

What is an Effectual Fervent Prayer? – James 5:16-18

I. Introduction:

- A. As **James** concludes his epistle, he exhorts us to *“pray for one another.”*
1. Coming in **chapter 5** instead of **chapter 1**, should we conclude that this is some sort of afterthought?
 2. Is this: *“Oh, by the way I think it would be good if you prayed for one another?”*
 3. As taught by this and other scriptures we know that prayer is extremely important, and it doesn't matter where in the epistle, or in the Bible, we find it.
 4. The statement, *“The effectual fervent prayer of a righteous man availeth much”* is important.
 5. The question is: do we understand what it is saying? What it means?
- B. If we take this thought out its context, ripping it from the preceding and following verses, or from the rest of the Bible, *“The effectual fervent prayer of a righteous man availeth much”* becomes problematic.
1. How does prayer accomplish things and exactly what does it do. How does it avail?
 2. If we read these ten words in the context of modern, shallow theology, they can create problems.
 - a. I read a statement the other days saying that this verse is **more doubted** than **denied**.
 - b. In other words, Christians have more problems with it than non-Christians.
 3. For example, if as Jesus said in **Matthew 6:8**, *“your Father knoweth what things ye have need of, before ye ask him,”* then how is **James 5:16** true?
 - a. For instance, do our prayers teach the omniscient God anything He doesn't already know?
 - b. Then how are our fervent prayers effectual or availing?
 4. And if the Lord is loving and good, especially to His children, is He going to withhold His blessings simply because we aren't as fervent in prayer as we should be?
 5. Furthermore, if God has determined from eternity what He will do, then how can our prayers avail even a little?
 - a. If all the saints in all the world unite themselves in prayer all at once about one particular thing – are they going to change God's mind or make Him do something He wasn't already going to do?
 6. And does human emotion – or fervency – impress the Lord or somehow change Him?
 7. Under these circumstances, how does *“the effectual fervent prayer of a righteous man avail in anything?”*
 8. After making his statement, James says, *“Let me explain, by giving you an example.”*

II. Consider **ELIJAH**, or as the New Testament identifies him: **ELIAS**.

- A. *“Elias was a man subject to like passions as we are, and he prayed earnestly that it might not rain: and it rained not on the earth by the space of three years and six months. And he prayed again, and the heaven gave rain, and the earth brought forth her fruit.”*
1. Having looked at this man several times over the last couple years, I didn't really intend to look at him again, but he is really important to the question.
 - a. We considered him in our study of faith, because he was a man of faith.
 - b. I believe that Bro. Austin long before that, brought Elijah to our attention – in a series of messages.
 - c. Do we need to look at this man again?
 2. Not only does Elijah illustrate or explain James' earlier statement, in my study the Holy Spirit smacked me in the forehead with something I had never seen before.
 3. Forgive me for highlighting something you probably learned years ago.
- B. We all know that Elijah was a man governed, or subjected, to the same passions & emotions as the rest of us.
1. In those earlier lessons we saw his depression, cowardice and fear, running from Jezebel into Gaza.
 2. And we heard him arguing with the Lord, inciting the Lord to thump him on the head so to speak.
 3. In other words, we can't put Elijah on a pedestal, looking at him as untouchable.
 4. *“Elias was a man subject to like passions as we are.”*
 5. But then we considered his restoration and subsequent notable service for God.
 6. Elijah had his ups and downs like all of us.

- C. Going back to James' previous verse and then to the Old Testament, **Elijah** was a **righteous man**.
1. That doesn't mean he was intrinsically holy, or that he was better than everyone else.
 2. No one ever said, *"Let's ask Reverend Elijah to pray for our sick son, because being so holy his prayers will be heard by the Lord before ours."*
 3. No, the *"prayer of a righteous man,"* simply refers to someone who has been made righteous by the grace of God.
 4. He has been redeemed and regenerated. He is a child of God, like any other believer.
 5. *"Elias was a man subject to like passions as we are,"* **BUT** he was **justified** – declared **righteous** just like you.
- D. From there **James** reminds us: Elijah prayed that it not rain, and the God of the universe stopped the rain.
1. Then after 42 months of drought, Elijah prayed that the rains return, and they did – in abundance.
 2. I have known these things for years, and you know them as well.
 3. But then I went back to **I Kings** and compared what the Holy Spirit told us **there** to what we have **here**.

