

Effectual, Fervent Prayer

James 5:16-18

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Turn with me to James 5:16. The second half of that verse is a promise you'll hear me quote frequently: "**The effectual fervent prayer of a righteous man availeth much.**" That's the King James Version. I want to look at that text and its context this morning, to get us thinking about the importance of prayer as we approach the New Year.

James 5. And we're going to home in on two and a half verses this morning, starting in the middle of verse 16. I'll read from the English Standard Version:

The prayer of a righteous person has great power as it is working.

17 Elijah was a man with a nature like ours, and he prayed fervently that it might not rain, and for three years and six months it did not rain on the earth.

18 Then he prayed again, and heaven gave rain, and the earth bore its fruit.

Now, notice what James is saying. This is a promise that prayer is effectual. God answers the fervent prayer of a righteous man. When we ask in faith—when the prayer comes from a heart of faith—God answers. That's the same promise Jesus made in Matthew 21:22: "**Whatever you ask in prayer, you will receive, if you have faith.**" Mark 11:24:

"Whatever you ask in prayer, believe that you have received it, and it will be yours." First John 5:14-15: **"this is the confidence that we have toward him, that if we ask anything according to his will he hears us. And if we know that he hears us in whatever we ask, we know that we have the requests that we have asked of him."**

Now, notice what all those verses are saying. Those aren't promises that you can manipulate God with your praying. The apostle John says, **"If we ask any thing according to his will, he hears us."** True faith is confidence in the power and the promises of God. Faith is not some kind of blind gullibility or presumption, as if you could get God to do what you want simply by convincing yourself that you'll get what you want if you think hard enough about it. That's what some of the charlatans on religious television teach, and they sometimes quote Mark 11:24 (**"Whatever you ask in prayer, believe that you have received it, and it will be yours."**) But that's not what Jesus meant when he spoke about the prayer of faith.

Genuine faith is grounded in God's promises and a true understanding of God's will. If you think God is going to grant a prayer request that is inconsistent with His character; if you imagine that He is going to do something that contradicts His promises; if you delude yourself into thinking He will give you anything that is contrary to His Word; or if you think He's going to say yes to a prayer

request that is in conflict with His will for you—it doesn't matter how much you have managed to convince yourself to believe in what you're praying for, that is not faith; it's *presumption*.

If you pray presumptuously, you're also praying selfishly. And in James 4, we are told that selfish prayers go unanswered. James 4:3: **"You ask and do not receive, because you ask wrongly, to spend it on your passions."**

So when Jesus tells us to pray in faith and not to doubt, that's not a lesson about positive thinking. Scripture isn't encouraging us to cultivate blind confidence that we can have whatever we desire. These promises ought to encourage us to understand the will of God, and ground our praying and our faith not in our own selfish desires, but in the certainty of God's promises; and in the steadfast faithfulness of His righteous character. Have faith, not presumption, when you pray.

Now, James says that when a righteous person prays earnestly and fervently, it avails much. This is an encouragement to be faithful and fervent in our praying. It's a promise that we are not wasting time when we pray.

And the person James holds up as a flesh-and-blood example for us is Elijah. Now Elijah should be very familiar to you, because a few years ago we did an extended study of his life. And one of the things we stressed is how he prayed

at every crisis point in his ministry, and God *always* answered his prayers. James says you can expect the same thing in your own experience, if your praying is fervent and faithful—if you persist in prayer, and if you pray according to the will of God, and not out of selfish motives.

After all, he says, "**Elijah was a man with a nature like ours.**" Elijah wasn't supernatural. He was a spiritual hero, but not some kind of superhero. He was a fallen human being, just like you and me, subject to the same passions and fears and fits of depression. Scripture records his failures as well as his triumphs.

But he was a righteous man, despite his sin, because he was justified by faith. He trusted God, and therefore righteousness was imputed to him. That's what James means when he speaks of "**a righteous person**" in verse 16. He's talking about believers, those who are clothed in the perfect righteousness of Christ.

Now, look at verse 17: "**Elijah was a man with a nature like ours, and he prayed fervently that it might not rain, and for three years and six months it did not rain on the earth.**" It's interesting that there is no record of that prayer in the Old Testament. Elijah first appears on the scene in 1 Kings 17:1, and simply announces to king Ahab, in Ahab's own court, that there would not be dew nor rain in Israel until he gave the word.

