

God's Friend, Elijah the Tishbite
How the Fervent Praying of a Faithful Servant
Changes Everything!

"A Journey through James"
Sermon 22

Texts: James 5:16-20; Deut. 11:13-16; 1 Kings 18:20-21, 36-39

James 5:16-20 *Therefore, confess your sins to one another and pray for one another, that you may be healed. 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.¹⁹ My brothers, if anyone among you wanders from the truth and someone brings him back,²⁰ let him know that whoever brings back a sinner from his wandering will save his soul from death and will cover a multitude of sins.*

Deuteronomy 11:13-16 *"And if you will indeed obey my commandments that I command you today, to love the LORD your God, and to serve him with all your heart and with all your soul."¹⁴ **he will give the rain for your land in its season, the early rain and the later rain**, that you may gather in your grain and your wine and your oil.¹⁵ And he will give grass in your fields for your livestock, and you shall eat and be full.¹⁶ **Take care lest your heart be deceived, and you turn aside and serve other gods and worship them;**¹⁷ then the anger of the LORD will be kindled against you, and he will shut up the heavens, so that there will be no rain, and the land will yield no fruit, and you will perish quickly off the good land that the LORD is giving you.*

1 Kings 18:20-21, 36-39 *So Ahab sent to all the people of Israel and gathered the prophets together at Mount Carmel.²¹ And Elijah came near to all the people and said, "How long will you go limping between two different opinions? If the LORD is God, follow him; but if Baal, then follow him." And the people did not answer him a word. . . .³⁶ And at the time of the offering of the oblation, Elijah the prophet came near and said, "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.**"³⁷ 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.**"³⁸ Then the fire of the LORD fell and consumed the burnt offering and the wood and the stones and the dust, and licked up the water that was in the trench.³⁹ **And when all the people saw it, they fell on their faces and said, "The LORD, he is God; the LORD, he is God."***

As James brings the final pieces of his letter into view, they form a very clear and unexpected perspective that James wants us to embrace as we strive to display our living faith in the dark spaces and hard places that make up the little kingdoms of the world.

Earlier in the chapter he compares our ministry to that of a faithful farmer who works diligently and waits patiently for God to bring forth a precious and valuable harvest (5:7). Doing this in hard places and dark spaces will require that we “strengthen our soul” so that our faith remains whole-hearted, single-focused, and fully trusting in God and His promises (5:8; cf. 1:5-8).

The harvest we are waiting for God to send is the same harvest that God’s friends the Prophets looked for as they persevered graciously in the face of unjust persecution (5:10). It was the harvest Job anticipated as he faithfully endured prolonged, painful, unexplained suffering (5:11).

In 5:13-16, James tells us God consecrates some of His servants to similar assignments that involve personal opposition or unexplained suffering because He intends to use them in hard places and dark spaces to bring about a **harvest of righteousness in people** (3:18; 5:20) for His glory.

What will sustain these gospel servants and give success to their mission as they sow seeds of gospel grace in that hard soil, is fervent, faith-filled praying that overcomes all obstacles! To illustrate what this kind of powerful praying looks like, James introduces us to the final friend of God mentioned in his letter – **Elijah the Tishbite**.

The particular event James recounts from Elijah’s ministry directs our attention to the time in Israel’s history when ***God called a Nobody to go to a Somebody to tell Everybody that God wanted a Word about His Word with His people for His glory and their good.***

James wants us to see that the amazing events in Elijah’s story happened because an unknown, humble, ordinary, faithful follower of God prayed fervently and spoke faithfully to magnify His name and rescue His people. And the prayer of this righteous man had great power and brought about amazing change as it worked (5:16b).

In Elijah’s day, God’s people had wandered far from the path set forth in the Word of Truth God had given them in the Law of Moses. They were guilty of the same

kinds of rampant wickedness and moral filthiness that James confronts in the lives of his readers (1:21). Ahab and his wicked wife Jezebel caused God's people to wander far from the way of righteousness taught by the "word of truth" that James mentions (1:18). But God was not done with His people nor was He unfaithful to His covenant, so he raised up a humble, faithful, righteous servant and appointed him to the painful ministry of bringing His wandering people back to their God.

