

ELIJAH: A PASSION FOR GOD

IV. "The Prayer of Faith"

2-16-03

I Kings 18:41-46
James 5:13-18

INTRODUCTION

Daily we live with the tensions and preparations for war against Saddam Hussein and Iraq. While I wouldn't pretend to know what our nation's approach needs to be in the current crisis, I do know we all should be feeling a call to serious prayer regarding this. I remember the Gulf War of 1991 that began just about this time of year. And I also remember it was a time of serious intercessory prayer on the part of many believers. Churches had special gatherings for prayer. Of course, many of the things that happened as a result of prayer will never be known. But the extremely low number of casualties in a war that large is a remarkable witness the power of prayer. I want to share one story from that war to encourage our faith.

U. S. Marine Corps General, Charles Krulak (now retired), was there. He became a Christian in 1976 and says every morning since then at 7:15 he has devotions. Of course during the Gulf War, those prayers were intensified and joined by many of his soldiers as well as millions around the world. A couple of years ago, at a Leadership Prayer Breakfast in Wheaton, Illinois, he gave this incredible witness:

“The prevailing winds in the Gulf area blow from northeast to southwest. If you attack from the southwest, your enemy can release biological and chemical weapons into the air, and the chemicals will blow right into your face. It was a tremendous concern for the military in the southwestern dessert and a grave prayer concern for many, both overseas and back home.

“On February 21, 1991, American forces began an attack from the southwest at four in the morning. Only three hours before, the prevailing winds had shifted from southwest to northeast, exactly 180 degrees from the direction prevailing winds normally blow.

“The winds blew in that direction for four days, the four days of the duration of the war. Within thirty minutes of the surrender, the winds shifted back. That is the unbelievable power of prayer.”

This is a good time for us to learn more about prayer. Elijah's model in this morning's text provides some solid instruction for us. First, he shows us prayer as an approach to life. Then we see him demonstrate qualities of effective, power-filled praying.

PRAYER'S PERSPECTIVE

Our Scripture begins with a contrast of two approaches to life. Ahab represents the secular, prayerless person. In Elijah, we see the man of faith who prays.

I suspect Elijah's instructions to Ahab had a touch of sarcasm when he says,
Go, eat and drink for there is the sound of a heavy rain.

Then, the contrast is drawn:

*So, Ahab went off to eat and drink,
but Elijah climbed to the top of Carmel and bent down to the ground and put his face
between his knees.*

Ahab did what he'd been doing all his life, even during the famine. He was a cruel, sensual man, looking out for number one. As we saw last week, earlier in this chapter, he sent Obadiah throughout the land to see if could find patches of grass for the royal horses and mules so he wouldn't have to kill any! He was more concerned about his animals than the people starving. Even after the incredible scene and showdown on Mt. Carmel, with the proof of the reality of Jehovah God, there is no repentance for his sins or the sins of the nation. There seems to be no sorrow over the apostasy that resulted in slaughtering 850 prophets of Baal and Asherah that day. It's all too much like what hear regarding Kim Jong Ill in North Korea or Saddam Hussein in Iraq. While they live in incredible luxury, amassing fortunes stashed in Swiss bank accounts, their people are starving and dying from a lack of the basic necessities of life.

While Ahab did what he'd been doing, so did Elijah as he goes away to pray. Elijah's life and perspective were shaped in prayer. He saw the idolatry and widespread disregard for God in Israel and it broke his heart. God called him to a prophetic role in confronting the sins of Ahab and the nation. Refusing to "play it safe," he risked his life in obeying God and upholding truth. He lived deeply and discovered the sufficiency of God to protect him and provide for his needs. He became a glove for God's hand to turn a nation back to God.

Here are two approaches to life we see daily:

1. **The secular person** whose life isn't shaped by prayer. If he does pray, the focus is getting God to do what he'd like God to do and how to get things from God like blessing and protection. This person comes to take what she can from life, looking out for #1. They are self-centered, self-absorbed— getting all they can and keeping it. They blame others for what doesn't work in life or when things don't suit them. Did you notice last week how Ahab in midst of drought and national disaster, rather than repenting and changing, launched a massive man-hunt for Elijah, as if he's the problem. When he sees Elijah, he addresses him with, "You troubler of Israel." Ahab was a man with all the answers, and in none of them was he to blame. Today there are still those who fix the blame everywhere but on themselves. Their problems in marriage, at the job, or with other circumstances are not their fault. It's somebody else's fault or just plain bad luck. They end up living on the surface of things.
2. **The praying person**, in contrast, lives deeply. Prayer becomes the lens through which they begin to see from God's perspective. Their own lives are lived in humility, frequently aware of sin and repenting of sin they uncover. They begin to see people and understand events from God's viewpoint. They get beneath the surface of things in life and wrestle with the roots of our motivation and with powers that make things happen in our world—even engaging the powers in spiritual warfare. That becomes an incredible adventure. They know the thrill of actually working with God to bring salvation to our world.

