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James #20
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Prayer, Healing, and Elijah our Example
James 5:13-18

The responses I hear when I ask someone to pray for the sick that they might be healed are varied:

“But I’m not an *Elder*. And James says the sick should call for the *Elders* to have them pray.”

“But I’m not a *Pastor*. I’m not on *staff* at our church. Isn’t it the responsibility of pastors to pray for the sick? Isn’t that what we pay you guys to do?”

“But I’m not very *eloquent*. I wouldn’t even know what to say, and if I were to say anything at all, I’d probably stumble over my words and make a fool of myself.”

“But I’m not a *theologian*. I don’t know much about doctrine and I’d probably say something heretical if I were to pray for the sick.”

“But I’m not a very *mature* Christian. I’m weak. I struggle with doubt. I struggle with fear. I struggle with various temptations. I’m just not qualified to pray for the sick. Why would God ever listen to the prayers of someone like me? Why should I ever think that he might actually answer my prayers by healing someone for whom I pray?”

Those aren’t all the answers I’ve heard, but it’s a fairly representative list. I mention them because I’m convinced that ***James heard the same sort of objections*** when he urged people in the first century to be diligent in their prayers for one another for healing.

Let’s be honest. What we’ve been looking at in vv. 13-16 is fairly daunting. It’s challenging and more than a little frightening. When you read these verses the instinctive human reaction is to conclude that James simply has to be talking about ***a special class of Christians: super-saints or***

holier-than-thou type folk, the sort who never, or at least rarely sin. Surely James would lay this responsibility only on the shoulders of those believers who virtually glow or vibrate with the presence of God. Surely, so we conclude, he can't mean me.

But he does mean you. If you are a believer in Jesus, you are included in this exhortation to mutual prayer one for another, all with a view to being healed physically of whatever affliction or pain or disease from which people typically suffer.

As I said, James undoubtedly faced the same sort of objections that I face today here at Bridgeway. The reason I know this is because of what we read in vv. 17-18. In order to motivate all believers to engage in this ministry of intercessory, healing prayer, he points us to an example we should follow. He directs our attention to someone that everyone in the church both in the first and twenty-first centuries has heard of, someone whose experience of the power of prayer is undeniable and can serve as a model for us all. And who might that be? Elijah!

Just so you know, it's quite common in the Bible for an author to encourage and motivate his audience by appealing to the example of someone with whom they're familiar. Jesus did it on several occasions, one of which is in John 13 where he celebrated the last supper with his disciples:

“A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another; just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another” (John 13:34).

The apostle Paul didn't hesitate to encourage his disciples to imitate his life, insofar as he himself imitated Jesus. Of the numerous instances of this, I give you only one, where Paul pointed to himself and his habit of working with his own hands so that he wouldn't be a burden to others. After reminding them that he had every right to be supported for his ministry in their midst, he said this to the church at Thessalonica:

“It was not because we do not have that right [to be supported financially by you], but to give you in ourselves an example to imitate” (2 Thess. 3:9; see also Heb. 13:7 and all of Hebrews 11).

Already in James, in 5:10-11, our author directed the attention of his readers to certain OT prophets and especially to Job as an example of steadfastness that we should imitate.

That's all well and good, you say, but *why Elijah*? Is he really the best example of someone who prayed fervently and with power? It would appear there were other OT figures who stand out more noticeably as men and women of prayer:

God himself pointed to *Moses* and *Samuel* as two of the most prolific intercessors in the OT (Jer. 15:1; see especially Number 11:1-3; 21:6-9; 1 Samuel 7:1-14; 12:16-18). One also thinks of *Joshua* (Josh. 10:7-14), *Hezekiah* (2 Kings 19:14-20, 35-37), *Jehoshaphat* (2 Chron. 20:1-25), *Ezra* (Ezra 9:5-15) and *Nehemiah* (Neh. 1:5-11). If you had asked me, I would have pointed first and foremost to *Daniel* and his fervent and fearless prayer life (see Daniel 9:3-19).

So why Elijah? What do we know of this man?

Elijah the Prophet

At first glance, Elijah strikes us as *the least likely example* for James to cite if his goal was to encourage us to pray expectantly. Let me remind you of this great prophet.

We read in 1 Kings 17:17-24 that Elijah was instrumental in raising from the dead the son of a widowed lady from Zarephath.