I. Who is the Nobody? (5:16b - 17)

The prayer of a righteous person has great power as it is working. Elijah was a man with a nature like ours...

- James points to Elijah as the example of a righteous man whose fervent prayers accomplish amazing things. So what is the portrait of this righteous man? What does James mean for us to understand when he calls for righteous people to pray like "righteous" Elijah prayed?
- **He was ordinary** – a man with similar feelings and experiences
- **He was humble** – not introduced with a long and stellar genealogy; no list of ministerial accomplishments or prophetic credentials; we are not even sure where his hometown was located. Elijah was a very ordinary person who was called by God to do some very extraordinary things (note that there are five major miracles associated with Elijah).
- He was **obedient and faithful** – everything he did and every word he spoke – *"all these things were done according to Thy Word"* (18:36).
- **He was whole-hearted, single-focused, and fully trusting** – he followed the Lord where God directed without question and without wavering. He went to Ahab with a preposterous proclamation. He went to the brook to be fed by a raven (an unclean bird); He went to the heart of Jezebel's homeland to be cared for by a widow; he trusted God to raise a dead son; and then he stood before an entire nation and asked God to send fire on an altar drenched with water in the middle of a drought. This man did not doubt (James 1:6). He was not double minded or unstable in his ways (James 1:8).
- **He was bold and gracious in persecution** – his tongue did not send a mixed message about God. Unlike Ahab, Elijah's tongue pointed people to obey Wisdom from above. Unlike the tongues of the false prophets, Elijah's tongue was not set on fire from hell, nor did it morally stain and defile the entire

nation (James 3:6-7). And unlike Israel's silent tongue that answered not a word, Elijah challenged them to choose God or Baal as their God (1 Kings 18:21). His tongue constantly spoke truth, blessed God, and ministered grace to his hearers because it was tamed/controlled by God (James 3:7-12).

- ***He faithfully endured suffering and hardship*** – even when exhausted, afraid, emotionally drained, and at the end of his strength (*I have enough* 1 Kings 19:4), he talked to God; he followed God's instruction; he listened to God; and he obeyed God! (1 Kings 19)
- ***He was fervent in his praying*** – James tells us a detail that the King's narrative doesn't. James reveals that long before Elijah appeared before Ahab to announce the drought, he had been praying. And all through these three chapters, Elijah's words and deeds are accompanied by a spirit of fervent, desperate praying.
- ***So what did he pray for?*** He prayed that God's name would be exalted; that God's servant would be vindicated; and that God's people would repent, be healed, and be restored. Listen to the words of his key prayer on Mt. Carmel: *"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!"* (1 King 18:36-37)
- And when this "nobody" prayed, God heard and fire fell from heaven, then the people fell before God, and finally rain fell from heaven and healed the land!
- This is what James has in mind when he urges you and me to pray these kinds of prayers out of our faithful lives and undivided hearts! This is what it means in James to be "righteous."
- ***God sent this faithful "nobody" to a "Somebody" with a message.***

II. Who was the Somebody? (1 Kings 16:30-33)

And Ahab the son of Omri did evil in the sight of the LORD, more than all who were before him. ³¹ And as if it had been a light thing for him to walk in the sins of Jeroboam the son of Nebat, he took for his wife Jezebel the daughter of Ethbaal king of the Sidonians, and went and served Baal and worshiped him. ³² He erected an altar for Baal in the house of Baal, which he built in Samaria. ³³ And Ahab made an Asherah. Ahab did more to provoke the LORD, the God of Israel, to anger than all the kings of Israel who were before him.

