



Prayer

Connect Season 3
2019

Prayer: The Hurdle

James 5.13-18

Introduction

Prayer is one of those things that we all know is important. We know that it works! We know that anyone can pray.

Prayer is something that even seems instinctive to humans throughout the world.

We know that God answers prayer. We know that He sometimes even answers the prayers of ungodly people.

And yet many of us find prayer difficult.

Prayer: the hurdle

In this short series, we are going to look at some aspects of prayer that will help to strengthen our praying.

In this first study, we are going to look at what I think is one of the biggest hurdles to prayer. We are going to look at James 5.1-18.

Some background

The letter of James was written by James, the Lord's brother. That is, James was actually *Jesus's brother*.

So the people he is writing to had Jesus's own brother as their pastor.

You might think that a church that was led by someone who was so close to Jesus, both physically and spiritually, would have no problems – or at least not too many. That, however, clearly was not the case. This little letter tackles all sorts of issues.

And one that it tackles is that of prayer.

In chapter 5, it's almost as though James is having to convince his congregation that praying really works! You would think that if a

church had Jesus's own brother as its pastor, it wouldn't need to be reminded in such a basic way about praying.

But it did. And it's highly likely if a church with such an illustrious pastor needed to be reminded about prayer, so do we.

We're going to look at three verses in particular:

"The prayer of a righteous person is powerful and effective. 17 Elijah was a human being, even as we are. 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.

Prayer: the possibility

Elijah: the example

In our later studies we will look in a bit more detail at Elijah.

Simply note that James backs up all that he teaches about prayer with reference to Elijah. Elijah, he says, saw amazing results in answer to his prayers, but remember, he was *just like us*. In other words, our praying can have the same kind of impact *as Elijah's prayers*.

Things happened in Elijah's world *because he prayed*.

It's important to keep that in mind, because James wants to convince his congregation – and us – that not just prayer but *our praying* has the potential to change the environment around us:

"The prayer of a righteous man is powerful and effective"

It's *praying* that makes change possible. It's *praying* that makes the impossible possible.

Prayer: the promise

Powerful and effective prayer.

Our prayers have an impact. Elijah's did.

There are promises all over the Bible about the effectiveness of prayer (e.g. Mark 11.24-25; John 16.24; 1 John 5.14-15).

God makes promises specifically in connection to prayer. Praying is *powerful and effective*.

Prayer: the precondition

James says it's the prayer of a *righteous person* that is powerful and effective.

That's the precondition. And that is also the hurdle where many of us fall down.

Who would be bold enough to say that they are *righteous*? And if you aren't confident that you are *righteous*, then how can your prayers have any impact? And if your prayers have no impact, why pray?

You might think that is stretching things too far. Perhaps. However, many Christians reading this would immediately rule themselves out of praying life-changing prayers simple because they don't see themselves as *righteous*.

They might pray when they are in trouble. But praying is not a pattern in their lives, primarily because they do not have the confidence that God hears them.

So they read a verse like this one and instead of being motivated to pray they are demotivated!

How do we get around that?

Firstly, we need to understand that *righteousness is not the same as sinlessness*.

Secondly, we need to distinguish between the *root* of righteousness and the *fruit* of righteousness.

The root of righteousness

The *root of righteousness* is the *righteousness of God*.

This righteousness is a *gift from God*.

Paul talks about it in Romans 3:

“But now apart from the law the righteousness of God has been made known, to which the Law and the Prophets testify. 22 This righteousness is given through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe.” Romans 3.21-22

It's not earned. It's nothing to do with the way you live. It is a gift received by faith in Christ.

The fruit of righteousness

Because we have received *righteousness as a gift* doesn't mean that we can live any way we like.

But if *righteousness* is not *sinlessness*, what is it?

Righteousness is revealed by our *actions* and *reactions*.

Actions

“Dear children, do not let anyone lead you astray. The one who does what is right is righteous, just as he is righteous.” 1 John 3.7

Righteous people do what is right. It's that simple.

Reactions

Lot lived in Sodom. He was a righteous man. But his soul was tormented by what was going on around him:

“...7 and if he rescued Lot, a righteous man, who was distressed by the depraved conduct of the lawless 8 (for that righteous man, living among them day after day, was tormented in his righteous soul by the lawless deeds he saw and heard)” 2 Peter 2.7-8

Your righteousness reacts to the unrighteousness around you.

Interaction

But we still sin. How does that all add up?

Martin Luther said that we are righteous *and* sinners at the same time.

So what do we do with sin?

We confess it and God forgives it. James says that earlier in chapter 5. Confess to each other and pray for each other so that we might be healed.

John says something similar in 1 John 1.9:

“If we confess our sin, He is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness”.

