the Bible says sing to the Lord a new song. Sing to the Lord. Call upon His name. Praise Him all ye peoples. Why? Because He wants you to sing to Him. It's a command. "I don't know that I like singing." Well, sing anyway. That's what He says. I love pastor in church that sings. I like when our team pulls away from a microphone. I still hear everybody singing because it's not about performance. It's about the collective body of Christ singing and giving praise to the Lord. Now, why is this so important? Because you need to know in your life, no matter what you're going through, here's your two weapons, prayer and praise. No matter what your circumstance, prayer and praise. That should be your reflexive action no matter what because God's sovereign. So I'm going to be praying to Him or praising Him because he's worthy of all no matter what's going on in my life.

And we see this all over the place. God wants us to give Him our heart first.

Many of us are familiar with the scripture in Jeremiah 29:11. It makes plaques that make their way into our homes all the time, says, "For I know the plans I have for you, declares the Lord, plans for you to prosper and not to harm you, plans for hope and for a good future." But verses 12 and 13 say this, "Then you will call upon me and come to me and pray to me and I will listen to you. You will seek me and find me when you search for me with all your heart." I want it all. I want to be the centrality of your life. I don't just want you to bark out a prayer. I don't just want you to sing a little song. I want to be central. When you're going through things, I want your life to be centered on me in your prayer and in your praise. That's what I want.

In 2 Chronicles 16:9 says something similar. "For the eyes of the Lord move to and fro throughout the earth that He may support those whose heart is completely His." A heart that's completely his is engaging God first. God, you have my prayer. God, you have my praise. When things happen, I'm looking to you. When things are going on, I'm going to you first. It doesn't mean I don't have other people in the body that I'm trusting or relying upon. We'll get to that. But first and foremost, God, I'm engaging with you. You're my God. Or how about Matthew 6:33 in the Sermon on the Mount, "But seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness and all these things will be added unto you." Prayer and praise, let it be foundational in your life regardless of what you're going through and everything around you will change. Your circumstances may not change, but your love for God will and people will take note.

Let me share you a familiar story. Remember when Paul and Silas got beaten and were imprisoned, and in Acts 16, even though they had really done nothing wrong and they were beaten with rods, got put into the depth of the prison, fastened with stocks and all these other things? And the Bible picks up and says, it was about midnight when what I'm ready to read you took place. What would you be like during the day if people falsely accused you and tried you and then physically beat you and then threw you into a jail cell and then put shackles on your hands and feet, all because you just love Jesus?

The day may come where some of us may have to do that, but notice what happened with Paul and Silas, but about midnight in Acts 16:25, Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns of praise to God. What were they doing? They took this

seriously. No matter what the circumstances were praying and were praising, and notice what it says. I love this, "And the prisoners were listening to them." You think? When things aren't going well in your life, when you're being falsely accused, when you're physically beaten, when you're mistreated and people see you praising God in the middle of a bad situation and praying to God and trusting him in a bad situation, they take notice so they're praying and praising and notice what happened. And suddenly, there came a great earthquake so that the foundations of the prison house were shaken and immediately all the doors were opened and everyone's chains were unfastened.

Now the prisoners are taking notice like, "Oh, I'm free." Because of what? Because of their prayer and praise. The jailer's going to kill himself. They're like, "No, no. Stop right there. Don't do that. We're going to tell you about Jesus," and they lead him and his whole family to Christ and baptize him. Now, what they could have done is take counsel of the fact that they were mistreated and that they were abused and that somebody had talked to them wrong, and they deserve better than that because they're only following the Lord. But no, they see God as sovereign so no matter what happens, we're praying to you and we're praising you in this circumstance because for whatever reason even if we don't understand it, you are worthy and we want to finish well. The reason Paul finished well is he understood prayer and praise as a weapon.

No matter what you're going through and no matter where you are, praise. No matter what you're going through, no matter where you are, pray. God's given us a gift

through Jesus Christ, the one mediator between God and man. We can seek his face, we can hear God, we can respond to God, we can see him illuminate his word so we can know him even more clear. God gives us that privilege. Don't take it for granted. You want to finish well, you want to finish strong, you want to finish all the way through the finish line? Engage God first, engage God first. And here's what you need to know. You're never alone. You're never alone. Jesus said in the great commission, "I'll be with you always till the very end of the age."

In Hebrews 13:5, "I'll never leave you or forsake you." There are times where you will feel alone, where you will seemingly think you're alone, but I got news for you Christian, you are never alone. God is always with you, and when you pray and when you praise, you'll experience more of his manifest presence among you. You want to finish strong all the way to the end? Make prayer and praise central to your life by engaging God first. Then He says this. He says, after He asks is anyone suffering or cheerful and pray and praise, then He asks this question, "Is anyone among you sick?" Sick here can be physical sickness. It can also be worrisome spiritually from serving the Lord so well.

In Hebrews 12:3, "Consider Him who endured such opposition so you will not grow weary and lose heart." That's that word sick that you won't grow weary, you won't grow sick. Many times when you're trying to walk your talk, many times when you're letting Jesus be the Lord of your life and you're like, "I'm not perfect, but I'm growing increasingly, I'm doing what God wants. I've suffered and I'm praying. I'm going through good times, I'm praising. But man, I'm at a place right now where I'm

doing everything I know to be doing, but I can't seem to be gaining any more ground. It's just hard. It's difficult to do what God's asking me to do." Sometimes there's people in the body of Christ that really do want to get rid of a sin. It's not just like, okay, yeah, everybody sins, but they seriously want it gone, but they prayed and they tried and they can't seem to get rid of it and they're struggling, they're weary, they're sick.