Perhaps the most famous incident in his life was his confrontation with the 450 prophets of the pagan deity Baal on Mt. Carmel. Elijah was determined to call the people of God to exclusive allegiance to Yahweh, so he proposed a test. He told the prophets of Baal to sacrifice a bull on one altar and he would do the same on another. The prophets were told to cry out to Baal to ignite with fire their sacrifice, and Elijah would do the same in crying out to God. You have to see this for yourself to fully appreciate both the humor and the tragedy of it all:

And they took the bull that was given them, and they prepared it and called upon 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 that they had made. And at noon Elijah mocked them, saying, "Cry aloud, for he is a god. Either he is musing, or he is relieving himself, or he is on a journey, or perhaps he is asleep and must be awakened." And they cried aloud and cut themselves after their custom with swords and lances, until the blood gushed out upon them. 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 (1 Kings 18:26-29).

Elijah then instructed the people to drench his sacrifice with twelve jars of water. He then prayed to God to show them all who really is God.

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. 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.” 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 (1 Kings 18:36-38).

I can almost hear some of you saying to yourselves:

“Sam, stop! You aren’t encouraging us in the least. In fact, you are *discouraging* us from thinking that our prayers will make a difference. My goodness: Elijah is a prophet and worked great signs and wonders and miracles. If ever there were a super-saint, a man filled with the grace and power of God, it had to be Elijah. How in the world can you and James point us to *him* as an example to be followed?”

Let me make it even more difficult for you.

We are told in Malachi 4:5 that Elijah is the man whose “appearance” was to be a prophetic prelude to the coming of the Messiah. Of course, we know that the reference was actually to John the Baptist who embodied the ministry and message of Elijah (see Mark 9:11-13).

We must also deal with the fact that just as Moses was representative of the revelation of Law, Elijah was representative of the Prophetic. And was it not Elijah who with Moses appeared on the Mt. of Transfiguration?

Aside from Enoch, Elijah is the only person who never tasted physical death; God took him into the glory of heaven apart from dying. Jewish tradition taught that Elijah would come at just the right time to deliver the righteous man from his afflictions. This may be why many thought Jesus was crying out to Elijah from the cross (see Matt. 27:46-49; Mark 15:34-36). Indeed, in the opinion of many in the first century, Elijah was considered almost *semi-divine*.

All that being said, ***why in the world would James point us to a man who is so obviously different from all the rest of us?*** Why direct our attention to a man who was so unique and

special and proficient in the supernatural? Why try to motivate us to pray by giving as an example *a man who clearly is in a class all by himself*?

The answer is quick in coming.

“You’re wrong,” says James. “All of you are *wrong*. Elijah is *not* special. Elijah is *not* unique. Elijah is *not* someone who lives above the temptations of the flesh. Elijah is *not* a special case who lived at a special time. Elijah is *not* different from you. Elijah is *not* semi-divine. Elijah is *not* in a class all by himself. He’s just a man. He’s just like you and me. He’s normal. He’s ordinary.”

James says it in one simple phrase: “Elijah was a man [not a ‘god’] with a nature like ours” (James 5:17a). He most likely has the experience of 1 Kings 19 in view. Let’s read it together.

Ahab told Jezebel all that Elijah had done, and how he had killed all the prophets with the sword. Then Jezebel sent a messenger to Elijah, saying, “So may the gods do to me and more also, if I do not make your life as the life of one of them by this time tomorrow.” Then he was afraid, and he arose and ran for his life and came to Beersheba, which belongs to Judah, and left his servant there. But he himself went a day’s journey into the wilderness and came and sat down under a broom tree. And he asked that he might die, saying, “It is enough; now, O LORD, take away my life, for I am no better than my fathers.” And he lay down and slept under a broom tree. And behold, an angel touched him and said to him, “Arise and eat.” And he looked, and behold, there was at his head a cake baked on hot stones and a jar of water. And he ate and drank and lay down again. And the angel of the LORD came again a second time and touched him and said, “Arise and eat, for the journey is too great for you.” And he arose and ate and drank, and went in the strength of that food forty days and forty nights to Horeb, the mount of God.

There he came to a cave and lodged in it. And behold, the word of the LORD came to him, and he said to him, “What are you doing here, Elijah?” He said, “I have been very jealous for the LORD, the God of hosts. For the people of Israel have forsaken your covenant, thrown down your altars, and killed your prophets with the sword, and I, even I only, am left, and they seek my life, to take it away” (1 Kings 19:1-10).

There, you can see it: contrary to everything you’ve been told or believed until now, Elijah is not different from you. He struggled with the same weaknesses, fears, and doubts. He battled hesitation, unbelief, timidity, frustration, disappointment, and depression. Listen to me. Elijah

was a weak and broken man, just like you and just like me and just like the people in the first century to whom this letter by James is addressed.

The Fallacy of the “Cluster” Argument

Many who are skeptical of divine healing today and tell us we have little reason to expect that God will do miraculous things in response to our prayers, appeal to what I have called the “cluster” argument. Here is what I mean.

