

James – Life after Faith
James 5:17-18
“Praying Like a Prophet”

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1. In 1961, legendary golfer, Sam Snead visited the Vatican in Rome, and was granted a meeting with the pope.

2. Snead revealed that he had brought along his putter in hopes that the pontiff might bless it. The pope smiled and said, “I know, Mr. Snead, my putting is absolutely hopeless too.”

3. Snead looked surprised by what the pope had said, and then he moaned, “If you live *here* and can’t putt, what chance is there for me!”

4. It could be that many of you do not pray as you should because deep down you feel like your prayers have little hope of being successful.

5. You say to yourself, “I’m not a great Christian. I don’t know that much about the Bible. I’ve not done as much for the Lord as others have. Surely my prayers will fall short of God’s ears.”

6. Well, what if I told you that you could pray like a prophet? What if you knew your prayers could accomplish mighty and miraculous things? That is exactly the truth Bro. James gives us toward the close of his letter.

7. The latter part of James 5:16 is more closely connected to verses 17 and 18, than to what immediately precedes it. There James says, “... *The effectual fervent prayer of a righteous man availeth much.*”

8. James illustrates this great promise with the Prophet Elijah, and in so doing he gives everyone of us hope that we can pray with the same kind of power that he did.

9. Whether you are a prayer warrior or a prayer weakling, this text offers instruction and encouragement for your prayer life.

10. If you are going to pray like a prophet, there are some things you need to know about prayer. James gives them to us in this passage. First of all, you need to know that:

I. PRAYER IS NOT A SPECIAL TALENT

1. If you have ever seen the Sistine Chapel, then you know Michelangelo had an unusual gift. To hear Pavarotti sing tenor is to recognize someone with an exceptional ability.

2. I think at times we are tempted to look at people who seem to be strong in prayer, and we suppose that they have a spiritual talent above and beyond what we have.

3. Bro. James assures us that this is not the case. Look again at verse 17. It says, *“Elias was a man subject to like passions as we are...”*

4. The name “Elias” is the Greek name for the Old Testament hero, Elijah the Prophet. James uses him to encourage us in our own prayer lives.

5. Consider with me what James is saying to us through this example. First of all, think about:

A. The character James references

1. If ancient Israel had a Mt. Rushmore, along with Abraham, Moses, and David, there would probably be carved the face of Elijah the prophet.

2. His life story is one of the most fascinating in all the Bible and the tales of his exploits are nothing short of amazing.

3. Consider just a little of this man’s religious résumé. He raised a widow’s son from the dead (I Kings 17:17-24). He embarrassed the prophets of Baal on Mt. Carmel, praying down fire upon his offering (I Kings 18:38).

4. He had meals personally catered by ravens when he was exiled by the brook (I Kings 17:6). On another occasion, he lived for forty days on a single meal (I Kings 19:8).

5. He outran King Ahab’s chariot from Mt. Carmel to Jezreel (I Kings 18:46). He parted the Jordan River and crossed over it on dry ground (II Kings 2:8). At the

end of his life, rather than dying he was carried to heaven in a fiery chariot (II Kings 2:11).

6. In the New Testament, he appears again on the Mount of Transfiguration, talking with Moses and Jesus (Matthew 17:3).

7. It is hard to imagine a life more exciting and a character more fascinating than Elijah, whom James references in this text.

8. You might be saying, "How is someone as extraordinary as Elijah supposed to encourage my prayer life?" I'm glad you asked.

9. As James refers us to Elijah, and reminds us that prayer is not a special talent, consider not only the character James references, but notice also:

B. The connection James reveals

1. Look again at verse 17. Bro. James says, "*Elias was a man subject to like passions as we are...*" Notice that phrase "like passions".

2. It essentially means of the same nature, or with the same sufferings. In other words, though Elijah's life was spectacular, he was still just a man like you and me.

3. John Blanchard, in his wonderful book on James explains it this way. He says, "He is not using some kind of superman, some biological or spiritual freak, to help in making his point; instead, he is using someone 'just like us.'"¹

4. Elijah was a man whose life was filled with miracles and mighty deeds. Yet, James indicates that the secret to this amazing life was *not* that Elijah was equipped with a special skill or unusual ability.

5. No, He says in verse 17, "*Elias was a man subject to like passions as we are, and he prayed...*"

6. Elijah was a flawed and fallen human being, just like all of us. Yet, he prayed to God. That is no special talent. With the access granted to us by Jesus, every believer has the ability to pray with power!