Sometimes people are following after God. They get physically sick. There was no sickness before the fall of mankind, so in some way sin brought sickness into the world, but what it doesn't mean is that when somebody has a sickness, it was caused by sin. When somebody has cancer, we don't look at them and say, "What sin did you commit?" Somebody's got a blood disease. We're like, "What sin did you commit?" It doesn't mean that there was a sin that necessarily caused it, but in general, sin brought sickness into the world and everybody is going to age, everybody's going to get sick, everybody's going to die at some point in time. So here's what He's addressing. He's addressing those here who are spiritually weary, maybe physically sick, maybe emotionally or spiritually sick, they just can't seem to take the next step. "I'm like spent. I can't take another step with the Lord. I'm doing what he wants and I'm kind of spent."

So here's what He says to do. Once you've engaged God first, He says this, "Summon faithful elders." Summon faithful elders, notice what He says, "Is anyone sick? Then he must call for the elders of the church and there to pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord and the prayer offered in faith will restore the one who is sick and the Lord will raise him up."

There's probably no more controversial passage in the entire New Testament,

certainly not in this book. Some people read that and they think this, okay, if I'm sick and the doctors can't heal me, but I come to a faithful church and the elders put oil on my head and pray for me, God must heal me, and if he doesn't, God's a liar. But I don't believe that's what it's saying, because if that were true, then God is a liar because I can tell you I've stood in the front of this church many times and prayed over people and anointed them with oil and believe fully for their healing and they've been fully healed. And there's other times I've done the same thing almost on the same Sunday with a different person and they've gone home to be with Jesus.

I don't think this is a flippant promise from God that, "Hey, if it doesn't work out there, I'm just here to heal all your diseases and just make you well all the time." Now, you need to understand something. I do believe in physical healing. I believe God can do whatever He's always been able to do, but what keeps me from the charismatic craziness is I also believe God's sovereign. I believe we call upon God's mercy, He can choose to do whatever He wants to do or He can choose not to do it in the timing I want Him to do it in, and I'm good with that because He's God. So let's read the text and let's let the Bible speak the way God wants to be heard. Is anyone sick? Are you weary? Are you at a place you can't go on with the Lord anymore even though you want to go on with the Lord or you spend, then you must call for the elders of the church, meaning this, you better be part of a local church somewhere.

You can't call for the elders of a church if you're not part of the church. I find that people that don't go to church call the church when they need about three things. I

need a place and a building to get married or have a funeral. I need money or the doctors can't heal me and I need to get healed. Can you guys do something? That's not what this is about. God's not out just give them flipping answers so you can go live your sinful life. God's saying you better be part of a faithful church and only a faithful church can have faithful men who are eldering in the church. But when you're in a season where you're weak and you're to the place like I can't go on anymore, God has established faithful men in His church. We have them on all three of our campuses to come to and to summon and to call and say, "Would you help me?"

So call the elders of the church and then do what? They're to do two things, pray over him and anoint him with oil in the name of the Lord. So first responsibility is what? Pray. A shepherd's first job, a pastor's first job, an elder's first job is to pray for the flock. It's the number one requirement of being in this position, prayer. Pastors that don't pray or a dime a dozen, they shouldn't even be in the office of a pastor. It's the number one responsibility of a pastor is to pray for the flock. Number one responsibility, call an elder, because here's what the elder's saying when it says to pray, "I can't fix your problem, but I know one who can, so let's call on Him for you. And I love you enough to let you know I can't fix you, but He can and He can give you the encouragement you need to take a step forward."

So he's going to call on the Lord, he's going to pray, and then two, he's going to anoint them with oil in the name of the Lord. Now, there's two words in the New Testament to anoint. One is ceremonially like you just kind of anoint with oil as like a ceremony. The other one is to rub on a wound to provide nourishment. That's this term.

He's not talking about let's have a ceremony with magic oil. He's saying give the people some refreshment when you pray over them. Now, symbolically, we do it here. We have these little vials of oil, so symbolically, oftentimes our elders will anoint you with oil. Would you be comfortable if I anointed you with oil? But it's symbolic to what we're reading about here. There's nothing magic about this oil. We're not selling it for 99.95.

When you see this stuff on TV, it's craziness. Don't buy it. Don't buy water from the Jordan River. I've been in the Jordan River, I baptized people in the Jordan River. Let me tell you about the water in the Jordan River. It's water. If I pray over this oil, it's still oil. Do you understand what I'm saying here? There's no magic promise God is making about the oil. Symbolically, what we're doing is we're saying, "Lord, refresh this person in the name of the Lord. I'm calling upon you in the name of the Lord. I'm encouraging this person in the name of the Lord." I believe anointing with oil is symbol of bringing edification or exhortation or consolation like we'd see in 1 Corinthians 14:3. It's encouraging people to build them up, exhorting them. It's encouraging people to step up and edify them. It's encouraging people to rest up as you're consoling them. Whatever they're dealing with, I get it. I'm with you, I'm for you, and Jesus is for you. That's what it means to anoint with oil. It's refreshing to them, it's medicinal.

