

Powerful Prayer
James 5:16-18
ABC 9/29/19

Have you ever prayed for the weather? Waiting for the ski season & pray for snow? Have an outdoor wedding planned & pray for decent weather? None of us have probably ever prayed for a drought, but that's what we see Elijah do in our passage today. As you remember, this section of James is about prayer. All of us face 2 dangers whenever we talk about prayer. We can make prayer seem so hard that only *super-Christians* can pray effectively while the rest of us just muddle along. Sometimes the stories we tell about saints who spent hours each day praying end up discouraging us because we're doing well if we pray 10 minutes. Or we can go to the other extreme & make prayer seem like texting a friend, which has the advantage of making you want to pray, but you can end up with a lightweight view of prayer. Instead of coming into God's presence to talk to your heavenly Father, you feel like you're chatting with a friend who's checking his Instagram while you're talking with him. We'd do better to think of prayer as a gift from God that enables us to stay connected with Him. If we use it, we'll grow deeper in our knowledge of & fellowship with God. Our Father wants us to pray, He encourages us to pray, & He invites us to pray. With that in mind, let's look at James & see what it teaches us about the power of prayer. **5:13-20 PRAY**

James' aim is to motivate us to pray more than we do. Of course, this assumes you've trusted in Jesus as your Savior. You must be reconciled to God through faith in Christ before you can rightly pray. Jesus must be your personal High Priest, whose blood has covered all your sin. If this is true of you, then the invitation of Heb 4:16 applies: **let us draw near with confidence to the throne of grace, so that we may receive mercy & find grace to help in time of need.** If you've trusted in Christ as Savior, then you need to pray more. We all do. As with everything in life, motivation is the key. To motivate you to pray, James gives a promise of the power of prayer & then proves it with the life of Elijah.

1. The Promise of Prayer 5:16b says, **The effective prayer of a righteous man can accomplish much.** James has just told us to **pray for one another, so that you may be healed.** Whether your need is physical or spiritual, prayer is very powerful. But James qualifies this in that he gives us a ...

A. Condition It's the **prayer of a righteous man**. Maybe you're thinking, *I'm out of luck because I'm not righteous*. While the word **righteous** sounds daunting, it shouldn't threaten us if we think about it biblically. If we've been justified by faith, we stand before God with a righteousness that isn't our own. He's declared us **righteous** because of His Son's sinlessness & our faith in Him. If you think you can approach God through your own righteousness, you don't understand the gospel nor how unrighteous you are. The gospel condemns us all because of our sin. Our own righteousness can never satisfy God's holy justice. As Paul states, **for all have sinned & fall short of the glory of God, being justified as a gift by His grace through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus** (Rom 3:23-24). To be justified is to be declared righteous. God doesn't do that on the basis of any merit in us, only by His undeserved favor, His grace. It's His gift to forgive all your sins & clothe you with Christ's perfect righteousness. That's the standing of everyone who's trusted in Christ. So **righteous** refers to our standing in Christ. But it also refers to our walk, the way we live. It doesn't imply perfection or no one could qualify. Elijah certainly wasn't a perfect man. To be **righteous** in the way we live means to walk uprightly before God, confessing all known sin, & seeking to obey God in every area of life. Our prayers aren't heard because of our worthiness or sinlessness. But if we're aware of unconfessed sin in our hearts, we won't feel confident in drawing near to the holy God. The psalmist says, **If I regard wickedness in my heart, the Lord will not hear** (Ps 66:18). Therefore, we should always draw near to God in prayer on the basis of the worthiness & merit of Jesus Christ & never on our own. At the same time, we should examine our hearts to make sure we aren't harboring any known sin. We don't need to be perfect, but we do need to walk in the light, turning from all known sin. Does this mean **righteous** people have a blank check from God to ask whatever they want & it will come to pass? Yes & no. The righteous person will only want to pray for things that are God's will. In that sense, yes, their prayers are answered. But none of us can know God's will perfectly in all things. Therefore, no, we don't have a blank check. How does the Lord's prayer begin? **Our Father who is in heaven, Hallowed be Your name. Your kingdom come. Your will be done** (Mt 6:9-10). The righteous person only wants the will of God to be done. If this weren't true, he couldn't be described as **righteous**.

