

AN EXAMPLE IN PRAYER

An example of prayer

Taught at our Sunday morning service, 21st August 2022 @ Deal Christian Fellowship

Reading: 1 Kings 18:1-19

Let's pray.

Introduction:

This morning we're going to look at an amazing example of prayer. Specifically, one of the great answered prayers in scripture, which is the one Elijah prayed on Mount Carmel in 1 Kings 18. But let us first consider a few things about prayer.

It is wonderful - don't forget that!

First, it's easy to forget how wonderful prayer is. Yet, it is such a privilege and blessing to be able to pray to our God, to seek His will in our lives, and to come before Him with our needs - all that is only possible because of what Jesus did by dying in our place, restoring our relationship with Him.

DL Moody put it like this:

My dear friends, it is a sweet privilege to pray; it is a sweet privilege to be in touch with heaven, to be in communion with the great God that made heaven and earth.

DL Moody

Just think about that! We're able to freely pray to the God who made everything. The God who made you and I. If you wanted technical support for your phone or TV, you would be quite shocked if you could actually speak to the person who designed it and made it, right? Yet in our spiritual and practical needs we can speak to the One who designed us, made us, and knows us better than we know ourselves!

It is critically important

Second, prayer is critically important. We're instructed in 1 Thessalonians 5:17 to *pray without ceasing*. That's pretty often, right? Charles Spurgeon said:

When asked, 'What is more important: prayer or reading the Bible?' I ask, 'What is more important: breathing in or breathing out'.

Charles Spurgeon

Reading our Bibles and praying are foundational to our relationship with God. I need not tell you that cutting communication out of your marriage or friendships would do them no good. The same is true of your relationship with God.

It is easy to neglect

Third, let's be honest, despite how wonderful and important prayer is, it is easy to neglect it. But we must not. We must work hard at it. RA Torrey warned:

Some of us let the hurry of our lives crowd prayer out, and what a waste of time and energy and nerve force there is by constant worry! One night of prayer will save us from many nights of insomnia. Time spent in prayer is not wasted, but time invested at big interest.

RA Torrey

JC Ryle warned further:

Backsliding generally first begins with neglect of private prayer. Bibles read without prayer; sermons heard without prayer; marriages contracted without prayer; journeys undertaken without prayer; residences chosen without.

JC Ryle

On that note about sermons heard without prayer - how many of you prayed ahead of this study this morning? Will you pray after it? Not here - but at home. I think this is a challenge to all of us. I know it is to me.

If there's one impact I hope this sermon has on each of us this morning, it is that we would not neglect prayer. To do so will affect our own lives, our relationship with others, and it will affect the life of this church family too.

We don't always feel like praying - pray anyway

Fourth, another moment of honesty for us - we don't always feel like praying. But that doesn't change the fact that we need to pray. RA Torrey said this:

When we feel least like praying is the time we need most to pray. Many of the most blessed seasons of prayer I have ever known have begun with a feeling of utter deadness and prayerlessness, but in my helplessness and coldness I have cast myself upon God.

RA Torrey

If it helps, think of prayer like sleep. They are both necessary, and both neglected. And we think we can get away with small amounts simply because there are other things to do! But like a lack of sleep affects your performance at work, your relationships at home, and your energy for other things - so a lack of prayer affects all that you put your hand to, your relationship with God (and I suggest with other people too), and your enthusiasm or zeal for the things of God. As cutting out sleep isn't an option for a healthy lifestyle, so cutting out prayer isn't an option for a healthy spiritual life.

We can make it ineffective

Fifth, just as our lifestyle choices affect our *quality* of sleep - so our daily choices affect our prayer life too. AW Tozer was direct as ever when he said:

Prayer will become effective when we stop using it as a substitute for obedience.

AW Tozer

That is, we can't keep praying that God would do something, when our lack of obedience is the reason that something isn't happening. Of course, this is scriptural. We read in Psalm 66:18:

Psalm 66:18

If I regard iniquity in my heart,
The Lord will not hear.

Once again, prayer is wonderful and critically important. But it's easy to neglect and we don't always feel like doing it - therefore we should be especially committed to doing it, ensuring that we are not using it as a substitute for obedience or action on our part.

1 Kings chapter 18

So then, with that said, let's take a look at what happens in 1 Kings chapter 18 where Elijah will pray and see an instant answer from the Lord.

As some background, King Ahab was ruling Israel at this time, and previously in chapter 16 we find his character described in that *"Ahab the son of Omri did evil in the sight of the LORD, more than all who were before him."* and *"Ahab did more to provoke the LORD God of Israel to anger than all the kings of Israel who were before him."* It's clear he was a wicked man.

