

The Prayers of Elijah

M. W. Bassford, 7-10-11

It's all too easy for us as Christians to fall into the habit of treating prayer like a spiritual 911 call. We're bopping along just fine, minding our own business, not really thinking about God at all except during worship services, and then, whammo! Something bad happens, and once it does, then we remember the help that God offers us through prayer. We pray constantly, until the situation is resolved, and then, once life gets back to normal, we stop praying.

There are many different problems that we could identify with this method of using prayer, but at least one of them is that it doesn't really line up with the way that godly men of old prayed. Too often, we think of prayer as a one-shot deal, but they thought of it as a continuing interaction with God. Whatever their situation, they prayed about it.

One of the clearest Scriptural examples of this life of prayer can be found in the life of the prophet Elijah. In Elijah's day, it wasn't easy to be righteous. Evil kings ruled over the nation of Israel, and each successive king seemed worse than the last. By the time of Elijah's prophetic work, King Ahab had taken the throne, and his regime actively promoted idolatry and opposed the worship of God. Anyone who stood against the evil of Ahab risked his own life.

It is in this setting that Elijah carried out one of the most fearless campaigns against evil that we see recorded in Scripture, and throughout his life, his primary weapon was prayer. When he fought to restore Israel to God, he prayed about it. When he encountered some private need, he prayed about it. Even when he started thinking in a disastrously wrongheaded way, he prayed about that. Prayer and God's answer to prayer formed the pattern of Elijah's life.

We have much to learn from a man like that. That kind of prayer walk will ensure that God blesses every area of our lives and that we remain close to Him. Let's turn our attention this morning, then, to the prayers of Elijah.

Zeal and Compassion

When first we encounter Elijah, we see him praying as a way to give expression to his **ZEAL**. The provocation for these prayers is clearly laid out in 1 Kings 16:30-31. King Ahab had just ascended to the throne, and somebody needed to stand up for God. As far as I can tell from Scripture, Ahab himself wasn't such a bad guy. He was just a weak, immature, spoiled man. The problem was that Ahab married Jezebel the Sidonian, and Jezebel had one of the most destructive personalities that we see anywhere in Scripture. Jezebel had all the strength of character that Ahab lacked, but she put that strength of character wholeheartedly in the service of idolatry and evil. She was determined to convert Israel from a God-worshiping nation to a Baal-worshiping nation, and she was willing to kill to do it.

In many ways, this rising tide of evil reminds us of the struggles of our own day. The United States of the 21st century does not lack for Jezebels. A wide range of people, from scientists to entertainers, have decided to be hostile to the gospel of Christ, and they are currently doing everything in their power to tear down Christianity and replace it with paganism. As the recent vote for gay marriage in New York shows, these people will not rest until they accomplish their goals. However, we must remember that it's not the first time that God's people have faced this kind of challenge, and in the past, God has always emerged victorious. Jezebel and her idols are gone, but the word of the Lord abides forever.

However, Elijah was not content to sit back and do nothing. We see his counterstroke recounted in James 5:17. In Leviticus 26, God had promised His people that if they worshiped idols, among other things, they would be afflicted with drought. Here, Elijah takes advantage of that promise to call upon God to shut up the heavens, so that for three years and six months, there would be no rain. For an agricultural society like Israel, this was devastating.

Today, we need to remember that the most important thing we can do about the troubles of our day is to pray. No one can stand against evil as strongly as God can, and we need to enlist Him in the fight. Sometimes, both on an individual level and a national level, what people most need is for God to take away His blessings. A man who stiffens his neck in prosperity may well fall to his knees in adversity, and I can think of people in my life who might benefit from such a humbling experience. Let's zealously call upon the Lord to intervene, in whatever way will accomplish His will.

Of course, even while Elijah took such extreme measures in his battle against evil, he never forgot the human cost, and we see him use prayer in the service of **COMPASSION**. Look with me at 1 Kings 17:17-19. Here, we see Elijah's final interaction with the widow of Zarephath. When the drought had dried up Elijah's wilderness refuge, God sent him to this widow, who was about to die herself, along with her son, because they were out of food. God blessed the widow so that her store of food was not exhausted, and she was able to feed her family and Elijah too all the days of the famine. However, in a cruel irony, even though her son survived the famine, he was carried off by something else.

Today, just like Elijah did, we must have sympathy for those who suffer because of the consequences of sin. It's so easy to look at the disaster that some sinner has made out of his life and say, "Serves him right," but that self-righteous attitude does not become the Christian. Many evangelicals of our day like to say, "Hate the sin; love the sinner," but if our love for sinners does not display itself in action, that makes our claim to love ring hollow indeed. In particular in our

lives, we need to look for ways to show compassion for those who are innocent of sin, yet often suffer the most from its ravages. I can't even imagine the number of children in the Joliet area who are hungry or neglected or mistreated because of their parents' foolishness and evil. We can't help all of those children, but we should help at least some of them.