And then, what's God promised to do? Notice his job. Here's what He says. "Anoint them with oil in the name of the Lord." That means Lord, for your reputation, "And the prayer offered in faith," which means I believe Lord, you're going to do what you want to do, "Will restore the one who is sick." That literal word restore means to save or deliver the one who is sick and the Lord will raise him up. God's job is to do

the refreshing. God's job is to do the building. Isn't it interesting that when the Lord speaks to you in a moment where you can't seemingly take another step and he touches your heart in a special way, even if the circumstances around you don't change, you think, that's what I needed, I can make it one more day. That's the job of the elders to present you to the Lord like that. His job is to build you up and he says, "And He will raise them up." He will raise them up. That's a promise of the Lord.

Now, here's the problem we have. We only see with temporal eyes. The promise of the Lord is he will raise you up. Now here's the truth. Listen, listen, listen, Christian, listen to me. If you're a Christian who loves the Lord and you're sick and you pray for healing, 100% of the time God will heal you completely, but it may not always happen in this life. He will. We're praying for healing. So if you come forward and you have cancer, I'm going to pray for your healing on this side of heaven, but I'm also trusting our sovereign God if He says, "I got a better plan than that."

We prayed for people in this church who have been physically healed, several of you have. I believe God still physically heals. We have prayed for people in this church with just as much faith who are now in the presence of Jesus. I don't know why, but I do know Psalm 139 says, "God has ordained all of our days before one of them came to be." You will die on time, I promise you. You won't get there one second too early or one second too late. The only thing you can control is the quality of your relationship with Jesus as long as you have life. And why is it sometimes that God gives one person cancer and chooses to give it to them for a period of six months to three years and completely heals them and they stay in remission for the rest of their life and

someone else gets it and three months later they're in the presence of Jesus? I don't know because I'm not God, but I do know this. Our God is perfect and sovereign and holy and He knows exactly why He did it. Amen?

Congregation:

Amen.

Pastor Jeff:

So I want you to know in this text, this text is for the refreshment of the believer. And here's the problem in North America. When I've gone all over the world and preached, if I'm in India preaching and we call for prayer and there's 2,000 people in the audience, 2,000 people are going to come forward for prayer. If I call for prayer in North America with 2,000 people, two people are going to come forward for prayer because here's what we think, "I don't need that. I'll work it out myself. I don't need help from anybody else. It's just me and Jesus. I'm working on it." Friends, you can't work on it. There are certain times God will bring things into your life where you need other people that are spiritually mature to pray for you and to encourage you and to help you through a season, and there's no shame in that. There's humility in that. Do you understand what I'm talking about?

When we have our altars covered with elders and pastors of people that love you and want to pray for you? If you're in a season that you just are like, "I'm sick. I'm like physically sick, I'm spiritually sick. I'm emotionally... I can't take another step. Help!" Elders are there to refresh you and encourage you and build you and pray and trust

that the Lord's going to bring the refreshment and the restoration. Trust that the Lord's going to be the one that lifts you up, because that's what the Lord promises He will do. So summon faithful elders, call upon them to come alongside say, "I need some additional help." So if you're going to be strong through the finish, engage God first, summon faithful elders, and then notice what he says next.

"If you're going to be strong all the way through the finish, confess your sins." Confess your sins. Notice what he says, "And the reason I think this is more than just physical healing," it says at the end of verse 15, "And if he has committed sins, they will be forgiven to Him." Well, what's he talking about? Well, I thought we're talking about healing? Sometimes, sometimes the reason that you're sick is because of sin in your life, but I thought I was completely forgiven by Christ when I repented and believed. You were, but if there's an ongoing sin in your life, it is like an anchor that holds you down from being the fullness of what God wants you to be. And I don't mean that, "Well, I got to get to someplace where I never ever sin again." I don't believe that happens in this lifetime, but I'm talking about for some of you that have that same besetting sin and you hate it.

I'm not talking about the ones that are like, "Well, this is my sin and I like it and nobody else knows about it and I'm good with it." I'm not talking about that, that'll hurt you too. But I'm talking about the ones that are like, "I've tried to pray this away. I've tried to ask God. I just can't. I need some help." Then confess it. Confess sin. Don't work on it. You can't work on sin. You can't work on your anger problem. You can't work on your drunkenness. You can't. You can confess it and let God start taking it

and releasing it and you can grow through it, but you can't fix it. If you could fix it yourself, Jesus didn't need to die for you, but clearly He did. There's a humility in confessing of our sins. That's why he says in verse 16, "Therefore, confess your sins to one another and pray for one another so that you may be healed."

Let's make a couple clarifications here. I don't believe what God is saying is anytime you get an audience, tell them everything about every sin you've ever committed. Just confess it to everybody. "Pastor Jeff, when you preach, tell everybody every sin you've ever committed and how awful it is." I don't think that's what He's saying. I think He's saying a couple things here. One is when you sin against somebody else, go confess to them, "I sinned against you. I was wrong. Will you forgive me?" That's what it means. Don't just sin in your marriage or sin with your kids and say, "Oh, they understand. We're all sinners." Go say, "When I did this, that was sinful. It was wrong. Will you forgive me?" Because if you do, you'll find you have to do it a lot.

