

Have you ever been shocked by what a friend said?

I was the new pastor to a prior church, and we had the board and their wives over for dinner to get to know them better. Somewhere during the meal, a deacon's wife was excited about something she saw on a Christian television program.

- She said, 'Jesus never prayed. Jesus only spoke the Word, and it happened.'
- Then she applied it to us, 'So, we don't need to pray, we just need to speak the Word, and it will happen.'

I was totally shocked for numerous reasons ...

1. The Bible says many times 'Jesus prayed,' even taught the disciples how to pray.
2. The next day I was preaching on John 17, Jesus' prayer for you and me. Do I change the message to appease this deacon's wife, or do I proceed and trust God's word to instruct her?
3. This extreme idea is propagated by hyper-faith preachers, the 'name it, claim it' types - who always seem to need more money for their ministry.
4. It is a corruption of the prayer of faith James mentions (Ja 5:15).

Today, we will see that there was a small measure of truth in what she said.

- She was wrong thinking we walk around and command God to do our bidding.
- But she was right thinking that when a word originates with God, we have great spiritual authority.
- However, a humble heart that really knows God, can pray powerful prayers.
- Jesus said, 'If you remain in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing (Jn 15:5 NIV).'

You see, powerful prayer flows out of a deep relationship with God.

- Postscript: I spoke on John 17 as I was led by the Holy Spirit, and they left the church a few months later. It turned out to be a good decision.

This fall, we are looking at OT characters and their stories to discern character qualities for us to embrace.

- Next Sunday will be our last character study as we transition to the Christmas season.

- Today we are going to look at one of Elijah’s stories to draw out what we can about prayer. It is all about who controls the rain.

## Elijah Prayer



The story begins in Jezreel – the capital of Samaria - with a prophetic word ...

### 1. Jezreel.

‘Now Elijah ... told King Ahab, “As surely as the Lord, the God of Israel, lives—the God I serve—there will be no dew or rain during the next few years until I give the word (1Ki 17:1 NLT)!’”

We have little context for this dramatic confrontation. It is the start of the story and our introduction to Elijah.

- We learn that King Ahab and his queen Jezebel have turned Israel away from worshipping the living God to the worship of Baal and Asherah.
- This battle will decide whose God has power to control the rain.

Who is God over the rain?

- Elijah’s name means Yahweh is his God.<sup>1</sup> We do not know anything of Elijah’s background. Scholars believe he was probably from a semi-nomadic people near Gilead.
- Baal is the Canaanite god of fertility and storm (rain).<sup>2</sup>

This challenge by the Lord through Elijah goes to the heart of Israel’s worship of other gods.

But it will take time for Ahab to realize that God is withholding the rain.

### 2. Kerith.

‘Then the Lord said to Elijah, <sup>3</sup>“Go to the east and hide by Kerith Brook, near where it enters the Jordan River. <sup>4</sup>Drink from the brook and eat what the ravens bring you, for I have commanded them to bring you food.” <sup>5</sup>So Elijah did as the Lord told him and camped beside Kerith Brook, east of the Jordan. <sup>6</sup>The ravens brought him bread and meat each

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<sup>1</sup> ‘Yahweh (Jah) is his God (Eli)’, Simon J. DeVries, *12 Word Biblical Commentary 1 Kings*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn., (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2004), 216.

<sup>2</sup> Day, John, in David Noel Freedman, ed., *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, Vol. 1, A-C (New York, NY: Doubleday, 1992), pp. 545-49 (p. 545).

morning and evening, and he drank from the brook. <sup>7</sup>But after a while the brook dried up, for there was no rainfall anywhere in the land (1Ki 17:2-5 NLT).'

Why is Elijah at Kerith? He needs to grow in his faith; Elijah needs assurance of God's provision and power.<sup>3</sup> He must ...

- Really know God. His time was spent getting to know God.
- Trust that God will provide. Where God calls, He provides.
- Just like God provided daily manna in the desert, Elijah is fed by ravens – amazing. We are taught to pray, 'Give us each day our daily bread (Lk 11:3 NIV).'
- Obey God's voice, even if it seems useless, like sitting around.