- ***Ahab was everything that Elijah was not:***

- ***He was well known*** – in contrast to Elijah, Ahab was the son of a powerful king (Omri) who founded a strong and powerful dynasty.
- ***He was powerful and respected*** – in many ways, his 22-year reign was politically, militarily, and economically successful due to his political skill and acumen. He had an international reputation that earned the respect of the powerful Assyrian king, Shalmaneser III.
- ***He was wicked and immoral*** – he acted wickedly without regard for God’s law, and acted sinfully without restraint. Whereas his predecessors had introduced a false way of worshiping the true God, Ahab introduced false gods and instituted a state-supported program to propagate their worship throughout the land by the ministry of 850 prophets of the two false gods. Jezebel wanted all of Israel to worship in place of Jehovah.
- ***He led God’s people astray*** – to the point that a leading Israelite official in his kingdom rebuilt Jericho and dedicated the foundation by sacrificing his oldest son and dedicated the opening of the city gates by sacrificing his youngest son (16:34). No wonder Elijah calls him the “troubler of Israel” (18:18).
- ***Here is the overall assessment of Ahab’s life and reign*** – “Ahab did more to provoke the Lord, the God of Israel, to anger than all the kings of Israel who were before him.” (16:33)
- In the midst of this nationwide idolatry and immorality, God sent a common, ordinary, humble servant who had been fervently praying out of a broken and grieved heart to this “Somebody” with a message from the ***true God of Israel for Everybody*** that started with an amazing pronouncement – “No rain until I speak again!” (17:1)

III. Who is Everybody? (1 Kings 18:31-32a)

*Elijah took twelve stones, according to the number of the tribes of the sons of Jacob, to whom the word of the LORD came, saying, “Israel shall be your name,”³² and with the stones **he built an altar in the name of the LORD.***

- When Elijah spoke to Ahab the second time, he stood there because ***God had decided*** to restore His people and bring rain to their land (18:1). And when Elijah appeared before Ahab, he commanded Ahab to gather all Israel to Mt. Carmel for a showdown with Jezebel’s 850 false prophets. And, shockingly,

Ahab obeys (18:19-20). I would suggest that God moved Ahab to obey because these were not Ahab's people, they were God's! They were:

- **God's covenant people** – note the altar was rebuilt (healed) with 12 stones, they are called the “sons of Jacob,” and Elijah reminds them that though they are a divided nation, they are ultimately the chosen people of the One True God of Israel! (18:31-32)
- **Who knew God** – “*Israel shall be your name!*” They had an experiential (not merely a theoretical) history with God stretching back to the very founding of their national existence.
- **Who had experienced God's gracious work** – starting with the Exodus.
- **Who had received God's gracious word** – the wisdom of Torah.
- **They had been deceived by sin** – just like James warns in 1:16).
- **They had been led astray by their lusts** – just like James describes (1:15). Baal and Ashtaroah were fertility gods that invited people to unrestrained, sensual worship with both their hearts and their hormones!
- **They were sinning sins that lead to death** – the penalty for idolatry and immorality was death. This is what James talked about when he exposed the end result of unrestrained sin – death (1:15).
- **They were under God's severe mercy as a precursor to His fierce wrath** – Moses had warned Israel about this very danger that had deceived them:
¹⁶ *Take care lest your heart be deceived, and you turn aside and serve other gods and worship them;* ¹⁷ *then the anger of the LORD will be kindled against you, and he will shut up the heavens, so that there will be no rain, and the land will yield no fruit, and you will perish quickly...*
- **The root cause of all this was they were double-minded** – “*How long will you go limping between two different opinions?*” (18:21)
- You will note that these are the very dangers James addresses in the lives of his readers. Some of them were behaving badly and were guilty of spiritual adultery (4:4) because they had been deceived by sin and led by the desires of their flesh to practice rampant wickedness and moral filthiness (1:21).
- And just like God sent Elijah with a strong word of warning to these ancient Israelites, He sent James with a similar word of warning to us when we are tempted in similar ways!