B. The Result Can accomplish much. This has been translated a variety of ways, including, **powerful & effective** (NIV), **has great power in its working** (ESV), & **has great effectiveness** (NET). There's no inherent power in prayer itself, but in who we pray to, the God who is all-powerful. James begins the sentence in Greek with the word **much** to emphasize what prayer can accomplish. When we pray, we communicate with the Creator of heaven & earth, who loves us & invites us into His presence. & so, as EM Bounds put it, *Prayer can do anything that God can do.*¹ That's a wonderfully true statement. But I still struggle at this point because I've experienced so many unanswered prayers. I've prayed for healing for many sick people who've died. I've prayed for salvation for some & haven't seen it happen. I'm sure you've experienced this too. Why? There seem to be 2 answers to this problem of unanswered prayer. 1st, sometimes God delays the answers we want to keep us in humble dependence on Him. That was the situation with Paul's thorn in the flesh (2 Cor 12:7-10). When Elijah prayed for God to send rain, even though God promised to send rain, He didn't answer instantly. It took 7 attempts on Elijah's part before the 1st cloud was seen. Sometimes God waits to answer to keep us seeking Him or for other reasons we may never understand. 2nd, sometimes God answers *NO* for His own mysterious reasons or because it's not His will. This is where we have to trust Him & His sovereign, all-knowing ways. He knows all the factors, which we can't know. As I said last week, I would've prayed for a long & fruitful ministry for John the Baptist, but that wasn't God's plan. I would've prayed for Jesus to avoid the cross, but that wasn't God's plan either. I pray many things that seem to me to be for God's glory & in accordance with His will, but He overrules my prayers with His own sovereign purpose. The danger when we encounter God's delays or denials is that we'll lose heart & give up praying. We need to remember that prayer links us with the omnipotent God who spoke the universe into existence. He can interrupt the normal laws of His creation, if He chooses, to accomplish His will. & He has chosen that He normally accomplishes His will through the prayers of His people. Because of this, we should pray big prayers & expect God to accomplish **much** through them, according to His purpose & glory. Does this mean God won't do what He wants to do if we don't pray for it? There are many answers to questions

¹ *Purpose in Prayer*, p 96

like this, but there's one answer that addresses them all. It's the reality that our Creator ordains the means as well as the ends. In an absolute sense, God certainly does not need our prayers. He isn't **served by human hands, as though He needed anything, since He Himself gives to all people life & breath & all things** (Acts 17:25). Our Maker can certainly do whatever He wants apart from our prayers. But that isn't how He's ordinarily chosen to do things. He's purposed to show His mighty hand in answer to our prayers. That's a privilege He's granted us. Prayer is for our benefit, giving us a glorious purpose in God's plan. As to the question regarding whether prayer changes things, we must remember that prayer can't change what God has ordained. By His hidden will, or His will of decree, He's already determined whatsoever comes to pass & this will is unalterable (Num 23:19; Dt 29:29). We live by His revealed will, that which He's told us is pleasing to Him (Dt 29:29). It isn't for us to figure out His hidden will because we can't know what He hasn't revealed. Instead, we're to take Him at His revealed Word, remembering, as He has told us, that **the prayer of a righteous person has great power as it is working** (Jas 5:16b, ESV). God has promised to work mightily in response to our prayers. He's revealed He'll use prayer to change not Himself, but to change things in fulfillment of His sovereign will. Prayer obviously does affect the course of our lives & the lives of others. Thus, we pray knowing He works through our prayers to accomplish His purposes. John Calvin notes that prayer is more for our benefit than it is for God's. While we can hold to the truth that there are some things God won't do unless we ask Him (Jas 4:2b), we also know that even the prayers in which we ask of things from Him are already ordained in His eternal plan.² Because of all this, we can have confidence when we pray that the same power Elijah accessed is available to us. I don't know about you, but I need that kind of encouragement. I need to know God is powerful. I need to know when I'm disappointed & don't see answers to my prayers as I think I should get them, wonderful answers to prayer, like Elijah experienced, are still possible. If you know Jesus, then wherever you are, in whatever need you find yourself, call out to God & He will hear & answer according to His will. God doesn't weigh the value of the prayers by their length or by how many people get together to pray the same thing or by how much you agonize in your

² www.ligonier.org/learn/devotionals/role-prayer-gods-providence/

prayers. Most of the prayers recorded in the Bible are short. Even if you've only got a few moments, you can still devote some time to prayer. Sometimes we think, *If we can just get a lot of people praying, it'll be more effective.* But our text says, **a righteous man**, not *a really big group of righteous men.* But the more who pray, the more get blessed when God answers. So it's good to enlist others in prayer as well. But if it's just you & God, the prayer may be as powerfully effective as if a whole group prays. Also, it doesn't say the righteous man has to agonize for it to be effective. Yes, Elijah's prayer was earnest, & ours should be the same. We should pour out our hearts before God (Ps 62:8). The more serious the situation & the more we're burdened by it, the more intensely we'll pray (Heb 5:7). But God answers our prayers on the basis of His grace through Jesus Christ, not on the basis of our working up certain feelings. James' theme here is the prayer of the righteous is very powerful in its working. He then illustrates the theme with a...