And so in chapter 17 Elijah had proclaimed there would be a drought in the land. During this time, God sustained Elijah, first through ravens bringing him food, and secondly through the provision of a widow, who in turn was provided for by God who ensured neither her flour or oil ran out. This is the same widow whose sick son Elijah prayed for and revived.

Then, in chapter 18, we see God instruct Elijah, three years into this drought, to go and talk with king Ahab. And in the the first 19 verses that Hazel read earlier, we see them meet, and Elijah say:

1 Kings 18:18-19

"...I have not troubled Israel, but you and your father's house have, in that you have forsaken the commandments of the LORD and have followed the Baals. Now therefore, send and gather all Israel to me on Mount Carmel, the four hundred and fifty prophets of Baal, and the four hundred prophets of Asherah, who eat at Jezebel's table."

So this sets the stage for what will happen in the next 20 verses or so, with the location being Mount Carmel which overlooks the bay of Haifa and the Mediterranean sea. The Bible passage continues...

1 Kings 18:20-21

So Ahab sent for all the children of Israel, and gathered the prophets together on Mount Carmel. And Elijah came to all the people, and said, "How long will you falter between two opinions? If the LORD is God, follow Him; but if Baal, follow him." But the people answered him not a word.

Elijah here challenges the people who were one minute worshipping God, and the other minute the false god Baal. They were double minded - something James warns against in his letter. And they didn't answer because they knew they were guilty of what he accused them of.

1 Kings 18:22-24

Then Elijah said to the people, "I alone am left a prophet of the LORD; but Baal's prophets are four hundred and fifty men. Therefore let them give us two bulls; and let them choose one bull for themselves, cut it in pieces, and lay it on the wood, but put no fire under it; and I will prepare the other bull, and lay it on the wood, but put no fire under it. Then you call on the name of your gods, and I will call on the name of the LORD; and the God who answers by fire, He is God." So all the people answered and said, "It is well spoken."

So everyone agrees to the plan.

1 Kings 18:25-26

Now Elijah said to the prophets of Baal, "Choose one bull for yourselves and prepare it first, for you are many; and call on the name of your god, but put no fire under it." So they took the bull which was given them, and they prepared it, and called on the name of Baal from morning even till noon, saying, "O Baal, hear us!" But there was no voice; no one answered. Then they leaped about the altar which they had made.

Lots of activity, lots of enthusiasm - but no results.

1 Kings 18:27

And so it was, at noon, that Elijah mocked them and said, "Cry aloud, for he is a god; either he is meditating, or he is busy, or he is on a journey, or perhaps he is sleeping and must be awakened."

Essentially saying, look maybe your god is having a nap. Maybe he's gone to the bathroom. Or just too busy to notice you right now. I love the humour, the sarcasm in this. But also the seriousness. This is not a man who accepts there can be many views of God, or many gods. No, this is a man who realises the futility of pursuing or believing in a false god made by hands or imaginations. He's showing how empty and worthless that is in front of all of Israel. And it only gets more futile for we read...

1 Kings 18:28-29

So they cried aloud, and cut themselves, as was their custom, with knives and lances, until the blood gushed out on them. And when midday was past, they prophesied until the time of the offering of the evening sacrifice. But there was no voice; no one answered, no one paid attention.

People can get easily caught up in rituals, routines, show, atmosphere, smoke machines, incense, even what looks like sincere commitment, but you have to look at the results - here it was all empty. Sincerity isn't a measure of truth.

1 Kings 18:30-35

Then Elijah said to all the people, "Come near to me." So all the people came near to him. And he repaired the altar of the LORD that was broken down. And Elijah took twelve stones, according to the number of the tribes of the sons of Jacob, to whom the word of the LORD had come, saying, "Israel shall be your name." Then with the stones he built an altar in the name of the LORD; and he made a trench around the altar large enough to hold two seahs of seed. And he put the wood in order, cut the bull in pieces, and laid it on the wood, and said, "Fill four waterpots with water, and pour it on the burnt sacrifice and on the wood." Then he said, "Do it a second time," and they did it a second time; and he said, "Do it a third time," and they did it a third time. So the water ran all around the altar; and he also filled the trench with water.

Why did he do this? Because, as one ancient writer notes, some would try and deceive the simple by performing tricks that concealed fire beneath the altar - only to open these funnels at the opportune time so as to give the appearance of spontaneous fire.

1 Kings 18:36-37

And it came to pass, at the time of the offering of the evening sacrifice, that Elijah the prophet came near and said, "LORD God of Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, let it be known this day that You are God in Israel and I am Your servant, and that I have done all these things at Your word. Hear me, O LORD, hear me, that this people may know that You are the LORD God, and that You have turned their hearts back to You again."