James, writing under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, informs us that the drought was a response to Elijah's prayer. **"he prayed fervently that it might not rain, and for three years and six months it did not rain on the earth."** Those three and a half years of drought brought the whole nation to its knees, and Elijah became known as the troubler of Israel. And finally, when it was time to end the drought, James 5:18 says, **"he prayed again, and heaven gave rain, and the earth bore its fruit."**

Now this is an episode in Israel's history that is well worth looking at, and I'm intrigued by the nature of Elijah's prayer. *This* prayer—when it was time for the drought to end—this prayer *is* recorded in the Old Testament. In fact, in 1 Kings 18, there's a detailed account of how the drought ended. It shows Elijah's persistence in prayer, his boldness, and his faith. And I want you to turn to 1 Kings 18 for a detailed look at this account.

We're picking up immediately after Elijah's victory over the prophets of Baal on Mt. Carmel. Elijah had called down fire from heaven, humiliated the Baal-priests publicly, and then ordered them to be slaughtered as a judgment for the evil they had done by corrupting Israel with pagan worship. That was Elijah's greatest moment of public triumph.

But public accolades were not what Elijah was seeking. His mission was to vindicate Jehovah, not to magnify himself, and Elijah's greatest work on Carmel was not yet

complete. He had come to Mt. Carmel not merely to call down fire from heaven, but more importantly, to call down rain. He had completely triumphed over the false prophets of Baal, but the full public vindication of Jehovah was not yet complete—and would not be complete until God opened the heavens again.

There's a fascinating contrast between how Elijah called down the fire and how he called down the rain. He had called down fire in the most public way, with a simple, public petition to the Lord before all the people. The prayer for fire consists of just two verses in our Bibles, 1 Kings 18:36-37: "**O LORD, God of Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, let it be known this day that you are God in Israel, and that I am your servant, and that I have done all these things at your word. Answer me, O LORD, answer me, that this people may know that you, O LORD, are God, and that you have turned their hearts back.**" There was no dramatic pleading, and in fact, he did not even mention fire. The heart of the prayer is really a plea for the repentance of Israel. The simplicity and calm quietness of Elijah's prayer made a stark contrast to all the screaming and writhing and bloody flesh-cutting that the priests of Baal had exhibited, when they were trying in vain to get *their* god to answer.

And God answered Elijah's prayer for fire instantly, apparently without delay, and in the most dramatic fashion,

sending a fire so hot that it evaporated several barrels of water that Elijah had drenched his offering with. It was a spectacular demonstration of *God's* power, in response to the earnest prayer of a single righteous man.

Now, you'd think Elijah would call down the rain in a similar fashion, but that is not what happened. In the scene that follows the slaughter of the prophets, Elijah went up on Carmel alone with one of his servants and pleaded again and again for rain. This time he went away from the crowd to pray. This time the answer didn't come so immediately or so dramatically. In fact, when the answer *did* come, it appeared in the most insignificant way—with the advent of a tiny cloud so far away on the horizon that its appearance probably would have been enough to discourage most of us.

But as we follow the story to the end, you'll see that the rain finally falls in a way that is at least as dramatic as the falling of the fire, proving that God is certainly no less powerful in the bestowing of His blessings than He is in the dispensing of His judgments. And the whole episode reminds us that God's blessings are reserved for those who pursue His promises with a patient and tenacious faith. The effectual fervent prayer of a righteous man can sometimes seem like hard and discouraging work.

This episode is also another great lesson about how we should pray. And what I want to do this morning is draw

some lessons about prayer from this text. Let me read from a section of 1 Kings 18, starting at verse 41 and going through the end of the chapter. Remember, Elijah has just ordered the slaughter of all the Baal-priests:

41 And Elijah said to Ahab, "Go up, eat and drink, for there is a sound of the rushing of rain."

42 So Ahab went up to eat and to drink. And Elijah went up to the top of Mount Carmel. And he bowed himself down on the earth and put his face between his knees.

43 And he said to his servant, "Go up now, look toward the sea." And he went up and looked and said, "There is nothing." And he said, "Go again," seven times.

44 And at the seventh time he said, "Behold, a little cloud like a man's hand is rising from the sea." And he said, "Go up, say to Ahab, 'Prepare your chariot and go down, lest the rain stop you.'"