Furthermore, Elijah challenges us to let prayer be integral to our approach to life. James, in talking about praying for those who are suffering, those in need of healing and forgiveness, uses Elijah as an example of the prayer of faith:

"...The prayer of a righteous man is powerful and effective. Elijah was a man just like us. He prayed earnestly that it would not rain, and it did not rain on the land for three and a half years. Again he prayed, and the heavens gave rain, and the earth produced its crops."

In light of our celebrating Lincoln and Washington's birthdays tomorrow, I found Chuck Colson's "BreakPoint" commentary on Lincoln's faith this last week interesting. Lincoln was not a Christian until near the end of his life. But in 1862, his life took a dramatic turn with the death of his son, Willie. Also, the Union was suffering devastating losses in the Civil War. At that time, a humbled Lincoln finally embraced Christ as his Lord and Savior. He wrote to a friend,

My own wisdom... seemed insufficient. I am driven many times upon my knees by the overwhelming conviction that I have nowhere else to go.

Another time, he told a friend,

When everyone seemed panic-stricken, I got down on my knees before almighty God and prayed. ...Soon a sweet comfort crept into my soul.

Lincoln learned the value of the perspective of prayer in facing life, moving from a rather secular approach to approaching life with prayer.

Let's look at how Elijah models the prayer of faith for us. This prayer scene with Elijah is one of the great ones in the Bible. In it, I see four qualities of effective prayer.

QUALITIES OF EFFECTIVE PRAYER

#1– Based upon the promises of God

Here we plunge into the heart of the mystery of prayer. Obviously Elijah is operating in response to what God has clearly told him and promised prior to the showdown on Mt. Carmel. So, why go and pray now for rain now? Just as God displayed his power in igniting the sacrifice, won't the rain now come to complete the scene? What is the purpose of this prayer? You might even say it shows a lack of confidence in God's promise. Shouldn't he just relax and God will do what God has promised?

We may think along those lines, but it is clearly not in harmony with God's Word. For one thing, Elijah's prayer is held up as a model of faith in James. F.B. Meyer affirms the principle here as:

*God's promises are given, not to restrain, **but to incite prayer**. They show the direction in which we may ask and the extent to which we may expect an answer. They are the mold into which we may pour our fervid spirits without fear. They are the signed check, made payable to order, which we must endorse and present for payment.*

So, even though Elijah has the promise, and is acting in accord with the will of God, evidently he understands prayer as the way to make it happen. This is the act of cashing the check as Meyer says. We see a similar situation in the Book of Daniel 9:1-3. Israel was taken into exile in Babylon, and through the prophet Jeremiah, promised they would return in 70 years. Daniel was

one of those taken.

In the first year of Darius son of Xerxes (a Mede by descent), who was made ruler over the Babylonian kingdom— in the first year of his reign, I, Daniel, understood from the Scriptures, according to the word of the LORD given to Jeremiah the prophet, that the desolation of Jerusalem would last seventy years. So I turned to the Lord God and pleaded with him in prayer and petition, in fasting, and in sackcloth and ashes. (Dan 9:1-3)

Why is Daniel praying, confessing sins and interceding? Apparently for the same reason Elijah is. Even though it's God's will, prayer is needed to make it happen! The revealed will of God (whether through Scripture, or His Spirit speaking to us) is meant to give direction for prayer—not remove our responsibility for prayer. Pascal is perhaps on the right track when he says,

Prayer is God's way of providing man with the dignity of causality.

While God could (and sometimes *does*) act independent of our prayers, He has chosen to use us as His agents in redeeming His creation. Letting us have the thrill, and the joy of participating with God in His work. We are actually His hands, His feet, His voice, His touch, His smile to a broken, hurting world.

Most of our homes (if we have children or grandchildren) have various things created by our children that are far from perfect. They bring joy to us, because *they* did it— an original creation. Hopefully, when we receive such a gift, we don't point out the imperfections, but affirm the usefulness and the importance of what they have done. Though we may have been able to do it better, it would not bring the same joy to our hearts as their offering. Perhaps that is a hint of God's perspective and love for us. While He doesn't exactly need us, He has chosen to work through us. Yet, He carries it even a step further in which there are things that won't happen *unless* we do the work of prayer. So, it is important for us to study God's Word, know God and know what He's promised and what He's wanting to do so we can participate in the action and be a part of the fulfillment in our prayers.

