

SERMON
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“Powerful Prayer”

September 30, 2018

James 5:13-18

“Elijah was a human being, even as we are”(v17)

You have to love James’ reminder about the very humanness of Elijah. And to put this in perspective, we have to remember that James was writing to Jewish Christians. They would have known the Hebrew stories of Elijah, and they would have understood him to be a prophet – a man of God – they would probably have elevated him onto a pedestal way above themselves – but James clearly tells them:

“Elijah was a human being, even as we are” ...

Now if you don’t know the story of Elijah that James is referring to. If not, I encourage you to take some time to read the story in 1 and 2 Kings. It is an epic tale with stories of severe famines, great battles, the rise of great leaders, the destruction of whole nations, people fleeing for safety, people being fed by giant ravens, death, seduction and more. It’s not a light read, and it’s not for the faint of heart – it’s in full graphic detail, and it reads a bit like a movie script, something like Lord of the Rings. Except the difference is – the underlying message is the power of prayer!

Perhaps you do know the story, but let me tell you my favorite part. I love the part in 1 Kings 17-18, where Elijah tells King Ahab that it is not going to rain for three years, but King Ahab doesn’t believe him because Ahab worships his god Baal, the god of weather. So, Elijah prays to his Lord God, and sure enough it doesn’t rain! Then after the three years pass, and not a drop of water has fallen from the sky. Animals start to die because they’ve had no water or food. The people all pray to their god Baal, who they thought could control the weather – but it makes no difference.

So what does Elijah do? (anyone know?)

Well, he decides to give them a demonstration on the power of prayer.

He gathers the people on Mount Carmel. He stands before them and says,
“How long will you keep changing your mind? Will you follow the Lord God, or will you follow Baal?”

The people just stand there and say nothing.

So Elijah says to them, "This is what we're going to do. Get two bulls, let your prophets choose the one they want, and I will take the other one. Cut it up and place it on wood, but do not start the wood on fire. And I'll do the same. Then you pray to Baal and I will pray to the Lord God. The god who listens and starts the fire is the real God."

So the people all nod and agree.

Elijah says to the prophets of Baal, "Get a head start and get your bull ready first. Call on Baal, but do n't start the fire yourself."

The prophets of Baal pick the best bull and set it on the wood. Then they begin calling on Baal to start the fire. They shout and dance around the altar yelling to Baal to start the fire. They shout and shout from morning till noon - with no answer.

Around noon Elijah begins to get bored. He says to the prophets of Baal, "Maybe you're not shouting loud enough. Maybe your god is busy or sleeping and he can't hear you, you better shout louder."

So some of the people run around screaming to Baal, others bow and cry to Baal, but nothing happens.

Finally, Elijah calls the people over to his altar. He begins to make his altar. He takes some stones and put them around his altar. Then he builds a trench around his altar to hold about a bath tub full of water.

Then Elijah does something very strange. He asks the people to pour water over his bull and over the wood, and enough water to fill the trenches below the altar.

Now, how is God going to start a fire when the whole altar was soaking wet?

The people start to giggle and thought for sure that Elijah's God would never be able to start a fire now.

But, after the entire altar is completely soaked Elijah steps forward and simply prays. He prayed:

"O Lord, God of Abraham, Isaac and Israel, show us today that you are the real God of Israel and that all I have done is obeyed you. Answer me God, so that these people can believe in you once again." (I Kings 18:36-37)

Elijah finishes his prayer; everyone stands silently watching and waiting. And even if you don't know the story, you can guess what happened –(ask)

The fire bursts out of the altar and everything is covered in flames. Every single thing was burnt down to nothing, and all the water was gone.

It was the power of prayer.

And this is what James is referring to. He is telling his readers that Elijah was just a human – no different from them – but he was a man who believed in, and who lived by the power of prayer!

Do we do that today? Is prayer part of our daily routines? Do we believe in powerful and effective prayer?

Now I'm not suggesting that prayer is a magic wand. I am not saying that all our wishes will be granted. If that was the case, then there would be:

no world hunger;
nations would not be at war;
we would not live in a world where people are treated differently because of their skin color, their faith, or their sexual orientation;
there would be a cure to all illnesses;
and perhaps our churches would even be full to the brim – wouldn't that be nice!

No, I can **not** promise you that your prayers will be answered in the way that you want. But I do know that God is always listening when we pray. And I do know that we can talk to God about anything!

James reminds us that we can share our concerns with God in “times of trouble”; when we are happy we can sing prayers that are “songs of praise”; we can ask God for healing, and for forgiveness. But above all else, when we pray, we need to have faith in our prayers.

Earlier in James' letter, in chapter one, he writes:

“believe and do not doubt, because he who doubts is like a wave of the sea, blown and tossed by the wind.” (James 1:6)

That's a wonderful graphic image that James has given us. The picture of waves blown around in all directions. And that's what we are like when we do not ground ourselves with prayers of faith. Our doubts get a hold of us, and we begin to toss around with anxiety, fears, stress, and more.

That's what we are like when we do not make prayer part of our daily spiritual routine.

I know for myself, spending just a few minutes each day talking to God grounds me; it makes me more aware of the presence of God's Spirit with me throughout the day; and it deepens my relationship with God. As the children said, when we recognize God as our friend, our parent, our comforter – then why wouldn't we talk to God every day!

And when we do see our prayers answered, what a joy and encouragement it is to share that with others. There is no doubt that answered prayer strengthens our faith. I am sure that we all have stories to share about the power of prayer.

(invite Susan to share her story of answered prayer)

Thank you Susan.

James recognized that sharing together in prayer encourages us in our faith, that is why he

told his readers to “pray for each other.” Pray together.
So we are going to take some time to do just that right now!

We will take some time of quiet prayer together.

I encourage you to turn to your prayer partner that you spoke to earlier. If you would rather take this time to pray alone, then that’s OK too.

With your prayer partner, I encourage you to share with each other some things that you would like to pray about, but please don’t feel obliged to share.

You can pray out loud together, or you can pray in the silence of your hearts.

I will be calling out some prayer headings to help guide you through this time of prayer – use them if you wish, or just pray together as the Spirit guides you.

Feel free to join hands together if you feel comfortable.

Nate will quietly play while we are praying. Let us just take some time to come to God in prayers of faith together.

(Nate plays VU948)

- I invite you to share and pray together for those closest to you,
- I invite you to share and pray together for those that help guide you and teach you,
- I invite you to share and pray together for those in position of authority and world leadership,
- I invite you to share and pray together for those that are sick, grieving, or in need of comfort,
- I invite you to share and pray together for each other.

Let us join together in the prayer that Jesus taught us: Lords Prayer. (VU959)