45 And in a little while the heavens grew black with clouds and wind, and there was a great rain. And Ahab rode and went to Jezreel.

46 And the hand of the LORD was on Elijah, and he gathered up his garment and ran before Ahab to the entrance of Jezreel.

Now, there are three characteristics of Elijah's prayer that I want to call your attention to. These features should characterize how all of us pray. They're the very features

Jesus stressed when He taught us to pray. And I'll give them to you as we begin, and these will form our outline as we go through the passage. First, he prayed privately. Second, he prayed passionately. Third, he prayed persistently. And let's study these aspects of Elijah's prayer one at a time:

1. ELIJAH PRAYED PRIVATELY.

By the time you get to this point in the biblical account of Elijah's life, Scripture has already recorded some remarkable instances of Elijah's praying, with miraculous answers to his prayers. In chapter 17, he prayed that God would restore life to the dead son of the widow of Zarephath, and the Lord raised that little boy from the dead. Then earlier in chapter 18, Elijah prayed for fire from heaven, and the fire fell and consumed his sacrifice in the sight of all Israel. We also know from James, of course, that he had prayed for the drought. So three times we know he has prayed and the Lord has answered with miracles.

The prayer for fire from heaven was the only one of those prayers that was prayed in public. The others are private prayers. And even now, at the height of his victory on Mt. Carmel, when a lesser man would want to bask in the amazement of the crowd and savor the public aspect of his victory, Elijah retreats to pray to the Lord in private.

I like what he says to Ahab (v. 41): "**Go up, eat and drink, for there is a sound of the rushing of rain.**" Here you see something of the contrasting characters of Elijah and Ahab. Elijah had come alone to Mt. Carmel. Ahab apparently had prepared and brought some kind of feast along with him, no doubt fully expecting that he would be celebrating the demise of his most hated enemy.

And Ahab came with a large crowd. For one thing, he had brought 450 of Jezebel's prophets. He had apparently also brought a number of people from the royal court, royal servants, tents, a movable feast—everything he needed to have a celebration on one of the plateaus of Mt. Carmel as soon as the showdown was over. The only person who seems to have been missing from the showdown was Jezebel. For reasons that Scripture does not explain, she was not there on Mt. Carmel, and that is why (according to 1 Kings 19:1) Ahab had to report to her what had happened when he got back to Jezreel.

Now, Ahab was apparently not quite the sort of fanatical Baal-worshiper his wife was. He doesn't seem to have been a religious man at all. He tolerated and to some degree participated in Jezebel's evil religious practices, but it was Jezebel, not Ahab, whose commitment to Baal set the spiritual standard for Ahab's regime. She was the wicked force behind the paganism in Israel during the years of

Ahab's reign. First Kings 21:25 says, "**There was none who sold himself to do what was evil in the sight of the LORD like Ahab, whom Jezebel his wife incited [urged on; stirred up].**"

Notice that according to 1 Kings 19:2, it was *Jezebel* who went into a rage when she heard about the slaughter of the prophets. Ahab was there on Mt. Carmel when it occurred, and he couldn't stop it. In fact, he comes across like someone who was afraid of Elijah.

Everything Scripture tells us about him suggests that Ahab was a weak man, utterly lacking in character and convictions. He was undoubtedly intimidated when the crowd's mood turned against him and all he stood for, and people suddenly fell on their faces, shouting "**The LORD, he is God; the LORD, he is God**" (v. 39). So he would naturally have been reluctant to try to intervene when the mob started rounding up the baal-prophets to behead them. But even if craven fear was the main thing that kept him silent on Mt. Carmel, he still does not seem to have regarded the killing of the Baal-priests as a *personal* loss the way Jezebel did. It didn't enflame his passions the way it enflamed hers. They weren't Ahab's Baal-priests; it wasn't his religion—all of that was a reflection of Jezebel's obsession.

In fact, after it was all over, he seems to have been eager to get on with his banquet anyway, and Elijah sensed that. So there's probably a tone of utter contempt and indignation

in Elijah's voice when he says to Ahab, "**Go, eat and drink.**" There's also an amazing attitude of *authority* in Elijah's words. He was dismissing Ahab from his presence. He wanted to be alone with God, and Ahab was at this moment an unwanted distraction to him. Elijah just wanted to be rid of his presence.

