

JAMES 5:17, 18

YOU CAN PRAY LIKE ELIJAH

“Elijah was a man with a nature like ours, and he prayed fervently that it might not rain, and for three years and six months it did not rain on the earth. Then he prayed again, and heaven gave rain, and the earth bore its fruit.”¹

Flashing like a lightning bolt across dark pagan skies, Elijah burst on the scene suddenly. And just as suddenly, he disappeared. Raised up by God to rebuke a wayward nation, Elijah did all that God commanded. Kings were reduced to searching for water, queens ranted and blustered, false prophets were exposed as fraudulent—all at the word of this singular man. When we read the account of Elijah the Tishbite, we often become so focused on the powerful demonstration of God’s power that we are prone to ignore the fact that he struggled, and not always successfully, with the same frailties that plague each of us. James compels us to think soberly about who we are and who God is.

A HUMAN BEING LIKE US — “Elijah was a man with a nature like ours.” Whenever I read the translation of James’ words, I realise that it is difficult, perhaps even impossible, to convey accurately the sense of what James said. The emphasis is on his frailties, and not on his strengths. “Elijah was a man,” an *ánthropos*. James is directing our thought to the fact that Elijah was not a demigod or a superhero. He was a human being just like us!

Moreover, James emphatically states that he had “a nature like ours.” The Greek term is that he was *homoioopathēs*. The only other occurrence of this word in the New Testament is found in **ACTS 14:15**. On the first missionary journey, Paul and Barnabas healed a man in Lystra which in turn resulted in a crowd gathering who attempted to honour them as gods. The missionaries tore their outer garments, ran into the crowd and only barely dissuaded them from offering sacrifice to them by shouting, “We also are men, of *like nature* with you!”

The term *homoioopathēs* sounds like our English word homeopathy, which is the method of treating disease by drugs, given in minute doses, that would produce in a healthy person symptoms similar to those of the disease. That definition gives us a clue to what James is saying in our text. Elijah faced the same circumstances and had the same feelings and experiences in life that we encounter.

One scholar provides insight into the meaning of James’ statement by cautioning that “readers are not to attribute the great effect of Elijah’s prayers to any exceptional qualities that were inherent in the person of this prophet himself. He was ... a human being, just as we are. This fact is intensified by [*homoioopathēs hemîn*], which does not mean “of like passions or of like nature with us.” The gods were considered [*apathies*], unlike human beings. The verb [] that is found in these adjectives refers to suffering and vicissitudes that are incident to human existence. Elijah had to endure vicissitudes of all kinds just as we do. Although he was a great prophet he was a plagued human being and felt pain just as much as we do.”² Elijah was a fellow sufferer.

¹ Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations are from **The Holy Bible, English Standard Version**, copyright © 2001 by Crossway Bibles, a division of Good News Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

² R. C. H. Lenski, **The Interpretation of the Epistle to the Hebrews and of the Epistle of James** (Lutheran Book Concern, Columbus, Ohio 1938) 668

James has stated that Elijah experienced the same fears and the same frailties and the same pains each of us experiences; he was just as fearful in the face of opposition as we are, and just as prone to failure as we are. The emphasis is that Elijah was a man of “similar suffering.” This is such an important point that I believe it will prove beneficial to take some time to review this matter in greater detail.

Let’s review the life of Elijah, to see what sort of man he was. In order to do this, let’s focus on the events recorded in 1 Kings 17 through 19. As we review the life of Elijah during this period, note that he was at times bold beyond belief. For instance, he boldly confronted the king to announce God’s sentence against the land, and then quickly departed to the secret place assigned by the LORD God where he leans upon God’s goodness to provide for his own needs. Later, God sent him to yet another location, where he boldly confronted the Lord, pleading for the life of a young man who had died.

When the time was right, Elijah boldly confronted the King of Israel, demanding a contest between himself and the entire company of the prophets of Baal. During that contest, he first challenged them to demonstrate that Baal was a god that could hear and answer prayer. Then, he mocked them publicly, ridiculing their pathetic efforts to coerce their god to show them favour. There is precedence for the man of God ridiculing false religion and for exposing evil. Though the sensitive nature of some of the saints of God will rebel at such forthrightness, the example provided in the Word gives no comfort to those who would mollicoddle wickedness.