IV. Who is the God who wants a Word? (18:36)

O LORD, God of Abraham, Isaac, and Israel...

- ***The One True God*** – as opposed to the many gods of the nations. “If the Lord is God, follow him!” (18:20).
- ***The Living God*** – as opposed to the powerless, pretend, dead gods. Here is Elijah’s opening statement to Ahab – “As the LORD, the God of Israel, lives, before whom I stand!” (17:1).
- ***The Creator, Sustainer, and Sovereign Ruler over Heaven and Earth*** – as opposed to the limited spheres and powers of Baal and Astaroth who could do nothing to bring rain, God sends rain at His will, by His Word, and according to His good pleasure.
- ***The Good and Gracious God of Israel*** – the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Israel (18:36) who always heard, always answered, and always gave good, life-giving things to His people as opposed to Baal and Astaroth who never heard, never answered, and never gave anything but sin, bondage, and death. Listen to the description given in 1 Kings - *They called on the name of Baal from morning until noon, saying, “O Baal, answer us!” But there was no voice, and no one answered. And they limped around the altar they had made. . . . and as midday passed, they raved on until the time of the offering of the oblation, but there was no voice. No one answered. No one paid attention.* (18:26-39).

V. What did God want to say to Everybody? (18:21)

And Elijah came near to all the people and said, “How long will you go limping between two different opinions? If the Lord is God, follow Him; but if Baal, then follow him.” And the people did not answer him a word.

A. God issued a Word of Confrontation – “How Long will you go”

- ***How long will you continue to be divided*** (limping) in your heart’s allegiance toward Me?
- James calls this double mindedness in 1:8 and it is why Israel was unstable in all their ways in this text.
- ***Your double mindedness*** is why your prayers for rain are not answered and my servant Elijah’s prayers are answered.

B. God extended a Word of Invitation – “Choose you This Day”

C. God granted a Word of Restoration – “You have turned their hearts back.” (18:37)

VI. What happened when this faithful Nobody spoke? (18:38-46)

- ***Fire fell from heaven*** – God answered definitively (18:38)
- ***The people fell on their faces*** – they worshiped repentantly (v. 39)
- ***The False prophets fell under Mosaic Judgment*** – they were judged lawfully and punished appropriately (**18:40; Dt 13:1-5**)
- ***Rain fell from Heaven*** – Mercy triumphs over Judgment

*God did this through the faithful proclamation of His Word
 God did this in response to the fervent praying of His Servant
 Elijah did all of this by the enablement of God's Spirit (18:46)*

Conclusion: What is the message in all of this for us?

Question: What moved God to show mercy and not judgment on these people? What caused Him to decide to return their hearts back to Him by granting them repentance instead of leaving them in their deception and allowing their sin to take its full course to their destruction?

Answer: The fervent prayers of a faithful servant who was willing to embrace an assignment from God that involved relentless opposition and intense personal suffering – to the point of emotional collapse (1 Kings 19) so that God's people could be rescued from their sinning.

Question: What will restore those Christian's in James' day (and ours) who have wandered from the Word of Truth? Who has become double minded? Whose lives are filled with rampant wickedness and moral filthiness? Whose engagement with the World has made enemies of God? Who will bring them back and how will this be accomplished?

Answer: Faithful servants who are willing to speak truth to them boldly and graciously. Servants who are willing to persevere graciously when mistreated by them and endure suffering faithfully before them. And faithful servants who pray fervently and faithfully for them!

Observation: Elijah points forward to another faithful servant who suffered beyond anything he suffered – who, as he was dying, he prayed fervently for God

to forgive those who were crucifying him. And as a result of his praying and suffering, we who were wandering lost in our sins were healed by his wounds and returned to the Shepherd of our souls (1 Peter 2:24-25).

And this great and good Shepherd has looked at some of us and said, will you be willing to do in your time what I asked Elijah to do in his so that I can use your suffering to return wandering sinners to Myself?