2. Proof of Prayer 5:17-18

Elijah had taken on legendary status among the Jews in James' day. After all, he marched in before the wicked & powerful King Ahab & announced it would rain only by his word. He was miraculously fed by the ravens during the drought. He enabled the widow of Zarephath's flour to be replenished throughout the drought. He raised her son from the dead. He called down fire from heaven to consume his waterlogged sacrifice in front of the prophets of Baal. Then he ordered their execution. Later, he called down fire to consume 2 groups of soldiers sent to arrest him. He parted the Jordan river to walk across. Then he was taken to heaven without dying in a chariot of fire. That's the stuff legends are made of! Admittedly, a man like Elijah could be more of a hindrance to our prayer life than an encouragement because we may think he's in a different league than we are. That's why James says...

A. He Was a Man with a Nature Like Ours. As you read the story of Elijah, you find that in spite of seeing God work in miraculous ways, he became fearful & depressed. He had his ups & downs. He was far from perfect. He had a temper & was prone to depression & discouragement. Despite his human weaknesses, he was a man of prayer who walked with God during an evil generation. Though an imperfect, off-the-grid mountain man, he was a man of prayer & faith. While Elijah was

a great man, he was just a man. He didn't have some privileged status before God that we lack. When Elijah was at his best, he called down fire from heaven & defeated Baal's false prophets. When Elijah was at his worst, he ran & hid in a cave. He did nothing half-way. Remember the story of Elijah laying himself on the body of a dead child & praying for God to bring him back to life (1 Kgs 17:17-24)? Most of us can't imagine doing something like that. But then we're not like Elijah. Or are we? Elijah wasn't some superhuman man in a category far beyond the rest of us. He experienced all the emotions of life: joy, sorrow, victory, defeat, frustration, exultation, encouragement, discouragement, anger, forgiveness, despair, & relief. We face a 2-fold danger when we study someone like Elijah. Sometimes we tend to idolize such a man, treating him as if he were exempt from the normal temptations of life. It's easy to chisel Elijah's head on some religious Mount Rushmore & say, *There never was such a man before or since*. Or we may focus on a great man's failures & faults, exposing every sin & every foolish mistake so he seems not very great at all. We pull him down into the muck & mire of ordinary life until the luster of his greatness has disappeared underneath the veneer of his frailty. All the heroes of the Bible had their weaknesses & Elijah was no exception. That's one reason we're drawn to such a man. God used him in spite of his weaknesses. After his greatest victory, Elijah ran away. God had to go to him & talk him back into his senses. Then God used him again. That's a good story because it's our story. We've all run away under pressure. We've all given up, thrown in the towel, & quit the race. We're all made from the same clay. Elijah's story is our story because Elijah's God is our God. Just as He came after Elijah, He comes after us again & again & again. He doesn't know when to quit. He doesn't accept our letter of resignation. He finds us, calls us, refines us, rebukes us, encourages us, & refits us. Then he commissions us all over again. James wants us to remember that this imperfect man of God prayed & the rain stopped. It didn't fall in Israel for 3½ years. Then he prayed & the heavens opened up & rain fell ending the drought. If God would listen to Elijah's prayers, He'll certainly listen to ours. Elijah prayed & God answered. So even though you have your ups & downs, pray! The power of prayer is not with us, but with our God.

As we know, Jesus is greater than Elijah (Mt 12:41-42; 17:1-6; Heb 3:3). This takes us to the heart of the gospel when we read about Elijah as an example of prayer because it goes back to that last statement in vs 16. Who is the **righteous** man? The example is Elijah. But Jesus tells us He is greater than Elijah. That focuses our attention on Jesus, the only **righteous** Man who's ever lived. He was & is perfectly righteous; perfectly obedient to His Father's will. It also takes us right to the center of our Savior's prayer life. All the prophets of whom Elijah is the representative were prayer warriors & they pointed us forward to Jesus. Therefore, when we read about the Savior's life, we read things like Mk 1:35, **In the early morning, while it was still dark, Jesus got up, left the house, & went away to a secluded place, & was praying there.** That was His habit. Now I'm not saying you need to set your alarm clock for 3 a.m. tomorrow & get up & pray. If that works for you, great, but that's not what the point of the verse is. The point of the verse is to show us the fervency & devotion of the Savior to His Father's will. Do we have that? Are we working at cultivating it? We'll come back to Jesus' prayers in a bit.