Just 63 words in English, only 32 in Hebrew. And what happens?

1 Kings 18:38

Then the fire of the LORD fell and consumed the burnt sacrifice, and the wood and the stones and the dust, and it licked up the water that was in the trench.

This fire came from the top down, rather than the bottom up. It was obviously miraculous. And so unsurprisingly we read:

1 Kings 18:39-40

Now when all the people saw it, they fell on their faces; and they said, "The LORD, He is God! The LORD, He is God!" And Elijah said to them, "Seize the prophets of Baal! Do not let one of them escape!" So they seized them; and Elijah brought them down to the Brook Kishon and executed them there.

What an incredible account, and decisive dealing with those who were leading Israel astray. What a clear demonstration of how foolish man-made gods are, compared to the God who made man and his hands. And what an example of prayer - Elijah acted according to God's will, prayed in confidence, prayed for God's glory, prayed for the spiritual need of others, and prayed for big things. There's much we can learn here.

Of course, this isn't the only time that Elijah prayed. But looking at what he does and doesn't do in this prayer should give us cause to think. Indeed I believe there are at least 9 things we can take away from this account.

He is an example in prayer

The first of those is that Elijah was an example in prayer to the people. We should not seek to pray in public to impress people - Jesus explicitly warned against that - but our prayer life should be evident to certain people. We should pray together as a church family - just as the early church repeatedly did. Indeed, prayer should be a significant part of the life of any church, and actually it is a great way that we can get to know each others hearts. In that sense, we can be both an example and encouragement to each other.

For those single or dating - consider the importance of not just praying *for* the person you meet and may marry, but praying *with* them too. Of course then, married couples - you should pray together. That's a habit that needs forming as early as possible, as, especially if you have children, it gets harder to add things to your routine as time goes on.

And parents, pray with your children. Every night without fail we pray with Judah before bedtime. We have done so since he was a few months old - he may not understand the words yet, but he'll grow up never knowing anything different than ending the day in prayer. As he gets older we'll need to think about family prayer times too - I remember doing that as a younger kid and it set a good example to me.

However, let's note - it wasn't just *that* Elijah prayed that was the example. But *how* he prayed, and *what* he prayed too. Let's take a look at those things.

Acts in obedience

Before Elijah prayed on Mount Carmel, he had obeyed what God had already asked him to do which led to everyone being present there. And, so should we obey God. As mentioned earlier, prayer is not a substitute for obedience - and sometimes obedience requires action. As one person put it, "*God is in control, but don't lean on a shovel and pray for a hole.*"

Don't pray for a Christian husband or wife when you're not honouring God in your life. Don't pray for a godly marriage, without aiming to be a godly man or woman. Don't pray your kids will come to know the Lord as their Saviour, without ever teaching them or leading them to Him. Don't pray for job security and fail to be a good employee. Waiting for God in prayer doesn't give us an excuse to do nothing.

In a similar way, we mustn't do things of our own accord without consulting God and then ask Him to bless it. It's frankly arrogant to do that. J Vernon McGee noted this and said:

You and I need to be sure that what we are doing is according to the will of God. Don't do something that you want to do and then ask God to bless it. God doesn't move that way. You have to go His route if you want to receive the blessing. We have no right to demand anything of God.

J Vernon-McGee

We need to act in obedience, before we pray, and after we pray.

Prays with confidence

When we do that, when we are following His will, when we are keeping His commandments, we can pray with confidence. I like how Sam Allberry put this:

Prayer is not the flare gun of the desperate or room service for the indulgent. It is the confidence of the adopted.

Sam Allberry

We have the confidence of the adopted. Jesus died for you. For you. His death and resurrection, so long as you have accepted Him as your Saviour, have restored your relationship with God - now; your Heavenly Father - and so long as you are not disobeying Him, you can go boldly before His throne as we read in Hebrews chapter 4:

Hebrews 4:15-16

For we do not have a High Priest who cannot sympathise with our weaknesses, but was in all points tempted as we are, yet without sin. Let us therefore come boldly to the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy and find grace to help in time of need.

Elijah was a man who prayed with confidence, because he was following God's will.

Prays according to God's will

But beyond *obeying* God's will, he prayed *according* to God's will. What is God's will? Well, He has given us His Word so that we might know it! Prayer and Bible study go hand in hand - we should pray that God would speak to us through His Word, and His Word should inform how we pray - for we should never pray for something that is contrary to the Bible.