But there's a humility in confessing our sins. There's a humility that says, "I'm not perfect yet." There's a humility in saying, "I wish I would've done it a different way, but I didn't quite do it the way that I should have done. I know God wasn't pleased and I know I hurt you, so I'm really, really sorry. Will you forgive me?" Confess your sins one to another. I think there's a humility sometimes in a small group situation where it's okay to confess your sins to some people that you confide in or to confess them to some spiritual leaders that you confide in. It doesn't mean that every time you have an open ear, "Let me tell you about all my sin." That's not what He's saying. There's a

humility in our lives that say, "I'd be willing to tell you anything if I thought the Lord wanted me to and could help. But I do have people in my life that I can go to."

Let me give you another word of caution on the other side though too. It doesn't mean that when God reveals that you've sinned against somebody, that you have to go blatantly tell them if they weren't aware of that sin, meaning this, if you've been harboring anger towards somebody, you don't need to walk over to them and be like, "Hey, I just want to tell you, Joe, I've really been angry at you. I hate you. I've been harboring all this anger. I just want you to know I'm really sorry." Because what does that do for Joe? He just took the brunt of all. He didn't even know. So if that's between you and the Lord, then confess it to the Lord and then treat him differently. Do you understand what I'm saying? This is not a release valve for you to feel better about other people like, "But here's why I felt that way about you. These seven things are so wrong with you, but forgive me, please." Do you understand what I'm saying? Okay, that's what He's talking about.

Confess your sins one and to... When you actually sin against another brother or sister in Christ, go tell him I sinned against you. I could have handled that different. I know that was wounding to you. Will you forgive me? It's not what I meant. I'm sorry. Confess your sins one and to another. I think we live in a day and age where we forget that sin is what brings death. Sin is what kills us. And even as a believer in Christ, yes, you can be totally forgiven but still be under the weight of sin sometimes. I mean, look no further than David as an Old Testament example. I mean, we see in his life that he sinned grievously by seeing Bathsheba and summoning her and having an adulterous

affair with her. And then, when he was figuring he was going to get found out, having her husband on the front line so he could be killed, and then he was found out and he confessed, "Yeah, that was me. I was wrong."

But David tells us in Psalm 32 and Psalm 51 what was going on internally in his life during all these times. Psalm 32:1-5, explain what it's like and maybe you're in this situation right here in this room right now, or you're watching online and you hear it and you're like, this is me. I know there's this sin and I know I'm feeling bad about this sin, but I don't know what to do about this sin and you feel just like David. "How blessed is he whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered. How blessed is the man to whom the Lord does not impute iniquity and in whose spirit there is no deceit." How blessed it is to know you don't have to carry that sin around you anymore. I got good news for you today, no matter what sin you brought in here, no matter how secret it is, no matter how silent it is, God's willing to take that burden out of your life right here in this moment and you don't have to carry it around anymore. Isn't that good news?

That's what David found out. I don't have to hide this. I don't have to suppress this. I don't want to push this down. I'm so embarrassed by what I did. But then he says this, let me tell you about what it was like, he says, Psalm 32:3, "When I kept silent about my sin, my body wasted away through my groaning all day long, for day and night your hand was heavy upon me. My vitality was drained away as with the fever heat of summer. Then I acknowledged my sin to you, and my iniquity I did not hide. I said I will confess my transgressions to the Lord and you forgave the guilt of my sin."

Unconfessed sin in your life that you're aware of will eat you up from the inside out. And it's really interesting because if you're going through a season in your life where you have unconfessed sin, no matter where you open your Bible, that's all you're going to hear God tell you about. And He loves you so much. He doesn't want you to live with unconfessed sin. Confess it to Him. Confess means I know this is sinful, I agree with you that it's sinful, I want to go, take it away. I don't want to carry around this guilt, this shame. I'm done with this stuff, done with it. Satan lies, James said, "Oh, don't tell anybody. They thought you were more mature than that. Don't tell anybody. They think you're more this. Don't tell anybody. You could lose this. You could lose..."

When you get to a place like I don't care what I lose as long as I have Jesus and as long as I have freedom in my soul and as long as I'm doing the right thing, I don't care anymore because there's no price tag on a clean conscience. Amen. That's what he's saying. He's saying, "If you want to finish strong, you want to go through the finish line. You engage God first. You summon faithful elders. You confess your sins one to another." David said in Psalm 51:10, "Create me a clean heart, oh God, and renew and right spirit within me." Change me God.

In the New Testament, we see in 1 John 1, "If we say we are without sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us, but if we can confess our sin, God will forgive our sin and cleanse us from all unrighteousness." It's not just saying it so that we're forgiven, it's saying it so we can experience the cleansing power of the Holy Spirit and the purity of God coming through our lives so that we can live free. There's

too many Christians that are forgiven but not free. God wants you to be free. One of the reasons that many people have a hard time putting into practice what the Lord shows them on a Sunday is because they're carrying such guilt and shame from the sin that they just won't confess.

So the pastor's like, "You should go share your faith." "I can't because I'm going to say I can't do this." "You need to serve in kids." "Well, I can't because if the kids really found out who I was, then they..." "Hey, you should be a part of the men's..." "Well, I can't because if you really knew how I treated my wife..." You see what I'm saying? He lies to you to keep you in bondage. He lies to you to keep you from confessing because he knows that when you confess your sin and are completely forgiven and feel the forgiveness and are cleansed from the inside out, that you're a danger to the kingdom of darkness. And it's not because you're perfect, because there ain't no one here that's perfect, it's because you're completely forgiven and you're walking in the spirit of the Lord increasingly.