In his situation, Elijah deals with the plight of the widow's son in characteristic fashion. He prays. We see both the prayer and the result in 1 Kings 17:20-22. The results are dramatic. The son is restored to life immediately, and instead of blaming Elijah for his death, the widow is persuaded by his life that Elijah truly is a man of God.

Today, as we use our lives to ease the suffering around us, we must never forget that the most important thing we can do is pray. The fact that we must face the consequences of sin is one of the bitterest fruits of free will. God allows us to make meaningful choices, even if innocents suffer as the result of that choice. However, as we seek to become His instruments on earth, He will bless our efforts if we ask. Through His help, our work will be as effective as possible, as we look to care for the physical needs of others, and even more than that, the needs of their spirits.

Conflict and Despair.

The story of Elijah also reveals that he turned to prayer at the height of his **CONFLICT** with Ahab. We see the challenge that Elijah proposes to Ahab in 1 Kings 18:23-24. Jezebel's promotion of Baal worship has been so effective that the false god has 450 prophets whom she feeds at her own table. Elijah, by contrast, is the only prophet of Jehovah remaining. Nonetheless, he demands that the 450 prophets of Baal prove the validity of their god by asking him to light the fire on a sacrificial altar. Elijah will do the same, and whichever god lights the fire is the true god.

Today, we're not likely to get into any fire-starting contests with anyone, but conflict is still a frequent part of our religious experience. Just as Elijah did nearly 3000 years ago, we fight today for the souls of those who are around us. In every case, the devil exerts some pressure in the opposite direction. Maybe the person we're trying to lead to the Lord has family members who are a part of a denomination. Maybe they're simply entrapped in some particularly enticing sin. Regardless, there is always going to be some hurdle we have to overcome. We need to constantly prove to everyone that God is with us, not by some pyrotechnic display, but by our love for others and our understanding of the word.

We see how Elijah wins his prophetic duel in 1 Kings 18:36-38. Before this, the prophets of Baal have embarrassed themselves. They've cried out to Baal, they've danced around his altar, they've cut themselves until the blood flowed, but Baal has failed to answer their appeal. Elijah, though, takes a very different tack. Once again, he relies on prayer to get the job done. Even though Elijah has drenched his altar with water, when he calls upon the Lord, the fire that God sends consumes the offering, the wood, the water, and even the stones of the altar. The people see the miracle, acknowledge that the Lord is God, and bring the prophets of Baal to Elijah so that he can slaughter them.

Today, even though the answer to our prayers will not be as spectacular, they are every bit as necessary to our ultimate victory. If we want a friend or a loved one to obey the gospel, we must pray for them, and the more we pray for them, the more likely their conversion will be. Sometimes, this is a rapid process. More usually, it is not. It can take years or decades of patient work to win our Mount Carmel confrontation. Some people are so hardhearted that they refuse to put on Christ, no matter how much we pray for them. However, prayer is the best hope that we can have for their souls.

Finally, we see that Elijah continued to pray, even in his moments of deepest **DESPAIR**. This prayer is recorded for us in 1 Kings 19:4. Even after Elijah's great victory at Mount Carmel, even after the power of Elijah ended the drought, things haven't gone the way he expected. Jezebel is still queen of Israel, and she tells Elijah that if she catches him, she will kill him. He is forced to flee Israel entirely to save his own life, and the victory that he thought he had won for God has apparently ended in defeat. After all those years, after all those miracles, Elijah is back at square one, and he's got nothing left. He knows he doesn't have what it takes to win the war, and he asks God to kill him.

We too can know periods of despair in our lives, when it seems that nothing is going right, that everything that we have tried to do has failed, and that we have no hope of making things right again. At times like that, it's very easy for the devil to use our difficult situation to crush our spirits. Even when we're enduring that, though, we must never stop praying. Even if we can't imagine how God could possibly bless us again, we must seek Him without ceasing.

God's reply to Elijah's prayer is found in 1 Kings 19:15-18. In response to Elijah's bitter petition, God reminds him that this isn't Elijah's fight. It's God's fight. Elijah isn't the whole divine plan; he's just a part of it. Even though the people have rejected Elijah's call to repentance, God is still going to be victorious, even if that victory involves the destruction of 99 percent of the people of Israel. Elijah's role is to work, and not to worry.

Often in our lives, we make the same mistake as Elijah. With the best of intentions, we map out how things are going to go, how we're going to be triumphant personally and spiritually, but then things don't go according to our little plan, and we get frustrated and we think we've failed. Brethren, it's not about us. It's about God, and God never fails. We might not understand what His purpose is, but He always accomplishes it. As part of that purpose, we can be sure that His will is to bring all who faithfully serve Him into the eternal kingdom of His glory, and whether or not we accomplish our goals in this life, if we receive the reward of heaven, our life can be nothing but a success.