III. Consider the terrible famine which struck Israel in Elijah's day.

- A. **I Kings 17:1** – *"Elijah the Tishbite, who was of the inhabitants of Gilead, said unto Ahab, As the LORD God of Israel liveth, before whom I stand, there shall not be dew nor rain these years, but according to my word."*
1. This is our introduction to Elijah. We know nothing about him before this verse.
 2. But here we read of his approach to the king of Israel with the declaration that the land would be dry as a desert until he said otherwise.
 3. From where did the idea of creating a national drought arise?
 4. Do we read that the Lord told Elijah that a deadly famine was coming, before commissioning him to warn the king of that sinful nation?
 - a. In the next verse God tells His prophet to go to the Brook Cherith, and that He would take care of him.
 - b. So Elijah was apparently sent to Ahab when the drought was just beginning.
 - c. But we don't read that God directly revealed that a famine was coming.
 5. Then what **does** the Bible tell us? *"Elias... prayed earnestly that it might NOT rain: and it rained not on the earth by the space of three years and six months."*
- B. Studying **I Kings 17** through *"James' Commentary on the Old Testament"* aren't we told that Elijah took the initiative, earnestly pleading with God to devastate his homeland with a drought?
1. *"Elias... prayed earnestly that it might not rain: and it rained not on the earth by the space of three years and six months."*
 2. Let's remember that Elijah thought he was only prophet left in Israel and that there were almost no servants of God of any sort left in the land.
 - a. I think God laid on this man's heart a desire for a national revival of righteousness and Biblical worship.
 - b. So he began preaching repentance, while praying to God to return Israel to her former spiritual glory.
 3. How long did Elijah beg God to save Israel and regenerate the hearts of its wicked citizens?
 4. After months of fervent, but unanswered prayer, did the Lord finally put into Elijah's heart the idea that the only way to get Israel's attention was with a disaster – an enemy army, a drought, a plague of some sort?
 - a. Did Elijah's prayers change from begging for revival to pleas for divine judgment?
 - b. *"Elias... prayed EARNESTLY that it might NOT rain..."*
 5. I believe that this prayer request came from the Lord, but it became a part of the heart of His servant.
 6. The Bible says that Elijah prayed that it might not rain, and God **answered** that prayer with a drought.
- C. Let's remember that part of the context of James' statement is – *"that ye may be healed."*
1. Sometimes the first step toward healing is a recognition that there is a disease.
 2. Sometimes the prayer, *"Lord, send revival,"* must be prefaced with *"Lord, awaken this people to their sin."*
 3. In the case of Israel, there was the necessity of a poverty-causing economic collapse – a famine-causing drought.