If you want to finish strong, confess your sins. Have some people in your life that you can share with. And you want to have people in your life that aren't overwhelmed by it like, "I can't believe that." You don't want to confess there, but you also don't want to confess to the person that says, "Ah, it's okay. Everybody sins. It's no big deal. All guys are like that. All girls struggle with that." You want to confess to the person where they say, "Man, I know that's hard for you. God's got a better way. It took a lot of courage to confess that and I'm going to pray with you because I believe the power of God is greater than whatever sin that was, and He's going to walk you through that.

Praise the Lord for your honesty." That's who you want to confess to.

That's why God puts faithful elders in the church as some of the people that you might be able to do that with. Does that make sense? Engage God first, summon faithful elders, confess your sins. And then He says this, number four, "To finish strong, you must trust righteous prayer." He said, when you pray for one another, you'll be healed. And notice the end of verse 16, "The effective prayer of a righteous man can accomplish much." Effective prayer of righteous people can accomplish much. Take note of that word, righteous.

When you trust Christ, you've been given the righteousness of Christ and then you begin to walk in it, and the garment of righteousness that he places on you, he wants to begin to have you walk in the fullness of that righteousness so that you yourself are righteous, and when you're praying as a righteous person, God's listening. Just because you've been robed in the righteousness of Christ doesn't mean that you're walking in righteousness. And if you're walking in unrighteousness, you're walking in unconfessed sin, you're walking... Don't expect God to hear your prayer. That type of person is not as effective in prayer. But the effective prayer of a righteous man, the effective prayer of a righteous woman can accomplish much.

Some of you're here today because you had moms, grandmas, dads, grandpas that prayed for you long before you even know who Jesus was. Some of you were prayed for when you were in utero, and that's why you're here. And you didn't even have a clue because God hears the prayers of the righteous. And then, he gives an example of the prophet Elijah. He says in verse 17, "Elijah was a man with a nature like

ours." I love the Bible's honesty. Sometimes we read about the prophets of old, the apostles in the New Testament, all these people, "Oh, they're so this." He was a man with a nature just like ours. You know what that means? He was a sinner that needed the blood of Jesus.

There's nobody that's on a pedestal up here. And then there's the people. There are people that are walking in righteousness and there's people that aren't walking in righteousness and there's people that are unsafe, but there's no person walking in righteousness even close to the pedestal of Jesus. There's Jesus and there's everybody else. There's Jesus the perfect God man, and then there's everybody else that has a nature just like me and you. There's nobody here. A foundational point of theology for everybody here today is y'all are sinners.

Congregation:

Amen.

Pastor Jeff:

Two amens. Y'all are sinners.

Congregation:

Amen.

Pastor Jeff:

And it didn't mean you just sinned before you came to Christ, you're still sinners, you still practice it. I mean, that's the theology. But sometimes in church, "I used to be

that. I remember when I was a sinner like my dad. Remember I was a sinner like this person." You still are. You've just been washed by the blood of Jesus. Praise the Lord. Amen.

Congregation:

Amen.

Pastor Jeff:

And you're a new identity now. Elijah was a man with a nature just like ours, and notes what he did. He prayed earnestly it would not rain and it did not rain on the earth for three years and six months. Then he prayed again and the sky poured rain and the earth produced its fruit. Elijah was a man, nature just like ours. He prayed. And for three and a half years after he prayed, no rain on the earth, then he prayed again and whoosh, rainfall.

Now, we read that and we're like, okay, so what in the world does that have to do with anything? Why use Elijah the prophet as an example? Because Elijah was used by God in a mighty way. Elijah called down fire from heaven, fire fell from heaven. Elijah said it wouldn't rain for three and a half years, it didn't. Elijah prayed it would rain again, it did. I mean, we look at Elijah like, "That's Elijah though. He is Elijah." The Bible says, no, he's a man with a nature just like us. But there was a way in which he prayed that got his prayers answer. And wouldn't you like to know what that way was? Because I'm going to tell you something about your prayer life. No matter how powerful your prayer life is, there's a lot that you've still left untapped. There's more to prayer

than what we realize.

The more I dip my toe into the ocean of prayer, the more I realize I don't know enough about prayer. I don't believe enough in the power of prayer. I don't realize the access I have to the divine. No matter what circumstance you're going through in life, you can access the Almighty at any point in time and He's available to you. I mean, how many times do you want to get in? "I got to talk to my boss. I got to talk to this person. I need this person. They're not answering their phone." Jesus' like, "I'm available and I control everything. You want to talk to me?" "No, I'm too busy right now for you, Jesus, but when I get this all figured out, then I'll call on your name and ask you to bless it." That's how we treat prayer sometimes.

Now, prayer needs to be first and foremost. And I think there's clues here as to how Elijah prayed and what he did. I'd encourage you this week to go back and read 1 Kings 17 and 18, you'll read about what was going on in the nation and what was happening in the nation is these people were serving other gods. And God used Elijah to pray that it wouldn't rain and it didn't. And at the end of chapter 18, he prayed that it would rain again and it did. You said, "Well, why rain?" I mean, is this encouraging us like, "Lord, do not let it rain in Denver for three and a half years." I mean, if you prayed that, you'd probably think you were Elijah because it might happen. I mean, we live in a desert. That's not what he's calling us to do.

