



*To Know Christ . . .
and to Make Him Known*

Wilmington, North Carolina
Dr. Mark E. Gaskins, *Senior Pastor*
The Lord's Day, June 17, 2018

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Praying Like Elijah 1 Kings 18:41-46

With not one cloud in the sky, Elijah boldly told Ahab, “. . . **there is the sound of abundance of rain**” (18:41).¹ It was almost as if he was like “Radar” O’Reilly on the old “M*A*S*H*” television show, who could hear the helicopters bringing in the wounded before anybody else could.

How could Elijah do that? It had been more than *three years* since there had been a drop of rain in Israel! There was *no sign* of rain anywhere! Yet Elijah declared, “. . . **there is the sound of abundance of rain.**” And the rains came!

Is it any wonder that when James, the Lord’s brother, wanted to illustrate in his little letter his statement that **the prayer of a righteous person is powerful and effective** (James 5:16b-18, NIV[®]), he pointed his readers and hearers to Elijah? And lest his readers think that this same kind of power and effectiveness in prayer was available only to “super saints,” James was careful to point out that Elijah was a human being just like us, with all the foibles and frailties we contend with.

But Elijah knew God, and he knew how to pray. And when he prayed, *God answered.*

This text we’re looking at this morning is the story that James was referring to. It’s really quite clear what happened here—*confident that God would do what He promised, Elijah prayed for rain, and God sent it.*

Saints who pray like Elijah

Have you ever known anybody like Elijah? I am blessed in that I have. And you may have too.

Now we know that God hears everyone who earnestly calls on Him. But if you’re like me, experience teaches you that when you really need somebody to pray about a specific need, there are certain people you call on. You know that they know how to pray like Elijah.

Her name was Mrs. Mary. I guess she was in her 70s at the time. She had been through some health problems, including a heart attack a number of years before we knew her. She was a member of the White Lake Baptist Church, where we served while I was a student at Campbell University.

She didn’t have much, and her husband was in worse health than she was. She would tell you that it was that heart attack that had changed her life—not because of the physical problems it caused, but because it was what caused her to get serious about her commitment to Christ and her walk with Him. Out of that experience, Mrs. Mary became what we often refer to as *a prayer warrior.*

I remember having asked one of my professors, Dr. Charles Allen, to preach a week of revival services for us in the spring that year. He told me with some regret that with his responsibilities at the university, he had had to limit himself to preaching two revival meetings in the spring and two in the fall, and that he was already booked up. I had prayed about inviting Dr. Allen, and really believed that he was the one God wanted to preach in those services. So on my way home from Campbell that day, I stopped by Mrs. Mary's house. I told her the situation and asked her to pray about it.

The following week, I stopped by Dr. Allen's office again and told him about my strong conviction that he was the one we needed to preach for these services. He looked at me, smiled, and said, "Let me get my calendar." We scheduled the services for right after the end of the spring semester. He came and preached, and that week had a more powerful impact on the church than any other revival services we had. And it almost didn't happen—but Mrs. Mary prayed, and God answered.

Why is it that some Christians seem to be so powerful in prayer? Could it be because they pray like Elijah?

The prayers of Elijah

Over the past few weeks, we've been looking at the life and ministry of Elijah, the prophet of the LORD. We've seen him call for a drought on the land to show that it was the LORD who controlled the rains and the harvest, not the Canaanite sky-god Baal. During that time, God provided for him at the wadi Cherith, then for him and for the widow who fed him at Zarephath and for her son. After more than three years of drought, the LORD told Elijah to show himself to Ahab, and there would be rain. Elijah obeyed God. He called for the contest on Mount Carmel to demonstrate once for all that it was the LORD, not Baal, who was really God. The prophets of Baal prayed to their god all day to send fire from heaven to consume their sacrifice, but nothing happened. Elijah prayed a brief prayer that is translated into English by 60 to 65 words in two sentences (depending on the version), and the fire of the LORD fell from the sky and consumed the sacrifice, the wood, the altar, and everything—even the water in the trench around the altar. What a prayer!

And now in this part of the story we're looking at today, Elijah prays again.

He tells King Ahab to go eat and drink (apparently a part of the ceremony of the religious sacrifice). He urged Ahab to go eat *immediately*, because he heard "**the sound of abundance of rain.**" While Ahab went off to eat, Elijah went to the summit of Mount Carmel, got down on the ground and put his face between his knees.

Though the text doesn't specifically say it, we know what Elijah was doing—he was *praying*. He sent his servant to look toward the Mediterranean Sea (remember that Carmel was a ridge that jutted out into the sea, and was usually the first place that the abundant autumn rains would fall as they came in off the sea). The servant came back and said, "There is nothing." Seven times Elijah told him to go look. And it seemed like six times were a waste. Every time it was the same thing—nothing.

But then the *seventh* time, he came back to Elijah and said, "**There is a cloud, as small as a man's hand, rising out of the sea!**" And with that, Elijah was satisfied. He told his servant to go tell Ahab to hitch up his chariot and go so the rain wouldn't stop him. Then the sky got dark, the wind got up, and the rain began to pour. Ahab rode off to Jezreel, and the power of the LORD came on Elijah so that he ran ahead of Ahab all the way to Jezreel.