- D. Then three and a half years later, Elijah faced the false prophets of Jezebel and Israel.
1. On a plateau on the side of Mount Carmel, Elijah famously sacrificed his water-soaked offering to Jehovah.
 2. And in *I Kings 18:37*, he prayed loud enough that everyone present heard him:
 - a. *“Hear me, O LORD, hear me, that this people may know that thou art the LORD God, and that thou hast turned their heart back again.*
 - b. *Then the fire of the LORD fell, and consumed the burnt sacrifice, and the wood, and the stones, and the dust, and licked up the water that was in the trench.*
 - c. *And when all the people saw it, they fell on their faces: and they said, The LORD, he is the God; the LORD, he is the God.”*
 3. At that point **Satan’s false** prophets were executed, and **God’s true** prophet told Ahab, *“I hear the sound of abundance of rain.”*
 4. **BUT** – there wasn’t a cloud in the sky.
 5. Elijah heard that sound by faith; he heard it because he knew the will of God.
 6. Apparently, the Holy Spirit had told him that God would send rain, but it would come **ONLY after** Elijah prayed for that rain.
- E. **James** says, *“Elias... prayed again, and the heaven gave rain, and the earth brought forth her fruit.”*
1. *I King 18:45* – *“And it came to pass in the mean while, that the heaven was black with clouds and wind, and there was a great rain.”*
 2. Without even hinting that it was God’s **eternal** will to send the rain, it **was** by God’s **power** the rains came.
 3. And I will tell you with complete confidence that Elijah’s prayer was a part of the equation.
 4. Elijah’s prayer was as much a part of that famine, as the words of an evangelist are a part of God’s plan to save a particular individual.
 5. Elijah’s prayer **“caused”** the drought in the same way as your witness **“caused”** the salvation of a lost soul.
- F. **James** tells us that Elijah illustrates his point that *“The effectual fervent prayer of a righteous man availeth much.”* What does that mean?
1. When God’s people sincerely and whole-heartedly plead with the Lord, great power becomes available which would not be there otherwise.
 - a. God has ordained that if the righteous do not pray, many times, He will not bless.
 2. The Almighty God has created a huge electrical power supply, and it is available to the righteous soul.
 - a. But He has also ordained that if you don’t flip the tiny switch on the wall, you will not enjoy that power.
 3. *“What if it is not God’s will that my particular prayer be answered in a positive way?”*
 - a. You do **not** necessarily know God’s will, but what harm is there in pleading with the Lord until He silences you?
 - b. Plead earnestly until the rains of God’s blessing come.
- G. In the middle of a certain farmer’s field was a good sized boulder, which made plowing that field difficult.
1. After he had struggled going around that rock all summer, he harvested his grain.
 2. Now it was midwinter and he didn’t have much to do.
 3. So the farmer dedicated a whole day, even an entire week, to crushing that rock with a sledge hammer.
 - a. Through the snow he slogged until he got to that big granite problem. Then the work began.
 - b. Over and over again, he slammed that sledge down on the boulder, but nothing happened.
 - c. Again and again for an hour he pounded on that rock. He took frequent breaks and left for lunch.
 - d. But after his meal he took up his work again. Bang, bang, bang.
 - e. He wondered if his sledge would survive. He felt his own strength ebbing away.
 - f. But then after 6 hours of sweat-causing, back-breaking work, there was one more swing of the hammer, and the rock split into a dozen pieces.
 4. It was God’s will that the boulder break; but it was also God’s will that the farmer fervently attack it.
 5. *“The effectual fervent prayer of a righteous man availeth much.”*

H. Now, think back to Elijah after he sent Ahab home.

1. *“Elijah went up to the top of Carmel; and he cast himself down upon the earth, and put his face between his knees,”* and he began to fervently pray for rain.
2. I don't think at that point he was being polite with God. He wasn't muttering a few religious phrases.
 - a. He didn't carve out three minutes of his time to bow before God.
 - b. He began pleading with the Lord as if his life depended on it. The life of Israel actually did.
 - c. He was willing to spend all the rest of that day in prayer. He was willing to pray into the night.
 - d. He was begging the Lord to glorify Himself with the restoration of the rain & the salvation of His nation.
3. Elijah was so intent on his prayers – so fervent, so intense and intent – that he couldn't even take the time to see if the clouds were coming.
4. He was wrestling with God by faith, and he would not let Him go without receiving this particular blessing.
5. He probably pled the needs of his wicked neighbors; he might have mentioned his own need.
6. But primarily he pled for the honor of the God of Israel.

I. This is how we are to pray. This is how we **must** pray, if we really expect God to do miraculous things.

1. Again, someone may say, but I don't know God's will.
 - a. It doesn't really matter, if you are willing to submit to what ever that divine will is.
 - b. Just beseech God for that thing which He has laid on your heart.
 - c. *“Lord, I believe that it is your will, and I believe you would be glorified, with a drought right now.”*
 - d. Or, *“Lord, flood this country with your grace.”*
2. If we are wrong in our prayer, the Lord will let us know.
3. But in the mean time, **Christ Jesus** has taught us to be **importunate** – not to give up until the rains come.
4. And **Paul** has taught us to **pray in faith**, believing that God desires to bless us.
5. But, again, what if He doesn't want to bless us? That shouldn't be our concern.

J. The only thing we are to remember is this: *“the effectual fervent prayer of a righteous man availeth much.”*

1. Are you a righteous man or woman – saved by the grace of God?
 - a. Then the primary prerequisite has been met.
2. Do you want your nation, or your friend, or yourself to be spiritually healed?
3. Then it is time to get fervent with the Lord.
4. Perhaps I shouldn't say **only** *“the effectual fervent prayer of a righteous man availeth much.”*
5. But I will say with James that such prayers do have power with God.