Why did Elijah pray the way he prayed? I'm going to give you five ways that Elijah prayed, five ways that Elijah prayed. If you get these, your prayer life will go to a whole different level. And even if you get numbers two and three, it'll change

everything. But first, Elijah prayed energetically. He prayed energetically. Energetically means wholeheartedly. It says the effective prayer. That word effective means to work at it. Do you know why you have to work at prayer? Do you know why you have to work at prayer? It doesn't come easy. It's not natural. Nobody just wakes up and like, "Oh, woke up today. And Jesus and I, we were just, we were basking in glory together. All I was thinking about was Jesus. I didn't have any problem."

I mean, it takes work to pray. Prayer is a work. As a matter of fact, I would say to the church of Jesus Christ, prayer is the most important work. It is the work. If the church prayed the way, we're going to teach you how to pray today, a lot of things would happen in ways that we want to see without us "doing a whole lot." Prayers work. Studied life of Jesus, what did He spend His work doing? Praying. What did the apostles say in Acts 6:4? "We will dedicate ourselves to the ministry of prayer and the Word." That's the work of a shepherd. Prayer is work. Pray, pray, pray, pray. Don't give up. Keep praying.

He prayed energetically. He worked at this prayer. It wasn't like he just threw up a prayer and said, "Lord, okay, if it wouldn't rain for three and a half years, that'd be great. Have a good day. Bye. Amen." You get the idea that he was praying and working hardily. Now, why did he pray that prayer? Because in number two, you know he prayed energetically, he prayed biblically. He prayed biblically. And you go back to Deuteronomy 11 when God was promising the people of Israel that they were going to cross into the new land, and he told him what it was going to be like. He said, "This land's going to be different than where you came out of Egypt. In Egypt, you had a

healthier water supply and you could dump buckets of water, and you had the equipment to do all that, but you need to know something about Israel. I'm the one that provides your water. You need to know when you get into this land, I'm the one that's going to provide water."

Now, water's necessary, isn't it? Water's necessary to drink, to stay alive. Water's necessary for crops. Water's necessary for animals. Water's necessary for everything in the culture. And God wants them to know the water is dependent upon me. So here's what he says in Deuteronomy 11:13. "It shall come about if you listen obediently to my commands, which I'm commanding you today, to love the Lord your God, and to serve Him with all your heart and all your soul, that he will give you the rain for your land in its season, the early and the late rain that you may gather in your grain and your new wine and your oil. He will give grass to your fields for your cattle and you will eat and be satisfied."

Here's what God says. "I promise you this. You honor me, you love me, you live obediently to my commands, I'll provide rain, you'll have crops, you'll have food, you'll have nourishment, you'll have everything you need. You know why? Because I'm a good God and I provide. That's who I am." But He also says this in verse 16. Notice what He says. "Beware. Beware that your hearts are not deceived and that you do not turn away and serve other gods and worship them. Be careful you don't make other idols. Be careful that I'm still the God of the universe. Be careful that you don't focus on anyone other than me, or the anger of the Lord will be kindled against you and He will

shut up the heavens so that there'll be no rain and the ground will not yield its fruit, and you will perish quickly from the good land which the Lord is giving to you."

So God says, "Here's the deal. I'll give you everything if you serve me and you're being to me. But if you're not, I'm going to shut the rain off. People are going to die. You're not going to have crops. They're going to perish. And here's why. It's my judgment on you as a nation because you went and served other gods." So what's Elijah praying? Elijah's looking at his world and saying, "God, they're serving other gods. And you said, God, I'm calling you biblically. This is your word. You said, if your people serve other gods, you'll shut the rain off. I'm telling you right now, they're serving other gods. You know they're serving other gods. Shut the rain off." And God did, because why? Because he was praying God's Word.

Do you pray God's Word or you just pray? Because sometimes we like to pick and choose the little parts like Philippians 4:19, "And my God will supply all my needs according to his glorious riches in Christ Jesus." Meaning I can spend more than I make and I can go into debt and I can have all these things, but my God will supply all my needs. That's not what it's saying. In the book of Philippians, Philippi was one of the poorest churches in the world, and they were giving generously to the church and to the ministry of the apostles. And Paul was saying, "I guarantee you, because even in your poverty, you're generous to the Lord and to the things. My God will supply all your needs according to his glorious riches."

Here's the context. Are you giving God all your best? Are you relying on the Lord for everything you have? If you do, he will meet all of your needs according to his

glorious riches in Christ. Do you pray biblically? Elijah was praying biblically. If we began to pray biblically and just say, "I don't know what to pray." Just pray the Bible. Pray the Bible over our nation. Pray the Bible over your family. Pray the Bible over your marriage. What does God want? He wants husbands to lead their wives. He wants wives to submit to their husbands. Pray that over your family. He wants parents to bring up their kids in the knowledge of the Lord. Pray that over your family. Just pray the word, pray energetically, pray Biblically.