Shortly after this demonstration of boldness, the great man ran for his life because Jezebel, the queen, sent word that she intended to kill him. When we see him next, he is a broken man consumed with self-pity and complaining that God has been unfair in His treatment. Therefore, the divine record presents Elijah as a man at turns bold and fearful, utterly reliant upon the Lord one moment, and pitiful in his self-absorption at the next. One moment Elijah is trusting God explicitly, and the next he is incapable of focusing on God’s might and power. This is what James means for us to see; Elijah experienced the same failures that each of us has experienced, and he faced and was overwhelmed by the same fears that have assailed each of us.

Make no mistake, Elijah was a great prophet of the Living God; but Elijah was human, just as we are human, and he was afflicted with all the weaknesses that mark our lives. Do not doubt that your prayers have great efficacy before God. Your requests of God are not disqualified simply because you are human and marked by the weaknesses and imperfections that mark each of us as human beings.

When you read the divine account, one truth that stands out immediately is the fact that we find no specific prayer for a drought. Neither do we witness Elijah praying for the drought to be broken. Moreover, we are not told the precise length of time the land suffered without rain. Under the inspiration of the Spirit of God, James here supplies information that the writer of the account in Kings does not supply.

James’ statement about the length of the drought is verified by the words of the Master, who also said that there was no rain for three and one-half years. In **LUKE 4:25**, the Master is recorded as saying, “I tell you, there were many widows in Israel in the days of Elijah, when the heavens were shut up three years and six months, and a great famine came over all the land.” The account in 1 Kings simply says that “the Word of the LORD came to Elijah, in the third year” [**1 KINGS 18:1**]. I am prepared to take the Word of Jesus on this matter. After all, it is His Spirit that inspired the Word, and as God He is well aware of all that happened. There is no reason to think that the land experienced drought for any less than three and one-half years. Obviously, the event with the subsequent famine made an impression on people.

There is no record of Elijah's prayer for God to withhold rain in the account in Kings. However, when we are introduced to him, the Word does record him as saying, "As the LORD, the God of Israel, lives, before whom I stand" [1 KINGS 17:1]. He here confesses that He stands in the presence of the Lord, referring specifically to the attitude of prayer that was most frequently assumed by those living in that day. Moreover, he does clearly say, "There shall be neither dew nor rain these years, *except by my word*" [1 KINGS 17:1b]. He does not control nature, but he will act as God's spokesman. He will speak to God and what he hears the Lord say, he will do. Consequently, because he is sent by the Lord, there will be no rain until God says it will rain again, and Elijah will then speak and there will be rain.

There is something about Elijah that is important for understanding. He was a human being, just like us. But he did pray. He was obedient to God, sensitive to His will and quick to fulfil what he discovered to be the will of the Living God. God commanded him to depart and to hide himself [1 KINGS 17:3]. He went where God directed him, not knowing precisely how God would provide for him, other than the promise of God that He had commanded the ravens to feed him in the place where he was commanded to be.

After a period of time by the brook Cherith, God again directed him to leave, and go to Zarephath [1 KINGS 17:8-10]. The ravens had indeed brought him bread and meat each day, and the brook had provided him water. Then, God directed him to go to a location in a Gentile land. Against all that he might otherwise have felt, Elijah obeyed the command of the Lord.

Many days later, the Lord again directed him to go show himself to Ahab [1 KINGS 18:1, 2], and Elijah obeyed. In fact, Elijah did not show himself until directed to do so at the command of the Living God. Perhaps many of those who advance themselves to preach the Word of God would be well advised to wait until God directs them to show themselves! Elijah's internship in prayer extended over a period of three and one-half years and it included an extended course in obedience. He prayed; and he heard the voice of the Lord speaking as he waited before the Lord.