John connects this in verse 7 to *fellowship*.

So, you can have confidence that, unless you are actively living in sin, you are leading a *righteous life*. You have fulfilled the precondition of effective prayer.

And you can keep your life pure by confessing any known sin and being purified by the blood of Jesus.

Not only that, but the Holy Spirit helps us to live a righteous life:

“13 For if you live according to the flesh, you will die; but if by the Spirit you put to death the misdeeds of the body, you will live.”

(Romans 8.13)

And, therefore, you can pray confidently because the possibility of prayer and the promise that *the prayer of a righteous person is powerful and effective* applies to you.

The big hurdle of *righteousness* isn't such a big hurdle when you understand what the Bible teaches about prayer and righteousness.

For reflection

1. What do you believe God has been saying to you through this study?

2. What sort of things are possible when we pray? How can we keep each other encouraged about the possibilities that come from praying?

3. How can the promise that the prayers of a righteous person are *powerful and effective* encourage us to pray? How can we encourage people to pray who think their prayers *aren't powerful and effective*?

4. Why is it so important to understand that a *righteous* life is not the same as a *sinless* life?

5. How does understanding that righteousness is a *gift* and that it is also *about the way we live* give us confidence to pray?

6. How can we help each other to overcome sin and to live right with God?

Declaration

Father, I thank you for the amazing possibilities that you give us in prayer. Thank you that by praying we can change lives and even nations (James 5.15-18).

I declare that my prayers have the power to change lives and nations.

Thank you Father for your promise that a righteous person's prayers are powerful and effective – just like those of Elijah (James 5.16-17)

I will believe that promise. I believe that my prayers will be powerful and effective.

Thank you Father for your gift of righteousness (Romans 3.21-22).

Thank you that it has been given to me through faith in Christ.

I believe that you see me as righteous because of what Christ has done.

Thank you that you give me power through the Holy Spirit to live a righteous life (Romans 8.13).

By your grace and with the help of your Spirit I will live a righteous life (1 John 3.7).

I recognise that I am not sinless, but I thank you that the blood of Jesus purifies me from all unrighteousness (1 John 1.7-9).

I declare that I will live confidently and pray confidently because of the provision that you have made for me in Christ.

Prayer: Someone Like Us

James 5.16-18

Introduction

In his talk about prayer, James makes his case that anyone can become effective in prayer by using Elijah as an example.

There are many examples that he could have chosen. He could have referred to the prayer life of his own brother Jesus. Or he could have used the example of someone like Daniel.

Daniel might not have been as perfect as Jesus and his prayers might not have been as powerful, but he was prepared to enter a cage full of lions rather than give up praying.

But James chooses Elijah. Why?

There are two points about Elijah's life and ministry that strengthen James' case. Firstly, Elijah's prayers were so powerful that they changed the weather pattern over Israel for three and a half years!

But, secondly, Elijah was also someone who was very obviously just like us. In 1 Kings 17-19 we see his great strengths and his weaknesses on display. He comes over, when his whole story is taken into consideration, as very human, despite his phenomenal ministry.

Elijah the person (1 Kings 17.1)

Who was Elijah? Where did he come from? What were his roots?

In truth, we don't know much about him.

We know that he came from Tishbe. We don't exactly know where Tishbe was. We just know that it was somewhere east of the Jordan river in the area of Gilead. Elijah is called a *Tishbite*. That can mean that he was from Tishbe, but it can also mean that he simply lived in the land of Gilead, since *Tishbite* also means "dweller".

We don't know anything about his family background. We don't know how he received his call to be prophet. He never wrote any books.

So there is very little that we know about Elijah before he gained his reputation as a prophet.

It's always dangerous to make arguments from silence, but you can't help asking why there is almost no detail of his background. Perhaps the answer is simply that it wasn't important.

Elijah became a prophet and his prayers were so powerful that they controlled the weather, yet he came from obscurity.

You don't have to have a great religious pedigree to become a great prayer. You don't have to have family connections, connections to influential people or come from a somewhere well known to pray prayers that can change nations.

Effective prayer is the result of what God is doing in your life, not what you were doing in life or where you were doing it.

Praying in different places (1 Kings 17.2-24)

At some point in his life, Elijah prayed the prayer that would earn him the reputation for powerful praying that is picked up in James 5.

Praying in the palace

At that point in his life he was moving in high circles. He had access not only to the royal court, but also the king Ahab himself.

However, his declaration that there would be no rain in Israel without his say so, forced a move to a new location. God told him to leave the palace and go to the brook Kerith (vv2-6).

Praying in Kerith (vv.2-6)

Elijah now had to learn to connect with God in a completely isolated location. He had to depend on God alone for provision. And from a most unlikely source – unclean birds, ravens.