How about this one? Pray specifically, specifically. Sometimes we don't know if God answers our prayers because we didn't pray anything specific enough. God bless me. Did he? I mean, you're still breathing. It seems like you did. I mean, how do you know that God's answering Elijah's prayer? God, I'm praying it won't rain. How do you know he answered it? Because it didn't rain. And then he said, "God, I'm praying it will rain." And what happened? It rained.

Elijah was so confident that he told King Ahab, you better get ready. I mean, he was basically, modern day translation, you better go get your umbrella and get off the highways because it's going to be mud. It's coming because I just told the Lord to open the heavens and He listens to me. Do you understand what I'm saying? Do you pray specifically enough so that if God actually did the specific things that you're asking for that you would say He totally answered my prayer? Here was specifically what I prayed and here's specifically what He did.

Energetically, biblically, specifically. How about this fourth one? Faithfully.

Faithfully. It means I'm praying for God's glory. Elijah wasn't praying that it wouldn't rain so people would be like, "Oh, Elijah, look at all the power you have." Elijah was praying so they wouldn't serve other gods and that God would be made famous. Are you praying prayer so that Jesus would be more famous in our culture? Are you praying prayer so that Jesus would be more famous in your family? Are you praying prayer so Jesus would be more famous than your kids? Those are the prayers that Jesus answers.

And then, pray intentionally, intentionally means focused like a laser. I'm praying for this reason. I'm intentional about this. You start praying like that, God will move. My first experience with this, I was about 22 years old. I was a senior at the University of Illinois. I was just starting to walk with the Lord. I was just starting to learn how to get my feet under me as a Christian. And I got news that the guy I was going to be living with in the fall was smoking weed, and I'd gotten word that he was thinking about selling drugs. He wasn't a believer. And I told a guy that was mentoring me that worked with Campus Crusade for Christ what was going on. He said, "Well, we should pray for him." And I thought, that's a good idea. Let's do that.

So I thought we would gather and pray for three minutes. He goes, "I'll meet you in your..." He lived upstairs from me. He goes, "I'll meet you in your house," I think it was like at 6:30 or 7:00 every morning. He goes, "Well, we'll just pray for him." And so, he would gather in my house and we would get down on my knees in my dining room and pray for like 30 minutes specifically for God to move in his heart, specifically for God to save him, specifically for him to see the air of his way, specifically for God to

do things in his life that he would use beyond when he got saved, and we did that for a period of months. I'd never prayed longer than about five minutes by myself in my life and we're praying 30 minutes a day for one guy.

He came back to school that fall, long story short, he was really upset with me was I started sharing the gospel and sure enough, he gave his life to Christ. He got saved and he started walking with the Lord. He ended up going into full-time ministry. He's now a counselor at a school in Indiana. I think he just won Counselor of the Year for all the high schools in Indianapolis or something like that. He's serving the Lord to this day, but I know... Amen. Praise God.

But when that happened, we were praying so specifically for him to get saved and for him to follow the Lord of everything we, "God, you did it." But we prayed that way. We were energetic, we were intentional, we were biblical, we were specific, we were doing it for God's glory, and he answers. He does that all the time. Sometimes the reason God doesn't answer our prayers, that's not how we're praying, that's how Elijah prayed. This is how he's encouraging us. Take steps in this direction. And then, he has these final two verses here, which finish up this whole theme of finishing strong and going well.

After it pours rain when he prayed again and the sky poured rain and the earth produces fruit, notice what he says next. He says, "My brethren," he's like, "Hey, brothers. Hey, hey, brothers and sisters. Hey church, if any among you, strays from the truth and one turns him back." Now, why would he say to Christians if anyone strays from the truth? Have you ever noticed as a Christian you feel pulled sometimes

to go back to the things of the world? You ever felt that tug like maybe I don't want to go to church today? You ever felt that tug that maybe I don't want to be that serious about Jesus? You ever felt that tug maybe I don't need to read my Bible anymore? You ever felt that tug like, oh, these people aren't really being... You ever felt that pull? Every Christian feels that pull.

And when you see somebody else among you that strays from the truth and one turns him back, let him know this, that he who turns the sinner from the air of his way will save his soul from death and cover a multitude of sins. When you see people that are calling themselves by the name of God go a different direction, it is your job to get involved. Let me give you two words. If you're going to finish strong, you must interrogate and irritate.

I know what some of you're thinking, "Irritate, finally, that's my spiritual gift. This is going to be good." Here's what I mean by that. If you love somebody, you're going to ask questions. "Hey, bro, I know you call yourself a Christian, I know you say this, but how come it is you act like that?" I've told you this story. I had a guy I played football with in college, a solid believer, I was just growing. He said, "Jeff, how do you call yourself a Christian and talk like that?" And I was like, "Well, what do you mean?" He's like, "Well, the language out of your mouth doesn't represent Christ." I'm like, "How do I change it?" He started walking with me and helping me. He showed me how Jesus could help me and Jesus help me.

If you love people, you'll ask questions, and I don't mean interrogate like put them

up against the wall. "What are you doing? You call yourself a Christian." And that's not what I mean. I mean, you're doing it in love because if God calls you to do this, you won't want to do this. This is not, I mean, if you're looking, "I can't wait to interrogate people." You're the wrong spirit. You're the wrong spirit. The spirit should be in love like, "Hey, I care for your soul. You're saying this out of your mouth. You tell people this, but in this area of your life, here's how you're living. Help me understand that. I love you enough to ask you about it. I'm interrogating you. I'm asking you a question." Interrogate means to ask.