The text does not say that Elijah prayed for food while staying in Zarephath, but the evidence indicates that he did pray. He asked a widow in the community to feed him, and when she demurred because there was not enough food, he insisted, indicating that God would provide for her needs. In fact, he says that it is God who has promised that there will be both flour and oil in the house until the day that the rains again come. Indeed, "The jar of flour was not spent, neither did the jug of oil become empty, according to the Word of the LORD" [1 KINGS 17:16]

While in Zarephath, there was an incidence that speaks of Elijah's intimacy with the LORD. The son of the widow with whom Elijah stayed died. The widow thought that Elijah was the cause of the death of her son; she thought that the presence of a man of God exposed her sin and that God had executed delayed justice by killing her son. Elijah, however, took the boy, and carrying him to the upper chamber where he lodged, he laid him on his own bed. Then, he cried out to the LORD. "O LORD my God, have you brought calamity even upon the widow with whom I sojourn, by killing her son?" Then, stretching himself out on the child, he cried to the LORD, "O LORD my God, let this child's life come into him again" [see 1 KINGS 17:18-21]. This is bold praying. This is not some pathetic, timid circuitous inquiry of what God might do; this is the bold plea of one who is on intimate terms with the Living God.

Now, you take your pencil and mark the twenty-second verse of the seventeenth chapter: "And the LORD listened to the voice of Elijah." This is phenomenal! God listened to the man who had obeyed Him because that man had stood in the presence of the Lord God. This is powerful stuff, because if Elijah was a human being just like us, and God hearkened to him when he cried out to Him, then the Word is encouraging us that He will likewise hear us.

In the context of what James has written in this chapter, God will hear the prayer of the elders when his people, brought low by divinely administered illness, confess their sins and seek His restoration. God heard the prophets when they patiently waited on Him to act [JAMES 5:10], and He heard Job because of His steadfastness [JAMES 5:11]. Now, we discover that He also heard Elijah because he was a righteous man, despite the fact that he was a mere mortal just as we are also mere mortals. Mark this truth in your mind: God delights to answer the prayer of that individual who honours His Name.

After God directed Elijah to show himself, he challenged the prophets of Baal to a contest of prayer. “You call upon the name of your god,” directed Elijah, “and I will call upon the Name of the LORD, and the God who answers by fire, he is God” [1 KINGS 18:24]. The fire is not the issue; the fire is incidental. The proposed test seeks to demonstrate one thing and one thing only—that God answers prayer. Elijah is proposing a contest in a discipline in which he has been well schooled. He has just spent three and one-half years in a post-graduate course taught by the LORD God of Israel, where he learnt obedience while learning how to pray boldly. Elijah knows the power of God; he does not need to guess whether God is able to answer prayer. When we are thus confident, we will boldly ask of God what we will, knowing that He will do it.

What a prayer Elijah offered before all Israel! “O LORD, God of Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, let it be known this day that you are God in Israel, and that I am your servant, and that I have done all these things at Your Word. Answer me, O LORD, answer me, that this people may know that you, O LORD, are God, and that you have turned their hearts back” [1 KINGS 18:36, 37]. And God did answer by fire.

Again, the text does not specifically say that Elijah prayed for rain, but the fact that he bowed down to the earth, placing his head between his knees, would indicate that he was praying. Moreover, he had said that there would be no rain except by his word. Now, at last, after three and one-half years, the man of God announces, “Go up, eat and drink, for there is a sound of the rushing of rain” [1 KINGS 18:41]. God did send rain, and on the authority of the Word of God as given through James, I am prepared to say that Elijah prayed, and the drought was broken.

What should be apparent from the Word of God is that Elijah knew the will of God so intimately that he could understand the exact time when the divine purposes were to occur. He was able to perceive when God wanted to begin and end the drought. I have no doubt that he did pray, but he prayed in concert with the will of the Living God. The example of Elijah in determining God’s will challenges us to seek closeness in our walk with God so that we know and follow his will. Those prayers which accord with the will of God will always be answered [see 1 JOHN 5:14–15]. We are responsible to walk in God’s will in such a way that we love what God loves and reject what he rejects.

Chapter nineteen of 1 Kings brings us to a different chapter altogether. Here, we see the great prophet displaying his weakness. He appears to have assumed that because he was doing the work of God that God’s people would accept his message and stand with him. However, God’s people are not always godly. The people had not been pursuing the Lord God before Elijah’s ministry among them, and they were easily turned aside from following the Lord after Elijah’s service to them. They certainly did not have the courage to stand with him or defend him. The queen was enraged when she heard what Elijah had done. As an aside, queens within the church have caused the destruction of more of God’s work than anyone can imagine. Women have a capacity for evil that is astonishing; and when they decide that they will teach the preacher a lesson, there are few churches with sufficient courage to face them down.