7. The story is told of a famous sculptor named Canova. A large, beautiful block of marble was brought to him, out of which he was asked to carve a statue of Napoleon. Canova surveyed the piece of stone, and soon discovered a very faint red mark that went through center of the block.

8. Most people would never have even noticed it, but Canova said, “I cannot work upon this; it has a flaw. It is not perfectly pure and white. I will not lay my chisel upon it.”

9. The point James is trying to make to us in this text is that we don’t have to be perfect to pray. Flawed people like Elijah, and like us have the opportunity and ability to accomplish mighty things through prayer.

10. You can pray like a prophet because prayer is not a special talent. Let me draw something else from this text. To pray like a prophet, you need to know not only that *prayer is not a special talent*, but remember also that:

II. PRAYER IS NOT A SIMPLE TASK

1. While prayer is not some sort of supernatural ability, possessed by only a few saints that does not mean that it is an easy work.

2. While every believer *can* pray with power and effectiveness, we all know that very few actually do.

3. The old saying is certainly true of prayer. If it were easy, everybody would be doing it.

4. You can pray like a prophet, but you need to know right up front that prayer is hard work. It is not a simple task.

5. What is it that makes prayer such hard work? James points us to this in our text. Notice first of all that:

A. Prayer requires passion

1. Look back again into verse 16, at the statement I believe connects with our text. James says, “*The effectual fervent prayer of a righteous man availeth much.*”

2. The word translated “effectual” there gives us our English word “energy” or “energetic”. It literally means to work, or to be active.

3. It is this active, energetic prayer that was practiced by Elijah the prophet. James says in verse 17 that, “*...he prayed earnestly that it might not rain...*”

4. What James literally says is that Elijah “prayed with prayer,” which was a way in the Greek language of describing the intensity of his prayer.

5. You cannot pray like a prophet so long as you offer to God shallow, sleepy, stoic, and stale prayers with no heart and no passion.
6. When the Lord Jesus prayed in the Garden of Gethsemane, just before He went to the cross for our sins, Luke tells us that, *"...being in an agony he prayed more earnestly: and his sweat was as it were great drops of blood falling down to the ground (Luke 22:44)."*
7. The writer of Hebrews says that Jesus *"...offered up prayers and supplications with strong crying and tears (Heb. 5:7)..."* In other words, our Lord prayed with passion.
8. For many people, their prayers more like lyrics to a song they have memorized than the fervent cries of a desperate soul?
9. Many people say their "Our Fathers", "Hail Mary's", and "Dear Lord's" everyday, and they do it with the same passion that they order their meal with at the drive-thru.
10. Prevailing prayer – prayer like the prophet – is no simple task though. It is hard work because it requires passion. I would say also that prayer is no simple task because:

B. Prayer requires persistence

1. Look again at our text, and notice verse 18. Bro. James says, *"And he prayed again, and the heaven gave rain, and the earth brought forth her fruit."*
2. The actual account of the prayer James references in that verse is found at the close of I Kings chapter 18.
3. There in verses 42 and 43, we read that, *"...Elijah went up to the top of Carmel; and he cast himself down upon the earth, and put his face between his knees, And said to his servant, Go up now, look toward the sea. And he went up, and looked, and said, There is nothing. And he said, Go again seven times."*
4. Elijah was praying for God to end the drought, and send the rain. As he prayed, he expected there to be some sign of the coming rain, so he sent his servant to check the sky over the sea.
5. Six times the servant came back and said, "I don't see anything; not even a cloud." Yet, the Bible said that Elijah sent him back each time, and kept praying until finally he saw some evidence of rain.

6. In other words, Elijah was persistent in his prayer. He did not give up when God did not immediately answer his request. He kept praying!

7. So often we think that prayer works like everything else in our microwave, high-speed internet, instant society. We want answers now, but many times God moves at a different pace, and we must persist in our prayers!

8. In 2001, after many weeks of drought, the governor of Louisiana called on the people of the state to pray for rain. Apparently the people listened, and the remnants of tropical storm Allison moved in from the gulf.

9. Unfortunately, the storm dumped three feet of rain on the state, and caused massive flooding. One of the residents commented, "We may have prayed too long."

10. Our problem is not praying too long. No, we give up too soon, and thereby we miss the power of persistent prayer.

11. You can pray like Elijah did, but only if you are willing to pray passionately and persistently. Notice another truth we find here about praying like a prophet.