Zarephath

Soon the brook dried up.

Elijah was forced to move again. This time to a place called *Zarephath*.

Zarephath was outside of Israel. Most Israelites would have considered it enemy territory.

Once again Elijah saw God's provision – through a widow and her son.

But in Zarephath, Elijah was faced with his greatest test.

The son of the widow died. It was tragic. Tragic because, not only did she lose her son, he was also effectively her means of income and her "pension" when she was unfit to work in old age.

Elijah prayed and the boy came back to life.

This was an amazing miracle. It was the first time in biblical history that anyone had been brought back to life.

Praying in different places

Elijah's experience highlights a couple of things for us.

First of all, you never know where your prayers will take you. Praying can lead you into the unknown. It can cause you to go places you hadn't dreamed of going.

Secondly, it reminds us that our circumstances or surroundings don't need to be perfect before we can connect with God in prayer.

Your limited surroundings don't need to limit your praying.

Public strength and private weakness (1 Kings 19.1-5)

Elijah's next stop, which we will look at in more detail in a later study was mount Carmel. It was a massive public victory. But the aftermath saw Elijah almost crash out of his calling.

Queen Jezebel makes a threat to kill Elijah and he goes into meltdown. He runs away (1 Kings 19.1-3).

It's not what you would expect from such a confident, fearless prophet.

1 Kings 19 reveals a man very different to the one of the previous two chapters. Elijah is burnt out and seriously depressed (1 Kings 19.4-5).

It had all become too much. He needed rest. He needed some proper food. And he needed the careful, compassionate counsel of the Lord to bring him back from the brink.

Weakness

It's hard to believe that a man as strong as Elijah could show such weakness.

Paul knew that kind of weakness. He once said that in one situation he and his friends despaired of their lives (2 Corinthians 1.8-11).

In 2 Corinthians 12 he says that he had made weakness his friend because it gave the Lord the opportunity to show His strength (2 Corinthians 12.10)

Weakness is not a barrier to effective praying

Some of us become so aware of our weaknesses that we feel that they must be a barrier to effective praying.

That is not the case with either Elijah or Paul. And it doesn't need to be the case with us either.

Conclusion

Elijah was a human being just like us. He had strengths. He had weaknesses. He had to learn to pray. He had to learn that prayer can take you places you might not naturally want to go. He had to learn to pray in those places. And he had to learn that his weaknesses were not a limit to what God could do through his praying.

For reflection

1. What do you believe God has been saying to you through this study?
2. Elijah came from an unknown family in an obscure part of Israel. How can Elijah's humble origins encourage us?
3. How can our prayers take us to different places?
4. How can we help each other to connect with God in prayer in limited circumstances or unfamiliar places?
5. Why do you think some Christians see their weaknesses as an obstacle to praying effectively?
6. How can we help each other to find the strength of God in our weaknesses?

Declaration

Father, thank you that you made me the way I am. Thank you for where I came from. Thank you that, like Elijah, I don't have to come from a special place or a special family (1 Kings 17.1).

I declare that I will not allow anything in my background to limit my praying.

Thank you too Father that I can connect with you in prayer in all circumstances and in any place (1 Kings 17.2-24). I declare that I will not allow limited circumstances or unfamiliar places to limit my praying.

And Father, I thank you that my weaknesses are not an obstacle to you (1 Kings 19.1-5). I declare that my weaknesses are your opportunity. I declare with Paul, that when I am weak, then I am strong (1 Corinthians 12.8-10).

Thank you, Father, that Elijah was just like us (James 5.17). And thank you that I can pray just like him. Amen.

Prayer: Opening the heavens

James 5.16-18; 1 Kings 18

Introduction

The time came for Elijah to go back to Israel and pray for rain.

That entailed a meeting with King Ahab and a confrontation with the prophets of Baal.

James doesn't mention anything about the confrontation with the prophets of Baal. He simply says that Elijah prayed, and it didn't rain, and then he prayed, and it did rain.

However, there are a few things in this story that will help us to understand a bit more about praying effectively.

Praying in the will of God (1 Kings 18.1)

One of the most obvious things about the prayer for rain, is that Elijah was *praying in the will of God*.

1 Kings 18.1 says:

"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.'"

God had already spoken. Elijah knew that it was God's will at this time to send rain.

Asking according to His will

The Bible doesn't say that we have to know exactly what God's will is before we can pray effectively. God sometimes gives us the *desires of our heart*.

However, if we *know* what God's will is, then we can ask with greater confidence.

Here's what John says:

“This is the confidence we have in approaching God: that if we ask anything according to his will, he hears us. 15 And if we know that he hears us – whatever we ask – we know that we have what we asked of him.” 1 John 5.14-15

How do you find out His will? Through his word. And when it is for something more specific, through a prophetic word or the voice of His Spirit.