Powerful and effective

Now what was it about Elijah's prayers that made them so powerful and effective? He prayed, and drought came. He prayed, and the fire of God fell and consumed the sacrifice and the altar. He prayed, and after more than three years of drought, a heavy rain came. What was it?

Maybe it was that he was so *focused* and *fervent* when he prayed. Focus is important. Without it we get distracted. When athletes are in a big game, focus is critical. But prayer is much more than a game.

Elijah was very focused in his prayer. He was apparently praying very specifically for God to send rain.

I don't know about you, but very often, I struggle with my prayers lacking focus, with their being too general. When I focus on particular intercessions and petitions along with specific thanksgivings, they seem to be more effective.

But as well as being focused, Elijah's prayer was fervent. He assumed a physical posture of urgency, and kept telling his servant to go see if the rain was coming.

The two really go together, don't they? When our prayers are more focused, they're generally more fervent, aren't they? The concern for a particular person or issue moves us to a greater intensity in our prayers.

When we were serving in Chatham County more than 25 years ago, a young couple in our church had a little girl named Rebekah. When Rebekah was about two years old, she contracted an *E coli* infection. She was very ill and was in the hospital at Chapel Hill.

Late on Sunday afternoon, we got an urgent call from the family asking us to pray for her. She had taken a terrible turn for the worse as the infection was attacking her kidneys and they were beginning to shut down. She was in critical condition in ICU, and it looked like she might not make it.

We had Discipleship Training on Sunday evenings, but not a worship service. So I told Jo Ann I was going to the hospital to be with the family, and asked her to have the Discipleship Training group to devote the time to praying for Rebekah. They did.

Around 7:15 or so, the doctor came out and said the crisis was over; she had turned the corner and was going to be alright. I called Jo Ann at the church to share the news. I asked her what time they had finished praying, and she said, "About ten after seven."

They were focused. They were fervent. And Rebekah fully recovered.

Maybe what made Elijah's prayer so powerful was the way he was so *expectant* and *persistent* as he prayed. When he sent his servant to see if the rain was coming, every time the servant came back and said he didn't see anything, Elijah sent him back. He was asking God to send rain, and was expecting Him to send it, because God had told him He would. So Elijah persisted in his prayer until the servant finally saw evidence that the rain was on its way. That cloud the size of a man's hand rising out of the sea was enough for Elijah. He could send word to Ahab to leave because the storm was coming.

In our Gospel lesson this morning, Jesus told His disciples to ask and keep on asking, to knock and keep on knocking, to seek and keep on seeking. He told parables about persistence in prayer, assuring us that God hears and answers His children, though not always on our timetable. When God delays in answering, we can be sure He has a reason, that He is working something in us in the midst of our praying. Like Elijah, we must be expectant and persistent as we pray, trusting that any delay in His response is purposeful for God's kingdom.

It's important to be focused and fervent, and to be expectant and persistent in our prayers. But could it be that what really made the difference was something even more basic, more

fundamental, more foundational? What really made Elijah's prayers so powerful and effective is that he *believed God* and *claimed His promises!*

When you look at this story, it's obvious that when Elijah had a word from the LORD, he took the LORD at His word. When God said to call for a drought, Elijah obeyed. When God told him to go to Cherith and He would provide for him there, he went. When God told him to go to Zarephath where a widow would provide for him, he went. When the LORD told him to show himself to Ahab and He would send rain, Elijah went to meet Ahab, called for the contest, and prayed for rain.

Elijah listened with *ears of faith*. He listened to what the LORD said, and he obeyed what the LORD told him to do. Elijah's prayers took God at His word, and prayed for God to do what He had said He would do!

It was just as Jesus told His disciples the night before His crucifixion: **"If you abide in Me and My words abide in you, you will ask what you desire, and it shall be done for you"** (John 15:7). If we're abiding in Him and His words are abiding in us, we'll be praying for what He wants to do and what He has promised to do, won't we? That's a prayer God *always* answers!

I've told you before about "Praying Tom Ward." He was from near where I grew up. His son "Singing George Ward" was one of my Grandfather's best friends. Praying Tom was known for his prayers; Singing George was known for the singing schools he conducted in some of the churches in the area. Our own Donna Cavedo is Praying Tom Ward's great-great-granddaughter.

There are many stories about Praying Tom Ward. When I told one of them in our church in Fairmont, a lady in her late 80s came to me after the service and said, "I knew Praying Tom Ward. When I was growing up and somebody in our family got sick, my parents would send for him to come pray for them!" I understand that was true of a lot of folks. That says something about the kind of man he was. He prayed like Elijah.

And so can we. How? *We pray like Elijah when we trust God to answer us according to His will and His promises.* Indeed, **the prayer of a righteous person is powerful and effective.** Amen!

†MEG

¹ Unless otherwise indicated, Scriptures taken from the New King James Version.