12. To pray like this, remember that *prayer is not a special talent*, and *prayer is not a simple task*. Lastly, to pray like a prophet, you need to recognize that:

III. PRAYER IS NOT A SMALL TOOL

1. One of favorite quotes from C.S. Lewis comes from one of his speeches. He says, "It would seem that our Lord finds our desires not too strong, but too weak. We are half-hearted creatures...We are far too easily pleased."

2. I think one of the reasons so many of us fail to pray like the prophet is not because we are asking too much in prayer, but rather because we are not asking enough. We are far too easily pleased with prayer as a small tool.

3. Many of our prayers are for things that could feasibly happen whether God answers or not. We pray, "Lord, give us a good day, help me get my work done, keep my kids safe..."

4. Think about it! The way most of us use prayer is kind of like using a back hoe to plant flowers. It will do the job, but it is designed for much bigger work than that.

5. In this passage, James reminds us of how Elijah used prayer as a powerful tool to make the remarkable a reality. Notice with me that he points us to:

A. The capability of prayer

1. Look at what James says that Elijah, a man just like us, was able to do through prayer. He says, *"...he prayed earnestly that it might not rain: and it rained not on the earth by the space of three years and six months. And he prayed again, and the heaven gave rain, and the earth brought forth her fruit."*
2. With his prayers, Elijah altered the normal course of nature; shutting up the heavens for three and a half years, and then opening them again like a faucet.
3. Now we know that it was God who brought the drought *and* the drops of rain, but the text indicates that God did it because of the prayers of Elijah.
4. I read a sermon this week by Jonathan Edwards, who lived during the 18th century, and is still the greatest American theologian. The sermon is entitled "The Most High, A Prayer-Hearing God".
5. In the sermon, Edwards quotes James 5:16 and says this: "God is, speaking after the manner of men, overcome by humble and fervent prayer...It has a great power in it; such a prayer-hearing God is the Most High, that He graciously [reveals] himself as conquered by it."²
6. Did you catch that? God, in His grace, allows Himself to be conquered by prayer. Therefore, the capability of prayer is to move the Most High God Himself into action.
7. I ask you, why are you spending time praying for vague, shallow, and petty things when the full power of the God who created the universe is available to those who will but seek it in earnest prayer?
8. In John 14:13, Jesus said, *"And whatsoever ye shall ask in my name, that will I do, that the Father may be glorified in the Son."*
9. Having that kind of promise, and not using it to its full extent, is kind of like using a Corvette as a golf cart. It is missing the point!
10. In thinking of prayer as a tool, consider not only the capability of prayer, but be mindful also of:

B. The catalyst for prayer

1. Again, James says in verse 18, *"And he prayed again, and the heaven gave rain, and the earth brought forth her fruit."*

2. I read to you the passage from I Kings 18, where we are told of Elijah praying for this rain. Before Elijah went to the mountain to pray, he got a word from God.

3. I Kings 18:1 says, *“And it came to pass after many days, that the word of the LORD came to Elijah in the third year, saying, Go, shew thyself unto Ahab; and I will send rain upon the earth.”*

4. The Word of God is the catalyst that moves us to pray for the work of God. If we have a promise from God, then we have the confidence to pray just like Elijah did.

5. Some people pray like they are trying to convince God to do something. They act as if prayer is the work of prying things from the hands of a greedy god.

6. No, that is not the case at all. When we recognize what kind of tool prayer is, we will take the promises of God like ammunition, and target our prayers toward the achieving of great and mighty things.

7. II Corinthians 10:4 says, *“...the weapons of our warfare are not carnal, but mighty through God to the pulling down of strong holds...”*

8. What kind of tool is prayer in your life? Are you using prayer as small tool or a mighty one? Are you praying like a pansy or a prophet?

1. The Sunday comic character, Broom Hilda, featured a particular strip in which Hilda approaches a wishing well, leans over the edge, and says, “I don’t want anything!”

2. In the next panel she says, “I just thought you’d enjoy knowing that there was one satisfied person around.”

3. I think it safe to say that none of us are completely satisfied with our prayer lives. All believers desire to pray more and get more out of those prayers.

4. James encourages us in this text, that while we may not be a prophet like Elijah, we can still pray like a prophet.

5. If we will take the opportunity of prayer that God grants to us all, and do the work of praying passionately and persistently, prayer can become a mighty tool in our lives for the Lord. You can pray like a prophet!

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¹ Blanchard, John, Truth for Life, (Evangelical Press, Darlington, England, 1986), p. 386

² Edwards, Jonathan, The Works of Jonathan Edwards: Vol. 2, (B&R Samizdat Express, 2009), *kindle edition*

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