Caught off guard, Elijah is in fear for his life, and he runs until he is exhausted. Famished and fatigued, he mines the depths of depression. If you have never been depressed, you will perhaps have no sympathy for the weary saint of God. However, even in depression, the man of God is still a man of prayer. He prays for God to take his life [see 1 KINGS 19:4]. Elijah is not contemplating suicide; he does pray, asking God to bring his life to an end. God doesn't answer immediately, but He does give an answer ultimately. The surprise is that the man who asked God to take His life never dies at all.

We are speaking of prayer; but we are not speaking of prayer such as might be produced by super saints. Rather, James has focused our attention on prayer that is offered by real people who struggle, not always successfully, to be bold and powerful. Perhaps you have had some spectacular failures in your life, perhaps you recall some times when you felt that you had not been all that you should have been.

Perhaps you have heard the old proverb that says that the bird with a broken wing will never fly as high. Well, we are not birds, we are saints of the Living God; and just because we may not have excelled at one time in the past does not mean that we cannot now excel in serving God. If you approach serving God in the right spirit, your best days and your most powerful days of service to Him lie before you.

Dear saint of God, you are not disqualified from continuing as God's servant, nor should you imagine that you will never pray powerfully. Elijah was a mere mortal, just like us, and God heard his prayer. Each of us can walk with God, and walking with God, we can ask of God that He reveal His will to us, and knowing the will of God, we can pray with power and confidence. This is the message James delivers by pointing to Elijah.

A LIFE MARKED BY PRAYER — "Elijah ... prayed fervently that it might not rain, and for three years and six months it did not rain on the earth. Then he prayed again, and heaven gave rain, and the earth bore its fruit." Take note of the translation that tells us that Elijah prayed fervently. When you read that, you may imagine that it speaks of intensity, or even of frequency. Let me translate the Greek somewhat literally. Elijah with prayer prayed. Elijah prayed. That and nothing more.

Here is a truth that is frequently neglected: human prayer; divine answer. Elijah asked; God gave. Only God is able to withhold rain; and ultimately, only God is able to send rain. Prayer is not the power that changes our world, but prayer is the key that opens the divine treasure chest to transform our world. When we ask, God answers. I know very well that you have heard the promises of Jesus concerning prayer; but I want to encourage you to pray.

In **LUKE 18:1-8** we find the account of a parable that Jesus used on one occasion when instructing His disciples in the effectiveness of prayer. The Master told this parable to His disciples to encourage them "that they ought always to pray and not lose heart. He said, 'In a certain city there was a judge who neither feared God nor respected man. And there was a widow in that city who kept coming to him and saying, "Give me justice against my adversary." For a while he refused, but afterward he said to himself, "Though I neither fear God nor respect man, yet because this widow keeps bothering me, I will give her justice, so that she will not beat me down by her continual coming."' And the Lord said, 'Hear what the unrighteous judge says. And will not God give justice to his elect, who cry to him day and night? Will he delay long over them? I tell you, he will give justice to them speedily. Nevertheless, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?'" Keep on praying. Don't cease asking. In His time, the Father will give what you seek, and especially will He give you justice.

On another occasion, He encouraged them to pray by saying, “Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives, and the one who seeks finds, and to the one who knocks it will be opened.” This was great encouragement, but the Master strengthened the promise as He continued, “What father among you, if his son asks for a fish, will instead of a fish give him a serpent; or if he asks for an egg, will give him a scorpion? If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will the Heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask Him” [LUKE 11:9-13]. Surely, the message we should draw from these words is that just because we do not see an immediate answer does not mean that God is not answering our requests.

Throughout His ministry, Jesus spoke frequently of prayer, encouraging His disciples to ask for whatever they needed. “Whatever you ask in prayer, you will receive, if you have faith” [MATTHEW 21:22]. On another occasion, He affirmed the identical truth when he said, “Whatever you ask in prayer, believe that you have received it, and it will be yours” [MARK 11:24]. Yet again, Jesus encouraged all who follow Him to ask the Father for their needs. “Whatever you ask in my name, this I will do, that the Father may be glorified in the Son” [JOHN 14:13].