B. Elijah Lived in Ungodly Times but His Prayers Affected the Nation King Ahab set a new spiritual low in Israel. Even though there were some bad kings before Ahab, 1 Kgs 16:33 states, **Ahab did more to provoke the Lord God of Israel than all the kings of Israel who were before him.** He married wicked Jezebel who established Baal worship as the religion of the land. She killed the prophets of God, except for 100 who were in hiding. Baal was regarded as the god who controlled the rain & fertility. Thus Elijah's prayer for drought & his later prayer for rain were a direct challenge to the worshipers of Baal. Everyone in the nation felt the effects of 3 years of drought. It pushed them to ask, *Why isn't Baal answering our prayers?* Elijah's showdown with the prophets of Baal pointedly drew the line: **How long will you hesitate between two opinions? If the Lord is God, follow Him; but if Baal, follow him** (1 Kgs 18:21). When God answered Elijah's prayer to bring down fire on the sacrifice, the people **fell on their faces; & they said, 'The Lord, He is God; the Lord, He is God'** (18:39). One righteous man's prayer affected the entire nation. It can be the same today.

C. Elijah Prayed Because He Knew the Living God The account in 1 Kgs 17:1 doesn't state directly that Elijah prayed that it wouldn't rain. Rather, he appeared before Ahab & announced, **As the Lord,**

the God of Israel lives, before whom I stand, surely there shall be neither dew nor rain these years, except by my word. But we can easily infer that James was correct in stating that Elijah **prayed earnestly that it would not rain**. When he later prays for God to bring down fire on the sacrifice, he states, **O Lord, the God of Abraham, Isaac & Israel, today let it be known that You are God in Israel & that I am Your servant & I have done all these things at Your word** (1 Kgs 18:36). The **all these things** included praying for drought. Also, the OT repeatedly says if Israel fell into idolatry, God would withhold rain from the land (Dt 11:16-17; 28:23-24). It's reasonable to assume Elijah knew these Scriptures & that he prayed for God to keep His word. The point is, Elijah knew the living God, & he knew he stood before Him. That's why he could boldly declare to Ahab there would be no rain. In the same way, the effectiveness of our prayer lives will be in direct proportion to how well we know the living God & consciously come into His holy presence.

D. Elijah Prayed Earnestly James' words, **prayed earnestly**, are literally, *prayed with prayer*. It signifies intensity. Elijah's intensity in prayer was because he was one man up against a powerful king & queen, their idolatrous prophets, & an entire nation that had turned its back on the Lord. Elijah, being a man with a nature like ours, recognized his own inadequacy in the face of these powerful enemies. That led him to **pray earnestly**. The reason we often don't pray earnestly is we don't clearly see how weak & inadequate we are & how powerful the enemy really is. If we see that apart from Christ, we can do nothing (Jn 15:5), we'd pray more earnestly about every aspect of our lives. Earnest prayer stems from a sense of personal inadequacy, but also from the knowledge of God's total adequacy. Here are 3 questions that should motivate us to pray:

#1 – Do we live in ungodly times? Then pray! Often the daily news is enough to get you depressed. What should we do? Pray! Like Elijah, we may need to pray for drought, recognizing the drought we pray for will dry up the brook we drink from. Sometimes we think our nation has hit bottom, it hasn't. But when people don't sense their need for God, there won't be true repentance. When God hits our nation with overwhelming catastrophes or withholds His blessings, people eventually begin to see their need & become open to turning back to God. Also with Elijah, at the appropriate time, we need to pray for rain. It's instructive that God told Elijah He would send rain (1 Kgs 18:1)

but Elijah still had to pray that promise into reality. When our nation or when an individual you know is parched from a spiritual drought, we should pray that God would graciously send the rain of His Spirit to bring genuine repentance & revival.

#2 – Do we face circumstances that are far beyond our ability to change? Then pray! A loved one's heart is hardened against the Lord. Only God can crack that hard heart. Pray! Someone you know has a deadly disease. The doctors have done everything they can do. Pray! God may heal or He may give extra grace to endure. I could go on naming overwhelming problems. Whatever yours is, let it drive you to the Lord in prayer.