And where the Bible doesn't expressly say what we should do in a situation, we can pray, following Jesus example, saying *Father, if it is Your will, do this, nevertheless not my will by Your will be done.*

We should always be willing to yield to His will. No matter how tough that may be in the moment.

Prays for God's glory

Another way in which Elijah's prayer in this chapter is an example, is that he prays for God's glory. Indeed, we so often focus on our own material needs, that we forget to praise Him.

Yet, when we look at the model prayer that is the Lord's prayer, which would really be better called the disciples' prayer, it both opens and closes with God's praise. And just one out of eleven lines, are to do with our practical need.

God is so deserving of our praise - let's not forget to praise Him in our prayer, and pray that things would be done for, and work out for His glory, not ours! Indeed, there is no room for pride in prayer - for prayer itself shows that we're fully dependant on Him.

Prays for others

Let's also note then, that Elijah prays for others in this prayer - that Israel's hearts would be turned to God. Sure, we absolutely should pray for our own needs, and for God's direction in our own daily lives. But we have great opportunity here - indeed praying for others is probably one of the best ways you can help yourself too.

First, it's hard to be angry at someone you pray for. Consider the sin Israel were committing in worshipping a false God. Yet Elijah prayed for them.

Second, praying for your husband or wife, your children, parents, or siblings is something that will bring blessing to your life as well! As will praying for your Christian brothers and sisters - especially those in this or any church God places you in.

And I would add - pray for those who lead and teach you. The Bible commentator Matthew Henry wrote this:

The more earnestly the people pray for their ministers, the more benefit they may expect from their ministry.

Matthew Henry

In the end, praying for others is an act of love. JC Ryle went as far to say *If you want to find out how much someone loves you, find out how much they pray for you.* - but turn that on its head... how much do you love others? How much do you pray for for them?

Prays for spiritual needs

Next, note that Elijah prays for the spiritual needs of the people. There are many practical needs in our lives, but I suggest it is important for us to prioritise spiritual needs over practical ones.

It would be better that the first thing we pray for each day isn't missing cats, new cars or new jobs. But rather that we'd please Him in all we do, and that we'd share the gospel, that we'd please Him in all we do, and that we'd understand more of His Word.

Where we do pray for the practical, let us pray fully yielded to His will - that we would be good stewards of the time and finances He has given us. That He would guide us in our choice of jobs, or choice of friends. That our daily decisions in all things would honour Him.

Prays simply

Another thing to note about Elijah's prayer is that he prayed just 32 Hebrew words, and fire fell from heaven. Long prayers are not necessary. Charles Spurgeon put this so well:

Short prayers are long enough. There were but three words in the petition that Peter gasped out, but they were sufficient for his purpose. Not length but strength is desirable. A sense of need is a mighty teacher of brevity. If our prayers had less of the tail feathers of pride and more wing, they would be all the better.

Charles Spurgeon

There is no need for our prayers to go on after we've finished.

Prays boldly

Now lastly, when we look at Elijah's prayer, we see he prayed boldly. Not just in terms of confidence, but in how grand his request was too - he'd rebuilt the altar, prepared the sacrifice, and was praying God would send down fire from heaven onto this soggy offering. And He did. The fire utterly consumed it.

Again, we must be obedient to God, pray within His will, and for His glory. But when we do, we should perhaps pray more often for bigger things. This comment from Milton Jones has been on my mind recently:

When we finally understand that God is paying the bill in this restaurant, some of us may wish we'd been a lot more audacious with what we'd asked for in the first place.

Milton Jones

Do we limit what we pray for because we think God is somehow limited? Or that we are only good enough for a small blessing from Him? Friends, if He was willing to send Jesus to die for you, will He not bless you with what you ask, so long as it is within His will and in His timing?

We read in Romans chapter 8...

Romans 8:31-32

What then shall we say to these things? If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not spare His own Son, but delivered Him up for us all, how shall He not with Him also freely give us all things?

Conclusion

Elijah is a great example in these things. He's a great example in prayer. But as one song said well "*prayer works when you take the time to pray*". That is, we need to pray. We can't keep it for special occasions. We must pray, and pray often. Individually, collectively, and with each other as we have opportunity.

I remember a phrase my Mum noted down for me as a child - 7 days without prayer makes one weak. Let's not wait until next Sunday to pray anything more than a quick momentary prayer.

Application questions

As you go home this week, consider Elijah's example in prayer and ask yourself:

- Are you setting an example in prayer where you should?
- Are you acting in obedience?
- Are you praying in confidence?
- Are you praying according to God's will?
- Are you praying for His glory?
- Are you praying for others?

- Are you praying for spiritual needs?
- Are you praying simply?
- Are you praying boldly?

Let's pray.