As He prepared the disciples for His departure, He taught them yet again about prayer, especially encouraging them that He would do what they asked because they rested in Him and because His Word rested in them. Jesus said, “If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you.” Then, as though an exclamation point to mark what He had just said, Jesus reminded His disciples, “You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you that you should go and bear fruit and that your fruit should abide, so that whatever you ask the Father in my name, he may give it to you” [JOHN 15:7, 16].

Could Jesus have made the case any stronger than when He said, “Truly, truly, I say to you, whatever you ask of the Father in my name, he will give it to you” [JOHN 16:23]? Momentarily, He clearly said that He wanted His disciples to experience joy through prayer, “Ask, and you will receive, that your joy may be full” [JOHN 16:23, 24]. Prayer is not meant to be a chore, but a joy. Asking the Father for what we need is not meant to be drudgery, but rather a source of joy because it leads us into intimacy with the Living God.

As we pray, shortly we cease to seek things and begin to seek the will of the Father. We learn that we are His servants and thus in danger from the snares of the wicked one. We see the progress of the age as it moves inexorably toward a conclusion, and we realise that we are susceptible to succumbing to the siren allure of the world about us. At such time, we need the encouragement of the Master, who said, “Stay awake at all times, praying that you may have strength to escape all these things that are going to take place, and to stand before the Son of Man” [LUKE 21:36].

Paul would echo that them when he wrote, “Be constant in prayer” [ROMANS 12:12] and “pray without ceasing” [1 THESSALONIANS 5:17]. Urging believers to be steadfast in prayer was a constant theme for Paul. “Continue steadfastly in prayer, being watchful in it with thanksgiving” [COLOSSIANS 4:2], he wrote. The words anticipate what was written in the Ephesian encyclical that believers are to be “Praying at all times in the Spirit, with all prayer and supplication. To that end keep alert with all perseverance, making supplication for all the saints” [EPHESIANS 6:18].

Think of one other promise of God that is given in John’s first letter. John writes, “Whatever we ask we receive from him, because we keep his commandments and do what pleases him” [1 JOHN 3:22]. “This is the confidence that we have toward him, that if we ask anything according to his will he hears us. And if we know that he hears us in whatever we ask, we know that we have the requests that we have asked of him” [1 JOHN 5:14, 15].

Here we see an iteration of the truth we saw earlier when we examined the life of Elijah—obedience to God’s will is necessary to witness answered prayer. As we obey the revealed will of God, we are walking in confidence with Him. And walking confidently with the Living God, we speak with Him, telling Him the things that are on our hearts. And as we tell Him of our concerns, He responds as a loving Father to give us what we ask.

If you take home no other thought from the messages drawn from these closing verses of James, let it be that prayer is a divine instrument of power, simplicity and confidence given to the children of God. God has appointed prayer—asking in confidence—as His instrument to unleash His power through His people.

Prayer is presented as a powerful instrument that is effective when used by God’s people. By prayer, Elijah raised the dead [1 KINGS 17:17-24], called down fire [1 KINGS 18:20-30] and rain from heaven [1 KINGS 18:41-45] and called God’s angel to the side of a weary saint [1 KINGS 19:4-7]. Prayer is not meant to be complex; it is really quite simple. Prayer need not consist of extended or repeated requests; the great prayers recorded in the Word of God—indeed, the great prayers recorded of Elijah—are models of brevity. In short, Elijah prayed; he simply talked to God. And God answered.

You, too, can pray like Elijah. As one of God’s righteous people, the same instrument of divine power is entrusted to you as was given to Elijah. Do not say that you have failed in the past, because that is of no importance in determining how effective you can be now. Do not say that your life is a contradiction of fear and doubt, because your feelings are not the determining factor in evaluating the effectiveness of prayer. We pray to God; and He hears. We ask; God gives. As we have seen throughout our review of prayer, we need but ask. Let us ask, then, believing that God hears and that God answers. Who knows the ways in which God will be glorified through the prayers of His holy people as they ask, and as He gives?

