

THE POWER OF PRAYER

While crossing the Atlantic on a ship many years ago. Bible teacher and pastor F.B. Meyer was asked to preach at a service for the passengers. The topic he was given to speak on was Answered Prayer. After the message an agnostic man came up to him and said that he did not believe a word of what F.B. Meyer had said. As they walked together around the deck of the ship discussing the message, they passed an elderly woman who was fast asleep in her deck chair. Her arms were outstretched and her hands were wide open. The agnostic had two oranges in his pocket left over from the breakfast in first class that he had, so as a joke he put the two oranges in her palms. The two men continued to discuss the message as they walked their way around the ship. Eventually they came back around to the place where the old woman was sitting. She was now awake, enjoying her oranges.

The agnostic said, "You seem to be enjoying that orange." "Yes, sir," she replied, "My Father in Heaven is very good to me." Puzzled, the agnostic said "What do you mean?" She explained, "I have been seasick for days. I was asking God to somehow send me an orange. We do not get them in third class. I fell asleep while I was praying and when I awoke, I found He had sent me not only one but two oranges!" The agnostic was amazed by the woman's answer, and realized that he had been the unwilling answer to her prayers. Later, he put his trust in Christ.

Today we are starting a series on Prayer. Today I want to speak about the power of prayer.

James 5:16-18 Therefore confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous man is powerful and effective. 17 Elijah was a man just like us. He prayed earnestly that it would not rain, and it did not rain on the land for three and a half years. 18 Again he prayed, and the heavens gave rain, and the earth produced its crops.

God wants us to become a people of prayer, who see specific events and specific people changed in answer to specific prayers. Powerful specific praying brings powerful specific results.

1. The Power of Prayer – 16

As Christians, we often say that we believe in the power of prayer but do not really live like it. While we may say that we believe in it, we often do not fully realize what powerful praying can accomplish. James chooses to end his letter by talking about the power of prayer. If we are in trouble, we should pray. If we are sick, we should pray – and receive prayer from others. He reminds his readers in vs. 16 that, "the prayer of a righteous man is powerful and effective." He then illustrates his point by using the example of Elijah. Elijah prayed and it did not rain in Israel for three and a half years.

1Ki 17:1 Now Elijah the Tishbite, from Tishbe in Gilead, said to Ahab, "As the LORD, the God of Israel, lives, whom I serve, there will be neither dew nor rain in the next few years except at my word."

I lived in Kuwait for 10 years and I can tell you that it was a very dry place. It hardly ever rained, but even there we could count on having several days of rain every year – about 2-3 inches in total. Israel, in comparison, is like a garden. Parts of Israel get over 35 inches of rain a year. In the winter, air from the warm waters of the Mediterranean hit the mountains and produce rain. For it to not rain for three and a half years is not just impossible, it is unthinkable. To not even have dew on the ground is even more incredible, yet that is what happened because of one man's prayers. That is the power of God!

Elijah is clear here that it was not by his own power or will that this would happen. It was the power and will of God whom he served. Prayer is not simply asking God to do something that He does not want to do, it is aligning our will with God's. It is praying God's specific will over a specific situation.

One of the reasons that we often do not see answers to our prayers is that we pray with such apathy that our requests are not really taken seriously. When Jesus taught His disciples to pray, He taught them to pray with boldness and persistence.

Luke 11:5-8 Then he said to them, "Suppose one of you has a friend, and he goes to him at midnight and says, 'Friend, lend me three loaves of bread, because a friend of mine on a journey has come to me, and I have nothing to set before him.' 7 Then the one inside answers, 'Don't bother me. The door is already locked, and my children are with me in bed. I can't get up and give you anything.' 8 I tell you, though he will not get up and give him the bread because he is his friend, yet because of the man's boldness he will get up and give him as much as he needs.

Are our hearts really burdened by the things that we are praying for? Are we serious about it? If the man asking for bread had just given up when his friend told him to go away, he would have received nothing. Instead, he showed boldness and persistence and received what he wanted,

R. G. Lee told of a little boy playing with toys in the front yard while his mother sat on the porch engaged in handwork. Occasionally, and casually, the little boy would mumble a request for something to eat without ever looking up from his preoccupation with his playthings. To these requests, the mother seemed to pay no attention. After a while, the son laid his toys aside and made his way hurriedly to the side of his mother, clutched her with both hands to get her attention, and, looking pleadingly into her eyes, cried out fervently, "Mother, I want something to eat." Of course, the mother went immediately to grant his earnest appeal.