Recognising the weaknesses in our own personalities (1 Kings 18.7-14, 22)

Elijah has an extended conversation with a very brave man called Obadiah. Obadiah had hidden and kept one hundred prophets alive at the risk of his own life (vv.7-14).

Elijah either forgets the conversation entirely or doesn't think Obadiah's efforts amounted to much. Elijah claims in his mount Carmel sermon that he is the only true prophet left (v.22)!

Whatever the explanation, Elijah had developed some spiritual pride in his role as prophet. The theme of “I'm the only one” comes out again in his meltdown after Carmel, and the Lord gently informs him that actually there are seven thousand other who haven't followed Baal (19.14, 18).

Weakness

Elijah really was someone just like us. He had his weaknesses.

We don't leave the weaknesses of our personalities at the door when we enter the place of prayer. God hears our prayers in spite of our weaknesses. But answered prayer should not be understood as God endorsing our weaknesses!

Whatever our weakness, we have the promise that *the Spirit helps us in our weakness* (Romans 8.26).

And of course, we don't ask in our own strength or authority, we ask *in the name of Jesus* (John 16.23).

Whatever you do, don't make your weakness a reason for not praying!

Putting the reputation of God on the line (1 Kings 18.18-40)

Verses 18-40 record the encounter Elijah has with the prophets of Baal. It's one of the most famous stories in the Bible. Elijah ends up calling down fire from heaven. And the miracle brings about a national revival.

It's worth remembering that this wasn't a miracle for the sake of a miracle. The lack of rain and the abundance of rain through Elijah's prayers had a very special significance.

Baal was considered by his followers to control the weather. In a society whose economy was largely based on agriculture, the weather had make or break power. One or two poor harvests and the nation was in big trouble.

So the confrontation with Baal and the prayer for rain was all about whether the true God of Israel was in control or whether Baal was in control.

When God shows Himself

Our prayers give God the opportunity to show Himself, to show us and others what He can do.

When Paul prayed for the chief official's father to be healed and he was healed (Acts 28.7-10) it triggered a chain reaction that resulted in people from all over the Island being healed.

Persisting in prayer (1 Kings 18.43-44)

After the fire falls, Elijah declares that the rain is coming and then begins to pray.

Initially, not much happens. He sends his servant to *go and look toward the sea* (v.43).

The servant reports that nothing is happening. Six times Elijah sends him back to look. Nothing happening. Elijah sends him back a seventh time. On this occasion the servant reports that there is a cloud the size of a man's hand (v.44).

Result! Elijah stops praying and declares that rain is on the way! And the heavens open.

Even though God had said that rain was coming, even though he believed that (vv.1,41), Elijah *still had to pray*. And he had to *persist* in prayer.

Keep praying

Sometimes people get the idea that keeping on praying about something is a lack of faith. It's not. Persistent prayer is more of an *expression* of faith than a *lack* of faith.

Jesus commends *persistent* praying. The story of the persistent widow (Luke 18.1-8) begins with these words:

"Then Jesus told his disciples a parable to show them that they should always pray and not give up." (v.1)

"Always pray and not give up", Jesus want His disciples to learn the value and the practice of *persistent prayer*.

Notice too that Elijah was *watching* for a sign that his prayer had been answered (v.44).

Paul says in Colossians 4.2:

"Devote yourselves to prayer, being watchful and thankful."

Conclusion

Elijah knew the rain was coming. God had promised it. But he still had to pray for it. And he had to pray persistently.

5. Why do you think people find it hard to persist in prayer?

6. Most of us are tempted to give up at some time or other. How can we help each other to persist in prayer?

Declaration

Thank you, Father that I can pray in a way that gets results, just like Elijah opened the heavens (James 5.17-8).

Thank you that you reveal your will to us so that we can be confident in our prayers (1 John 5.14-15). And even when we are not sure of your will, we can still pray.

I declare that I will expect to know your will. And I will pray with confidence – even when I am not sure of your will.

Thank you that you do not see my weaknesses as an obstacle to my prayers (1 Kings 18.22, 19.14,18). I will not allow them to become a reason to stop me praying. Instead I will rely on the Holy Spirit to help me in my weakness (Romans 8.26). And I will ask in the name of Jesus.

Thank you, Father that you like to show yourself in answer to our prayers (1 Kings 18.16-40). I will not be afraid to pray bold prayers and believe you for answers so that you might be glorified (Acts 28.7-10).

And by your grace I will persist in prayer (1 Kings 18.43-44; Luke 18.1-8). I will watch for the result (1 Kings 18.44; Colossians 4.2).