#3 – Do we sense personal inadequacy? Then pray! Prayer acknowledges that our need isn't for just a little boost from God & then we can handle it on our own. No, prayer admits our need is total! Dr Howard Hendricks used to challenge his students with the question, *What is there in your life that you cannot explain on any other basis than the supernatural?*³ Our problem isn't that we're inadequate to live the Christian life, but rather that we think we're at least partially adequate in ourselves to do so. So God sends some overwhelming circumstances into our lives to teach us what Paul learned, **Indeed, we had the sentence of death within ourselves so that we would not trust in ourselves, but in God who raises the dead** (2 Cor 1:9). Many years ago EM Bounds wrote,

*What the Church needs today is not more machinery or better, not new organizations or more & novel methods, but men whom the Holy Ghost can use—men of prayer, men mighty in prayer. The Holy Ghost does not flow through methods, but through men. He does not come on machinery, but on men. He does not anoint plans, but men—men of prayer.*⁴

Pray for your elders. Pray for this church. Pray for your own needs. Since the prayer of the righteous is effective, pray! It's not a burden nor a duty. It's a blessed privilege we have as children of the King. We shouldn't pray because we have to but because we want to. Let us pray with confidence, expecting God will answer our prayers in the best possible ways. Nothing is too great to ask & nothing is too hard for Him to handle.

Back to Jesus' prayer life. The culmination of it was in the Garden of Gethsemane. There we find the sinless Savior of the world, the God-Man, on the night before His execution, asking His best

³ *Living by the Book: the art & science of reading the Bible*, p 324

⁴ *Power Through Prayer*, p 12

friends to pray with Him. What happens? They sleep (Mt 26:39-46). Jesus wasn't simply making polite conversation with His Father. He's in such agony & distress that He sweats blood. What is He praying? **Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from Me.** What cup? The cup of God's wrath for all of our prayerlessness, all our pride, all our refusing to be dependent upon God, & all our sin. Jesus says, **If it is possible, let this ... pass.** But how does He finish the prayer? **yet not as I will, but as You will.** That goes back to what James has been teaching us. Jesus models it for us perfectly. He has the prayer of faith. *I know You can do this, God. I know You can take the cup from Me. Nevertheless, not My will, but Yours.* Don't lose confidence in prayer. That's what James is shouting at us. That's what Jesus is saying to us on His knees in the Garden of Gethsemane. He told Peter, **I have prayed for you, that your faith may not fail** (Lk 22:32). & He's praying for all of us right now. When you need somebody to pray for you, yes, ask anybody here or call the elders. But 1st ask Jesus. Go to Him. He will pray for us. Let me close by giving us 4 ways this looks in the real world. How do we live this dependent life of prayer?

#1 – Simply pray whenever & wherever you can. On the way to school or work, while you're doing dishes, in the deer stand, doing laundry, mowing the yard, exercising. Whatever it is, pray wherever & whenever you can.

#2 – Don't focus on the length of your prayers; focus on the One to whom you're praying. Satan has a strategy. If you only pray for a few minutes he says, *See what a weak pray-er you are!* The moment he gets us to focus on that, he takes our eyes off Jesus. That's to be the focus of our prayers, not how long we're doing it.

#3 – Pray when you don't feel like it! You may think that's hypocrisy. It's not. It's humility. Again the devil says, *You're a hypocrite. You don't feel close to Jesus. Your heart's not in it so stop praying.* Jesus says faith is better than feelings. When you don't feel it, pray. *When it's hardest to pray, pray the hardest.*⁵ That's saying, *God, I don't feel it but I trust You. I believe that You will hear me.* Pray when you don't feel like it.

⁵ Gabe Fluhrer, www.fpcjackson.org/resource-library/sermons/the-power-of-prayer/

#4 – Pray expectantly! Don't put your trust in oil or elders; put your trust in Jesus & pray knowing He can work. Do we believe that? As a church, as individuals, this is what is needed today. We've got to be the kind of church & the kind of individuals who joyfully realize that God answers prayer & can do supernatural things through the prayers of His people.

Why did Jesus pray this way? Why did our Savior sweat great drops of blood in the garden? The answer is, for us. He knew our names when He went to the cross. He knew the suffering He was undergoing wasn't for His sin. He committed no sin. He was perfect, the spotless Lamb of God. & yet all of our sins were represented in that cup & He got on His knees & He prayed the way He prayed for you & for me. He was praying in our place. & the best news is, the cross didn't stop that prayer. Jesus hasn't stopped praying for us. The author of Hebrews puts it this way, **He always lives to make intercession for us** (Heb 7:25). The best part about powerful prayer that James is talking about is that we can all experience it. It's available for us all. Do you believe that? Then pray!