APPLICATIONS FROM THE LIFE OF ELIJAH — James does not actually call us to become a people of prayer, but the call is surely implicit in what he has written. James is spare in his writing, avoiding immediate application. He treats us as mature, demonstrating that he believes that we are capable of making the application of his words without further plea on his part. James evidently does not believe it necessary to grasp our hands to lead us where we should go. This does not excuse us from making immediate application of what is written, however.

All that Elijah accomplished, he accomplished by grace. This is true of all prayer. When we pray, it is not our words that are powerful, but it is the Spirit working in us that moves the hand of the Father. We read in Paul’s letter to Roman Christians, “We do not know what to pray for as we ought, but the Spirit Himself intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words” [ROMANS 8:26]. As we walk with God and as we wait on God, the Spirit prompts us to ask for what glorifies God and clarifies our requests so that His grace is revealed through us. “Elijah was a man with a nature like ours”; therefore, we should not see Elijah as great, but rather we should see that the grace of God working through Elijah was great. That same great grace is available to each Christian today.

Sometimes it is right to pray for God’s vengeance. Elijah called for God to judge the wayward nation—and God did judge them! It should be obvious that he did so, not because he wanted to injure them, but because he longed for the glory of the Lord. As he prayed before the altar he had constructed on Carmel, he sought God’s answer by fire so that the people would know that the LORD was God and that He might turn their hearts back [see 1 KINGS 18:37].

Be cautious in assuming that you know the mind of God when asking for God to judge wickedness. We call on God, not to judge particular people, but enemies of the Faith. The 83rd Psalm is replete with imprecations, but it concludes with this plea:

“That they may know that You alone,
whose Name is the LORD,
are the Most High over all the earth.”

[PSALM 83:18]

We seek one thing, and one thing only—God’s glory. We do not want to fall under the censure of the Master, who scolded James and John when they sought to destroy a village that would not receive Jesus. He said, “You do not know what manner of spirit you are of. For the Son of Man did not come to destroy men’s lives, but to save them” [LUKE 9:55b, 56].³

When God means to bestow blessing, He stirs the heart of His people to pray. When God’s judgements had completed their work, He sent Elijah to pray. Similarly, when God means to bless a church, bless a community, bless a nation, He stirs up His people to pray. And through their prayers God sends refreshment and renewal.

Though we are certain of God’s answer, we must not stop praying. Elijah knew that God was sending rain. Did he not tell Ahab that God would shortly send rain [1 KINGS 18:41]? Nevertheless, though he knew what God intended to do, he bowed down with his face between his knees and prayed [1 KINGS 18:42]. Though Daniel knew from reading the Word of God that the time of exile was completed, he nevertheless prayed [DANIEL 9:1-19]. Though God’s people know the Saviour is coming soon, because He has promised that He will do so, they nevertheless pray, “Amen. Come, Lord Jesus” [REVELATION 22:20]. Even so, though we know that God is already acting to accomplish His will, we must not cease to ask that His will be fulfilled.

Prayer is God’s chosen means of revealing His power through His people. If we neglect prayer, we are dismissing the sweetest means of conversing with God and we are abandoning the most forcible means of demonstrating God’s power. Prayer caused the sun to stand still at Joshua’s request [JOSHUA 10:12, 13] and even caused the sun to retreat by measurable degrees when Hezekiah asked [ISAIAH 38:8]. Elijah prayed and God withheld rain. Then he prayed, and God sent fire from heaven and angels to minister to his wearied saint. The God of Elijah stands ready to reveal His power through us as we pray.

Prayer has no efficacy if we have not relationship to the Living God. Therefore, I urge each person to look to God, asking Him to forgive your sin and to receive you as His child. Should it be that somehow you have never received the Son of God as Master of your life, do so now. Do not delay, but invite Him to take control of your life.

The Word of God promises, “If you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you will be saved. For with the heart one believes and is justified, and with the mouth one confesses and is saved.” That passage concludes with the promise of God given through the Prophet Joel that “Everyone who calls on the Name of the Lord will be saved” [ROMANS 10:9, 10, 13]. Believe this message and be saved. Do it today; do it now. Amen.

³ New King James Version. The verses are not well attested in some of the oldest manuscripts, though they do occur in the majority text.