And sometimes it means you're going to irritate somebody. Let me give you a biblical precedent for that. Hebrews 10 says, "Let us spur one another on towards love and good deeds." Spur is like the spur on a cowboy's boot going into a horse, spur them on to love and good deeds. Don't irritate them just because I want to irritate them. I'm stirring you up. I'm irritating you so that you will live to the fullness of Christ. Did you know that's your job as a Christian? Parents, if you ever had your kids say, "Why are you asking me so many questions? You're really bothering me." Then you're doing a good job. Amen. I mean, if your kids growing up are like, "I love my parents. They never ask me any questions. I can do whatever I want whenever I want." You're a horrible parent.

If you're in a church and you see people that are going the wrong way and you're like, "That's none of my business. Those get mad at me if I ask them." Then you're not living the way God wants you to live, and by getting involved with people like that and by letting the spirit of Christ come through you like that, it will strengthen your resolve

to the finish and it may save that person from going over the cliff. Interrogate, ask questions. "Hey, I noticed that you say this, but you're doing that. Let me understand. You say you love your wife, but I notice you're hanging around with other women that aren't your wife. Help me understand that. That's ungodly."

"Hey, I noticed that you say I want to respect your husband, but the way you talk about him in a group of people is so disrespectful. Help me understand why you do that." "Hey, I noticed that you say as a single, you want to serve the Lord, but I also know that you're shacking up with your boyfriend or girlfriend. Help me understand why you call yourself a Christian and do that." Well, they're going to be so irritated with me. They might need to be. That might be the loving thing to do if you have the right spirit, if you have the right heart, if you really want to see people finish well, if you really want to see them do their best for the Lord.

And I love that we have a community of people that can do that. I have people that can speak into my life and do that. I need that. You need that. Why? Because left to our own vices, we'll think we're doing okay, because if we're the only objectivity, we'll always be subjective with ourself, but completely objective with others. But when we allow others to speak into our lives, when we're willing to speak into other people's lives, that's how God can grow us. And why is He saying this? Because walking your talk is hard. It is not easy. If it was easy, every single person who was saved would be doing it to the full. It's a journey. It's a journey.

That's why oftentimes in our church, we have our elders and pastors in all of our campuses coming forward so that if you're feeling prompted, I need to engage God

first. He's been kind of a backseat. I need to call the elders. I need to be able to talk to somebody that can help me. I need to be able to confess a sin that I just can't seem to get over. I need to trust somebody that has righteous prayer that can pray for me. I need to allow other people to speak into my life, ask me questions. I need to allow somebody that might even irritate me, and I need to be that for other people too. That's why we're going to have our elders and pastors on our campuses come forward as we sing I trust in God today.

Now, I know when I do this, and I said this already in this message, when we have our elders forward, here's what many of you're thinking. "Yeah, that's not for me. That's for those two people that are really weak and needy, and if I ever had to get up and come forward, people will think I got problems." Everybody already knows you have problems because you're a sinner, you already told us that. This is for people who are walking with the Lord who are saying, "I'm stuck. I'm not in a groove. I'm in a rut. I can't seem to get out. I'm praying. I've been asking God for help. I've been seeking friends. I've been doing the right thing, but I've just kind spiritually stuck. I need some encouragement. I need to be refreshed. I need to be encouraged to take the next step. I need all that."

We have elders and pastors that are willing to do that, and if they ask if they can anoint you with oil, remember, that's symbolic of what the Holy Spirit's going to do in your life. It's not magic, but do you trust God enough to be that way? Because there's too many people that come to BRAVE that leave after hearing his word, that instead of

confessing what's going on and getting prayer and getting set right and leaving refreshed and cutting that anchor of sin and moving on, just kind of say, "Okay, I know what I need to do," and they go still living under all that.

Don't do that today. Let today be the day you're like, "I don't care what anybody else thinks. I don't care what anybody else knows. I'm going to trust the Lord's work in my life. I'm going to trust Lord through the elders of the church to confess what I need to confess and to get right and to get back on track because I know this church loves me. I know they love Jesus. I know they have my best interests, and I want to grow in Christ." Amen.

Would you stand with me? Father in heaven as we bring our elders and pastors forward today and special ministers of prayer in our church, we just pray that you would do a work. Lord, as we sing this song, we're going to be praying to you or praising you, saying, I trust in God. Psalm 34 says, "I sought the Lord and He heard me and answered me and responded." Lord, do a work here today. If you're here today, you've never trusted Christ, just tell Him, "Lord, I repent on my sin. I know it. I need you. Come into my life."

If you're a believer here today and you're like, "I know it's me, I know this is the thing," don't be afraid. Just trust the Lord's movement in your life. Just come forward, be a part of this. Get prayed for it. There's nothing more great than having somebody else that loves you, that loves Jesus, that caress for you, that'll help set you on your way, refresh you so that you can take the next steps with Christ. God, we just pray this time will be a time of honor and glory and praise to you as you deliver and free

people and set them up for their next step in you. We trust you greatly for healing, for deliverance, for salvations because that's who you are and that's what you do. Give us the assurance of our salvation today. We pray in Jesus' name, amen and amen. Could we give God some praise today for who He is?