Ahab may have been relieved just to get away with his life. He also now had a promise from Elijah that the three-and-a-half-year drought would soon end, and rain would be abundant once more. Beyond that, there was not a lot for Ahab to celebrate, because he had to go home and tell his wife that all her priests had been defeated and killed because of one solitary man. But Ahab was not going to miss the opportunity for a feast. So he went to the plateau where his tents were pitched and his was banquet ready. Verse 42 says, "**So Ahab went up to eat and to drink.**

"And Elijah went up to the top of Mount Carmel. And he bowed himself down on the earth and put his face between his knees." Going up to the very pinnacle of Carmel, where he could be alone with God, Elijah began to pray for rain.

Now, someone might point out that the text nowhere says he prayed for rain. But we know that is what he was doing, don't we? Verse 42: "**He bowed himself down on the earth and put his face between his knees.**" He apparently prayed silently, or in a hushed tone that was between him and God alone.

Elijah had already won his *public* victory. Jehovah had been vindicated before all Israel, and the Baal-priests had paid for their false prophecies with their lives, in accord with the penalty spelled out in Moses' law. Elijah *could* have indulged himself with the congratulations of the crowd. He could have reveled in a popularity that he had never known before. He might have made this an opportunity to gain a popular following and set himself up with political power and public recognition so that he would never again have to live in hiding and suffer the lack of material blessings he had endured for the previous three and a half years.

But Elijah shunned all of that, and at the first opportunity, he got alone with God again, so he could pray in quiet.

This is in perfect harmony with what Jesus taught in the Sermon on the Mount: "**When you pray, you must not be like the hypocrites. For they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, that they may be seen by others. Truly, I say to you, they have received their reward. But when you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret. And your Father who sees in secret will reward you.**" (Matt. 6:5-6). If we're going to commune meaningfully with God, it is ultimately necessary to shut ourselves off from the commotion and ungodliness of this world, and get alone to seek Him in private prayer. Elijah sensed that need even in the midst of his most public victory.

There's a second aspect of Elijah's prayer I want you to notice:

2. ELIJAH PRAYED PASSIONATELY.

Notice how Elijah assumes the most abject posture before the Lord, not merely kneeling, but also putting his face to the ground between his knees. (Don't ask me to give a demonstration. My body doesn't bend that way anymore.)

When Elijah confronted the people of Israel—even when he was in the presence of Ahab—he stood resolutely, unbendingly, strong and erect before them. He was no wimp. He wasn't a weakling who bowed before any man.

But when he went before God in prayer, he bowed as low as his frame would permit him to bow. Remember when he prayed for the widow's dead son back in 1 Kings 17:21, he stretched himself out prostrate on the boy's dead body.

Elijah's bowing posture reflects, first of all, his deep reverence for God. This is a concept that is all too often lost in this worldly and impious generation. The typical Christian today approaches God with far too much familiarity and far too little fear. The very word *reverence* has an old-fashioned ring to it, doesn't it? The typical Christian today would tell you that he feels more spiritually refreshed and invigorated by the high-fiving enthusiasm of a stadium rally than he

does by an hour alone with God in prayer. And that fact alone speaks volumes about the spiritual state of the church.

But I think Elijah's posture suggests something in addition to his fear of the Lord. He wasn't merely showing his reverence by taking this posture. It *was* that; it *was* a posture of abject humility and meekness. But it also reveals his deep passion. The expression used in the King James Version of verse 42 captures a sense of the verb that may not be conveyed in other translations: "**He cast himself down upon the earth.**" He physically threw himself on his face before God. There's an intensity in the expression that tells us this was a prayer of great passion.

Elijah, along with everyone else in Israel, had endured three and a half long years of drought. The whole nation had been strained to the breaking point by the impact of that drought. Everyone thirsted for relief, but no one more than Elijah.

Elijah saw the spiritual significance of the drought. He knew it was a judgment of God against the nation for their apostasy. The drought was the fulfillment of a warning Moses had given Israel when they left Egypt. The Lord was bringing them into a land of milk and honey. Listen to the description of the land in Deuteronomy 8:7-9:

For the LORD your God is bringing you into a good land, a land of brooks of water, of fountains and springs, flowing out in the valleys and hills,

8 a land of wheat and barley, of vines and fig trees and pomegranates, a land of olive trees and honey,

9 a land in which you will eat bread without scarcity, in which you will lack nothing, a land whose stones are iron, and out of whose hills you can dig copper.