The other reason that we often do not see answers to our prayers is that we pray such generic non-specific prayers. It is easy to get so preoccupied with the things around you that your prayers become mechanical and indifferent. We pray for such basic and general things. If you want to receive an answer to your prayers, you have to pray something specific enough to be answered. You can pray, "Lord bless my family" but then what is the measure that you use to determine whether that prayer has been answered or not.

Years ago, there was a RONA commercial on TV where 2 guys are building a deck. The one guy asks for the thing. The little thingy from the place. You know, the doopsy doodle, the thingy. You can see the frustration on the face of the friend who has no idea of what to hand him because he has no idea of what he is asking for.

Effective prayer is specific prayer. If we want specific answers to our prayers, we must make definite, individual, personalized requests and not sweeping generalizations. When we pinpoint our prayers, we find reasons to praise God for particular answers.

Some years ago, a young girl was very sick and not expected to recover. Because of her love for Jesus, she was troubled that she had not been able to do more for Him in her short life. Her pastor suggested that she make a list of people in their little town who needed Christ and pray that they might put their faith in Him. She took his advice, made a list, and prayed often for each person. Sometime later, God began to stir a revival in the town. The girl heard of people who were coming to Christ and prayed even more. As she heard reports, she checked off the names of those who had been led to the Lord.

After the girl died, a prayer list with the names of 56 people was found under her pillow. All had put their faith in Christ, the last one on the night before her death.

Such is the power of definite, specific, fervent prayer. Do you have a prayer list? Who are you praying for on a regular basis? There is an old poem that says;

Lord, lay some soul upon my heart and love that soul through me,
And may I nobly do my part to win that soul for Thee!

2. The Person of Prayer – 17a

One of the reasons that we often do not pray powerful prayers is that we do not really feel like powerful people. We fail to ask God to do the impossible because we figure that we are unworthy to make such a request. Notice that in James 5:17 he says that, "Elijah was a man just like us."

The word used here for LIKE US is the Greek word HOMOIOPATHES which means similarly affected – subject to like passions. Elijah was not some super saint that never had any problems. Yes, Elijah saw God do some amazing miracles through him. However, it is important to remember that Elijah was only human, he possessed our same limitations. He was a man like us. He was prone to all the frailties of human nature that we are.

Yes, he called down fire from heaven and defeated the prophets of Baal on Mount Carmel, but then he was so afraid of Jezebel that he ran away in fear. He ran until he was so tired that God had to come and take care of him. Then he went and hid in a cave where he complained about everything that was happening to him.

1Ki 19:10 He replied, "I have been very zealous for the LORD God Almighty. The Israelites have rejected your covenant, broken down your altars, and put your prophets to death with the sword. I am the only one left, and now they are trying to kill me too."

Elijah was struggling, so God met him where he was and spoke with him and reassured him. He told him what to do next and told him to go find Elisha to help him. The point is that Elijah was just a regular person like you and I. The secret to the power in his life was his relationship with God.

When Hudson Taylor was 18, he wandered into his father's library and read a gospel tract. He couldn't shake off its message. Finally, falling to his knees, he accepted Christ as his Savior. Ten days later, his mother, who had been away, returned home. When Hudson told her the news, she said, "I already know. Ten days ago, the very date on which you tell me you read the tract, I spent the entire afternoon in prayer for you until the Lord assured me that my wayward son had been brought into the fold."

3. The Product of Prayer – 17b-18

Elijah prayed that it would not rain, and it did not rain for three and a half years. Elijah prayed again, and the heavens gave rain, and the earth produced its crops. The drought ended and the rain brought life and abundance back to the land. This is the product of prayer.

1Ki 18:1 After a long time, in the third year, the word of the LORD came to Elijah: "Go and present yourself to Ahab, and I will send rain on the land."

Again, it is clear that this was God's idea, not Elijah's. His prayer was simply an expression of God's will. It is interesting that between God's announcement of rain and the rain actually coming, Elijah had to first confront the prophets of Baal. Very often in our lives God wants to send a blessing into our lives, but we have to first be obedient and ready to receive that blessing.