Jesus sends out the 12 disciples, then the 70, and finally in Acts He commissions His church to continue His work of healing, redeeming, and setting people free. Wonderful things happen. But if the disciples fail to do as they are told, if the church falls down in its commission, are there things God wants to do that go undone? Are there healings, miracles, and redemptive work that will not happen? I think the answer has to be "yes." You may be thinking, "But how does that fit with God's foreordained will?" Could the rain not have come if Elijah failed to pray? Or Israel's captivity not ended if Daniel dropped the ball? Or the cripple at the temple gate not be healed in Acts 3 if Peter and John had ignored him? Here, we quickly get over our heads. In these instances, the question is moot since it is not what happened— but you can't help wondering. Maybe God raises up others to pray if we blow it and we simply miss our chance to be a part of it. Yet, maybe too, there are things that are never done even though God would love to do them, simply because no one was faithful in prayer. Why do we pray, "Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done?" We know in the end, nothing will stop the return of Christ and His rule and reign. But in between now and then, maybe there are many battles and transformations our prayers are meant to be a part of.

#2– Humility

Elijah's posture in prayer pictures humility. He has been standing tall, in control, challenging the prophets of Baal. Now, we see him sitting on the ground with his face between his knees. This is an expression of helplessness and humility before God. He is not demanding, but obviously feeling rather vulnerable.

This is where true prayer must always begin—relinquishing our control, letting go and humbling ourselves before the God of the universe. It is not telling God what to do, but waiting, seeking to understand and follow His will.

#3– Persevering

Apparently this is the next day, the day after the contest with the prophets of Baal. Remember the fire fell at the time of the evening sacrifice, which was the end of the day, so Elijah must have spent the night there. Ahab must have camped there for the night as well, eating and drinking. James says Elijah's prayer was "earnest." This is not the casual, going-through-the-motions praying we often engage in, but he is there before God for the duration, however long that took. We can wonder at the delay as Elijah sends his servant to look seven times. Perhaps the delay was to purify Elijah's soul a little, wipe out any smugness over the victory. As we saw last week, he had a bit of the showman in him, and certainly was not without some ego. Maybe also there were a few resentments and some anger over the people's apostasy in abandoning God. I expect he had to get over Ahab's impenitence and seeming arrogance in all this. In fact, he may have spent a good part of the night in prayer.

Often times God uses delay to purify our souls, doesn't He? I've often recalled this prayer when I needed encouragement to keep on praying and seeking God. In the waiting, I've often found God doing some refining in my heart, changing my focus and even my prayer to move more in harmony with what He's desiring.

#4– Expectant faith

I like Elijah's tenacious, expectant faith as he sends his servant up seven times to look out over the Mediterranean Sea to look for clouds forming. Elijah is on the top of the mountain we're told, so it makes one wonder why he doesn't just look himself. I picture him maybe just down from the top a bit, facing out over the drought-ravaged nation as he interceded; overlooking the great Valley of Armageddon that was once so fertile. I think the earnestness, the intensity of his prayer accounts for him not wandering up to the top and looking himself. He is intense, focused. At least here we have documentation of six times he apparently felt he'd prayed through to the answer, and there was nothing. Do you expect Elijah was beginning to feel a bit foolish in keeping on sending his servant to the top? Finally, on the seventh trip up to look, there is a hint of something. Of course the number seven in the Bible is God's perfect number, letting us know it is in His time.

That's all Elijah needs—just a hint. The servant tells about a cloud the size of a man's hand rising from the sea. I can imagine the servant almost wondering if it is worth speaking about. No

thunder heads beginning to brew, only a tiny cloud, rather unremarkable. Undoubtedly he'd often seen much more during the drought. But to Elijah, this was the seed that by faith he new would bring the rain. Hear his excitement now as he tells his servant:

Go and tell Ahab, "Hitch up your chariot and go down before the rain stops you."

Rain would soon make the road impassable for the chariot wheels. Then,

The power of the Lord came upon Elijah, and tucking his cloak into his belt, he ran ahead of Ahab all the way to Jezreel.

That's about 20 miles, running before Ahab's chariot. Quite a feat! Just short of a marathon. So, here is another awesome display of the power of God energizing Elijah!

How often our prayers lack this expectant, tenacious faith. We don't even look for evidence of an answer on the way. We give up, quit, or are afraid to be specific— thinking we may be disappointed. We pray anemic, "Lord, bless..." prayers. With such a generic prayer, how can you recognize an answer? We can learn from Elijah's boldness, and expectant faith that keeps on until he gets it right.

CONCLUSION

A pastor I know, who followed me in my first pastorate, tells of the powerful effect of prayer in transforming lives and our world. He attended the U. of Cincinnati and was a member of a frat house with 15 guys. None of them were Christians. They were a wild, partying bunch. They had a little German woman who was their cook. He said they all gave her a hard time, critical, complaining and arrogant. But she let it be known to them that she was a Christian and was praying for them. And, here's the remarkable thing: today, 13 of the 15 guys are in full-time Christian service. He attributes that to her prayers.

Friends, while the life of prayer has many frustrations and unanswered questions, it is a great, exciting way to live— experiencing God's love, wonderful gifts, living deep, and participating with Him as agents of His redemptive, healing work in our world. Catch the thrill, the energy in that picture of Elijah running before Ahab's chariot!

What a way to live.