But Deuteronomy 28 prophesied what would happen if the people turned away from the Lord: "**The heavens over your head shall be bronze, and the earth under you shall be iron. The LORD will make the rain of your land powder. From heaven dust shall come down on you until you are destroyed**" (Deut. 28:23-24). The earth as iron pictures the hardness of the soil after a long period without rain, and the heavens as brass may suggest the constant shining of the sun. But the imagery of heaven as brass also suggests the utter silence and impenetrability of heaven. It was as if a brass shield had been put in place so that prayers for rain would not reach the throne of God.

And what Moses prophesied is exactly what had occurred in Elijah's day. The earth was as iron and the heavens had become as brass. And the curse of God was over all the land. The drought signified the spiritual dryness of Israel, and the

rains would not come until the people turned to the Lord again.

Now in the wake of Elijah's victory on Mt. Carmel, the people had to some degree recanted Baal worship. And by killing the priests they had begun to put the evil away from themselves. History suggests this was neither widespread nor complete repentance, but it was a token of the right response, and Elijah knew it was time for the Lord to open the heavens. He longed to see that happen. So he prayed with great passion.

Our text in James also underscores the passion of Elijah's prayer. James 5:16: "**The prayer of a righteous person has great power as it is working.**" Elijah was a man of passion who prayed earnestly, James says in verse 17. Elijah's prayers were fervent. They were not lacking in heartfelt passion, like so many of our prayers.

That brings us to the third characteristic of Elijah's prayer:

ELIJAH PRAYED PERSISTENTLY.

Elijah had a promise from God that it would rain again. Look back at verse 1: "**the word of the LORD came to Elijah, in the third year, saying, 'Go, show yourself to Ahab, and I will send rain upon the earth.'**"

Now some people might think such a promise would mean Elijah didn't have to pray. After all, he had an iron-clad

promise from God! Why should he have to pray for what the Lord had already promised?

But Elijah did not think that way, and neither should we. It is true that He is faithful who promises, but along with His promises he commands us to pray without ceasing.

This may seem like a paradox to the natural mind, but it is clearly what Scripture teaches. Remember, it was Jesus who said, **"Do not be anxious about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, nor about your body, what you will put on"** (Matthew 6:25). He went on (vv. 31-34):

do not be anxious, saying, 'What shall we eat?' or 'What shall we drink?' or 'What shall we wear?'

32 For the Gentiles seek after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them all.

33 But seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be added to you.

34 "Therefore do not be anxious about tomorrow, for tomorrow will be anxious for itself. Sufficient for the day is its own trouble.

That's a promise to each of us that God knows our daily needs and promises to supply our food and clothing. It is a sin to fret about such things. God has *promised* we will not lack them.

And yet when Jesus taught his disciples to pray, He instructed them to pray, **"Give us this day our daily bread."** Just

because God has made a promise does not mean we should not pray for what He promised.

God gives His promises to stir our hearts to prayer, not to keep us from having to pray. God's promises teach us what we are to pray for. In the words of F. B. Meyer, the promises are "the mould into which we may pour our fervid spirits without fear. They are the signed cheque, made payable to order, which we must endorse and present for payment."

Arthur Pink commented on the same principle. He points out that "In Ezekiel 36:24-36 will be found a whole string of promises, yet in immediate connection [with those promises] we read [where God says], '**I will yet for this be inquired of by the house of Israel, to do it for them,**' v. 37."

I sometimes hear Christians complain that God does not seem to fulfill His promises for them. They can't find peace, or they seem to have needs that are going unmet, or they are frustrated spiritually, continually falling into the same sins, and even though God promises a way of escape from temptation, they can't seem to find the way of escape. If that is where you find yourself spiritually, let me remind you of James 4:2: "**You do not have, because you do not ask.**" Just because God has promised something does not mean you don't need to pray for it.

Elijah had the promise of rain. But that did not stop him from praying fervently for the fulfillment of the promise.