After the fire fell from heaven and the prophets of Baal were defeated, Elijah once again climbed Mount Carmel. He sat there waiting for the word of the Lord to be fulfilled. He had told Ahab that there was the "sound of heavy rain" when the skies were still blue and cloudless. Now he is sitting there on the mountain waiting and praying.

1Ki 18:42-46 So Ahab went off to eat and drink, but Elijah climbed to the top of Carmel, bent down to the ground and put his face between his knees. 43 Go and look toward the sea, he told his servant. And he went up and looked. "There is nothing there," he said. Seven times Elijah said, "Go back." 44 The seventh time the servant reported, "A cloud as small as a man's hand is rising from the sea." So Elijah said, "Go and tell Ahab, 'Hitch up your chariot and go down before the rain stops you.' " 45 Meanwhile, the sky grew black with clouds, the wind rose, a heavy rain came on and Ahab rode off to Jezreel. 46 The power of the LORD came upon Elijah and, tucking his cloak into his belt, he ran ahead of Ahab all the way to Jezreel.

It does not say in the text, but I wonder how long Elijah waited on that mountain for the rain to come. He sent his servant 6 times to go and scan the horizon for any sign of clouds – so it must have been a considerable length of time he was waiting there. What do you think he was doing sitting there with his head between his knees? Though it does not say so, I think he was praying! God had told him that it would rain. He had told Ahab that it would rain. Still the skies were clear and there was no sign of rain anywhere.

What was going through his mind at that point? God, did I hear you right? God, my reputation is on the line, why are you not doing what you promised that you would do? Remember, Elijah had just seen the power of God displayed through a mighty miracle. The fire from heaven had fallen and consumed the offering, the wood, the stones, the soil and the water. You would think seeing that would have removed any trace of doubt from his mind.

The Lord had told Elijah that he was about to send rain on the earth. However, God did not do so until Elijah had prayed. I have seen this truth so often in my own life. God declares His will and then waits for us to act in obedience to it. Instead of working around us, He will often wait for us to cooperate with Him by prayer first before the answer is given. Elijah needed to know that the rain was coming, but that did not excuse him from the earnest prayer that would release it.

John Oxtoby, who was affectionately known as "Praying Johnny" was sent to hold a revival in Filey. He stopped under a hedge and he wrestled in prayer for the success of his mission. A passer-by heard Johnny Oxtoby's prayer: "Will thou make a fool of me, God? I told them at the conference that you were going to revive your work, and you must, or I shall never be able to show my face among them again, and then what will the people say about praying and believing?" He continued to plead for several hours. The struggle was long and heavy but he would not give in. At last he rose, exclaiming, "It is done, Lord, it is done! Filey is taken."

Prayer is powerful. In order to truly understand that we need our prayers to be specific and sustained. Focused and fervent. Jesus told us;

Luke 11:9 So I say to you: Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you.

Notice that there is a progression in this persistence: asking, seeking and knocking. Asking means making the specific request. Seeking takes that one step further. It implies an intentional ongoing desire and suggests a greater sense of urgency and time. Knocking again goes one step further. It implies moving from simply looking for an answer to actively working towards an answer. It shows ongoing determination and perseverance.

In your life right now, what are you praying for? Is there something you are asking God for? Have you gone past simply asking to actively seeking and knocking?

Elijah was a man like us. He prayed and it did not rain for three and a half years. Then he prayed and it rained and brought life back to the land.

This summer was quite dry for us in Chatham. There were days I remember thinking; a little rain would be really good right now. I pray for rain today. Not just physical rain, but spiritual rain. I pray that God will revive our land and revive our church. I pray that God will do a new work amongst us. If you read the prayer that Elijah prayed before the fire fell from heaven, it simply said;

1Ki 18:37 Answer me, O LORD, answer me, so these people will know that you, O LORD, are God, and that you are turning their hearts back again.

That is my prayer for all of us and for our land this day. That we would know that Jesus is Lord, and that our hearts would be drawn back to Him today. Prayer is powerful. I can only imagine what it was like that day when the rain returned after three and a half years. As people walked out of their houses and began dancing and singing. Lord, do so in our nation again.