They argue that signs, wonders and miracles were not customary phenomena even in biblical times. Rather, they were *clustered* or *concentrated* at critical moments of revelatory activity in redemptive history. John MacArthur is today an outspoken advocate of this argument:

“Most biblical miracles happened in three relatively brief periods of Bible history: in the days of Moses and Joshua, during the ministries of Elijah and Elisha, and in the time of Christ and the apostles. None of those periods lasted much more than a hundred years. Each of them saw a proliferation of miracles unheard of in other eras. . . . Aside from those three intervals, the only supernatural events recorded in Scripture were isolated incidents.”

That is simply false. I have responded in great detail to this argument elsewhere, but for our purposes today I’ll be brief and say only one thing.

When I read the OT I discover *a consistent pattern of supernatural manifestations* in the affairs of humanity. In addition to the multitude of miracles during the lifetime of Moses, Joshua, Elijah, and Elisha, we see numerous instances of angelic activity (just read Genesis!), supernatural visitations and revelatory activity, healings, dreams, visions and the like. One example would be that period when *Daniel* was taken captive into Babylon along with the rest of the Jewish people. If you read the book of Daniel you see multiple miracles and instances of deliverance and dreams and visions and other supernatural phenomena.

Consider the assertion of *Jeremiah 32:20*. There we read: “You [God] have shown signs and wonders in the land of Egypt, and to this day in Israel and among all mankind, and have made a name for yourself, as at this day.”

This text alerts us to the danger of arguing from silence. The fact that from the time of the Exodus to the Babylonian Captivity fewer instances of signs and wonders are *recorded* does *not* mean they did not occur. Jeremiah insists they did. One might compare this with the danger of asserting that Jesus did not perform a particular miracle or do so with any degree of frequency simply because the gospels fail to record it. The Apostle John tells us explicitly that Jesus

performed “many other signs in the presence of the disciples” which he did not include in his gospel account (John 20:30), as well as “many other things that Jesus did” that were impossible to record in detail (John 21:25).

So, the first thing we see is that Elijah should not be viewed as having lived and ministered at a special and unrepeatable time when God was performing great miracles, such that we should not expect the same in our day.

But even more important than that is the mere fact that James cites the example of Elijah in a context where he is encouraging us to pray for healing.

The point of verses 17-18 is to counter the argument that Elijah was somehow unique or that because of the period in which he lived he could pray with miraculous success but we cannot. James wanted his readers to know that Elijah was just like you and me. He was a human being with weaknesses, fears, doubts, and failures, no less than we. In other words, James said: ***“Don’t let anyone tell you Elijah was in a class by himself. He wasn’t. He’s just like you. You are just like him. Therefore, pray like he did!”***

Don’t forget the context: James appealed to the example of Elijah to encourage us when we pray for the sick! The point is that we should pray for miraculous healing with the same faith and expectation with which Elijah prayed for both the beginning and the end of a 3½ year drought.

Thus, as John Piper has said, “this text does not limit powerful praying for divine healing to the elders, and it encourages us rather than discouraging us to think of our praying in the same category with a great miracle worker of the Bible.”

What Happens When We Pray Fervently

James refers to two occasions on which Elijah prayed. First, he prayed and there ensued 3½ years of drought and famine (see 1 Kings 17:1). Again he prayed and it rained cats and dogs (see 1 Kings 18:41-46)! You might wonder: “Why in the world would anyone pray that it not rain for such a long period of time?” The reason is that the drought that ensued was an expression of God’s judgment against King Ahab, his wicked wife Jezebel, and the people of Israel for their rampant idolatry, immorality, and evil deeds.

But it is also of significance that Baal, the Canaanite deity, the ‘god’ of Ahab and Jezebel, was believed to be the god of rain and of fertility. When it rained people conceived of it as Baal “impregnating” the earth which in due course bore its fruit in the form of crops. ***Elijah’s prayer and the resultant drought, therefore, were a direct confrontation with and defeat of Baal.***

Some have asked the question of why James says it was 3½ years (as we also see in Luke 4:25) when, according to 1 Kings 18:1ff., it was three years. Most likely there were six months of drought that preceded Elijah's declaration. This would have made Elijah's declaration of drought even more substantial and meaningful since it would have come at the end of the dry season and at the beginning of the rainy season when everyone typically expected the rain to fall.

Why was Elijah's prayer used mightily of God on these occasions? The answer is found in two statements made by James. First, he was "righteous" (5:16b). Second, he prayed "fervently" (5:17a). Literally, "he prayed with prayer" or he really prayed; no half-hearted, half-baked verbal dart aimed at heaven. His prayer was sustained and energetic and sincere and relentless.

Conclusion

If the prayers of this man, of like passions with us, can be used of God to control the forces of nature, surely God is well-pleased to use our petitions to heal our bodies and to fulfill our daily needs.