With his heart emboldened by that promise, he began to beseech the Lord to send the rain. From the top of Mount Carmel, where he had a good view of all sides, he went down on his knees, and placing his head between those knees, he earnestly prayed for rain.

I cannot explain to you why the answer was not as immediate as the answer to Elijah's earlier prayer for fire. All we can do is take note that God sometimes answers us quickly, and sometimes He makes us wait. Even a prophet like Elijah was not always answered *immediately*. Who are we to think God should always answer our prayers without delay?

I'll tell you this: God's delays always have good reasons. We may never see what those reasons are, but we know the character of God, and we know that He is good, and merciful, and all his ways are right. His time is the *best* time. He makes all things "**beautiful in His time**" (Ecclesiastes 3:11). He does not delay just to toy with us. He's not playing tyrannical games when He withholds the fulfillment of His promises for a time. But Scripture assures us that His delays are always tokens of His grace and mercy to us.

Often when the Lord waits, it is so that he can pour out the answer in a superabundant way. Elijah prayed for rain, and when the answer did not come immediately, he persisted. What he ultimately received was a torrential

downpour—exceedingly abundantly above what he could ask or think.

It is also true that often when the Lord waits, it is so that we can mature and learn about Him in the waiting process. We must wait for *His* time, because His time is always right.

Whatever the reasons, it is always for our good that He waits, so that our faith can be strengthened, so that we can benefit from the greater abundance of His blessings, and so that when the answer finally does come, we will receive it with more gratitude and see His hand more clearly in the answer.

Notice what happened in Elijah's case: He had a servant, possibly a youth or a young boy. I think perhaps this might have even been the son of the widow of Zarephath, whom Elijah had raised from the dead. And as Elijah prayed for rain, he sent the servant to a place high on the mountain summit where he had a view of the Mediterranean ocean. And he told the servant (v. 43), "**Go up now, look toward the sea.**"

The servant went and looked, but the sky was as dry and clear as it had been for almost 4 years. So he came back to where Elijah was praying, and said, "**There is nothing**" (v. 43). And Elijah said, "**Go again.**" And after a little while longer the servant came back and said, "**There is nothing.**" And Elijah

said, "**Go again.**" And he came back a third time and said, "**There is nothing.**" And Elijah said, "**Go again.**"

Meanwhile, he just kept praying. We don't know how long all this took, but it must have been a considerable time—hours, not minutes. And no doubt each time the servant went, he would stay a little longer, but then he would finally get discouraged, and again come back to Elijah, saying, "**There is nothing.**" And Elijah would say, "**Go again.**" And that happened *seven times!*

You'll remember that when Elijah raised the young boy from the dead, the answer to *that* prayer did not come immediately, either. He had to pray three times. But here the delay is more than doubled. Yet there's no sign that Elijah ever grew discouraged or became disheartened. He simply kept praying. He had promise from God, and he *knew* the answer would eventually come.

In fact, notice Elijah's words to Ahab when he sent him away (v. 41): "**Elijah said to Ahab, 'Go up, eat and drink, for there is a sound of the rushing of rain.'**" What do you think Elijah meant by that? It is clear that there was no actual or visible rain storm yet on the horizon. The top of Mt. Carmel is 1742 feet above sea level and barely 13 miles inland from the Mediterranean coast. From there on a clear day you can see more than a hundred miles over the horizon, and Elijah's servant saw nothing, as far as he could see in every direction.

That means when Elijah said these words to Ahab, there was not a storm cell within a hundred miles of them. Elijah did not literally hear with his physical ears the actual sound of rain.

But so certain was he of the promise of God that Elijah could hear with the ears of faith what he was certain was about to occur. The heavens were about to let loose with a torrent the likes of which Ahab could scarcely imagine. Elijah didn't literally hear the sound of an approaching storm, but by faith he knew one was coming.

And that is why Elijah did not grow discouraged or weary while praying and seeing no tangible sign of an answer. He endured as seeing that which is invisible. He remained steadfast, hearing that which is inaudible. By faith he persisted, because he knew the faithfulness of God; he had seen God answer before, and he knew that the answer would come in God's time.

In fact, that was a recurring a theme in the life of Elijah—remember? God always seemed to take the prophet to the very brink, before he finally answered his prayers. First He placed Elijah beside a drying brook, and didn't even tell him what the next step of the journey would be until the brook was completely dry.

Then he sent him to hide in the home of a starving widow, and supplied just enough oil and flour on a daily

basis to meet their daily needs, without a speck of provisions beyond what they need.

Then the widow's son inexplicably fell sick and suddenly died, and Elijah had to pray repeatedly before the Lord revived the boy. Always the Lord's intervention in Elijah's life was at the last possible moment, and Elijah seemed to live the first half of his life constantly on the very brink of total ruin. But all of that only strengthened his faith, and made him so much more effective as a prophet. Rather than resenting it as many of us would, Elijah seemed to be enlivened and emboldened and excited by it. He drew power from the knowledge that God would work in his time and in his way—because by now Elijah could see that God's timing was always just right and his ways were always absolutely perfect.

And so he calmly kept sending the impatient servant back to the edge of Mt. Carmel's summit, until on the seventh time, the servant returned and said, "**Behold, a little cloud like a man's hand is rising from the sea.**"

I gather he meant it was shaped like a man's hand, although it may have also been a reference to the small size of the cloud. The servant seems to have been utterly discouraged at that point, and that may have been his way of conveying his discouragement to Elijah. Finally, he spotted

something on the horizon, but it was small—infinitesimally small for a cloud—and certainly no reason to rejoice.

But Elijah, man of faith that he was, saw it differently and knew that it was the answer to his prayer. So he sent the servant immediately with a message for Ahab (v. 44): "**Go up, say to Ahab, 'Prepare your chariot and go down, lest the rain stop you.'**" And as the breathless servant reached Ahab with the message, Ahab knew by now that Elijah's prophecies were not to be trifled with. So he harnessed his horses to the chariot, mounted the chariot, and set out for Jezreel.

Meanwhile, that little cloud was gathering moisture. Verse 45 says, "**And in a little while the heavens grew black with clouds and wind, and there was a great rain. And Ahab rode and went to Jezreel.**" Soon the heavens were literally black with roiling clouds, and those clouds unleashed a torrent of rain and wind like Israel had not seen in years.

Listen to James 5:16 again: "**The prayer of a righteous person has great power as it is working.**" That's an argument for persistent prayer. We should not grow weary in praying because your prayer is powerful from the time you start praying—even when it seems like God is delaying His answer. And often an answer to prayer that follows one of God's delays is almost always a more abundant answer than those answers that come quickly.

That was certainly the case here. The heavens unleashed a flood.

It's at least 20 miles from the summit of Mt. Carmel to Jezreel, so what occurred next is nothing short of miraculous. Verse 46: **"And the hand of the LORD was on Elijah, and he gathered up his garment and ran before Ahab to the entrance of Jezreel."**

You know what happens in a desert climate like that when after a long period without rain the heavens suddenly open. The entire Jezreel valley would have been flooded and muddy, so it is no wonder if it took Ahab and his chariot awhile to get home. But for Elijah to pass him on foot is nothing short of miraculous. I used to run long distances in my youth, and I have run 20 miles several times. And I have to tell you that it would be difficult under any circumstances to overtake and pass a chariot.

And imagine the impression this made on Ahab! In his utterly pagan mind he must have been thinking that Elijah was some kind of God himself. In fact, after this episode, whenever Ahab encountered Elijah, Scripture portrays him as trembling and fainthearted.

But there is a terrifying insight into the heart of Ahab in this account. Notice that he had no doubt whatsoever about whether Elijah's words were true. When Elijah told him it was going to rain, He knew he had better saddle up

immediately and get home! He also had no doubt about Elijah's credentials. He had repeatedly seen the prophet do supernatural things. He knew these represented and verified the claims of Jehovah. And yet Ahab remained as stubborn and hard-hearted as ever in his hatred of Elijah and the God he represented. He was convinced but not converted. He was actually now in a worse state than if he had never witnessed Elijah's miracles.

But **"the prayer of a righteous person has great power as it is working."** Here's what James is saying: your prayer life ought to be the most exciting and exhilarating aspect of your spiritual life. If you're not seeing answers to your prayers, it's not because there's something wrong with *God*. The problem is with your own prayer life. **"You do not have, because you do not ask. You ask and do not receive, because you ask wrongly, to spend it on your passions."** Learn to pray passionately, persistently, according to the will of God, and the Word of God guarantees that your prayers will avail *much*.