We have already learned some important lessons about prayer:

#### Powerful Prayer

- Flows from knowing God. 'Apart from me you can do nothing (Jn 15:5 NIV).' This is the key take away today. Powerful prayer flows out of a deep relationship with God.
- Is a conversation with God, not monologue. Jesus did not pray a shopping list of needs, he listened and conversed with his Father. 'If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you (Jn 15:7 NIV).' If we remain / abide in Him, then we will ask according to His will – because we know him.
- Requires obedience. Jesus said, 'I ... do exactly what my Father has commanded me (Jn 14:31 NIV).'

At Kerith Elijah is as elusive as the rain.<sup>4</sup> When the brook dried up, even Elijah had to trust God for water. He is not told the next step until there was no water. God's plans often don't make sense until later. Elijah is in bootcamp, learning the basics of prayer and his commanding officer.

### 3. Zarephath.

'Then the Lord said to Elijah, <sup>9</sup>"Go and live in the village of Zarephath, near the city of Sidon. I have instructed a widow there to feed you (1Ki 17:8-9 NLT)."'

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<sup>3</sup> Hermann J. Austel & Richard D. Patterson, in Tremper Longman III, ed., *The Expositor's Bible Commentary, vol. 3, 1 Samuel – 2 Kings* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2009), p. 769.

<sup>4</sup> 'This hiding has symbolic intent', DeVries, *1 Kings*, 218.

- Elijah is in the eastern part of Israel, and he travels right through the heart of Israel to the western, Mediterranean coast. Right past king Ahab and his army who is looking for him. He is instructed to be fed by ‘the poorest of all society.’<sup>5</sup>

He meets her at the village gate and asks her for water. She turns to get it, and he adds, bring me some bread, too. She replies, ‘I swear by the Lord your God that I don’t have a single piece of bread in the house. And I have only a handful of flour left in the jar and a little cooking oil in the bottom of the jug. I was just gathering a few sticks to cook this last meal, and then my son and I will die (1Ki 17:12 NLT).’

Elijah then gives another prophecy: ‘Don’t be afraid! Go ahead and do just what you’ve said, but make a little bread for me first. Then use what’s left to prepare a meal for yourself and your son. <sup>14</sup>For this is what the Lord, the God of Israel, says: There will always be flour and olive oil left in your containers until the time when the Lord sends rain and the crops grow again (1Ki 17:13-14 NLT)!’

- Note the timing: God will provide for this poor widow and Elijah until it rains. God is using water to show He is Lord over all creation.
- Did that sound like a prayer? No. It is like he spoke the word, prophesied, rather than prayed. That is because Elijah was merely restating what God had prompted him to say.
- The widow does as Elijah prophesies, and the Lord provides by multiplying what is in containers.
- Time goes by, between Kerith and Zarephath three years have passed.
- Ahab and the people are counting on Baal to provide rain for them, but there is no rain.

Suddenly, the widow’s son dies. The widow is angry and blames Elijah.

Why is Elijah at Zarephath? To help the widow and to grow his faith.

Powerful prayer flows out of a deep relationship with God.

Elijah takes the boy in his arms and takes him upstairs to a room on the roof and lays the body down. This is the first of three prayers we hear Elijah pray: ‘He stretched himself out over the child three times and cried out to the Lord, “O Lord my God, please let this child’s life return to him.” <sup>22</sup>The Lord heard Elijah’s prayer, and the life of the child returned, and he revived! <sup>23</sup>Then Elijah brought him down from the upper room and gave him to his mother. “Look!” he said. “Your son is alive (1Ki 17:21-23 NLT)!’

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<sup>5</sup> DeVries, *1 Kings*, 217.

Elijah is going through advanced training in faith. If Kerith was bootcamp then Zarephath is Ranger school.

### Powerful Prayer

- Flows from knowing God.
- Is a conversation with God, not monologue.
- Requires obedience.
- Must have faith – to follow through with God’s desire. Why did Elijah have to stretch his body over the boy and pray three times? The boy’s death was a test. God challenged Elijah to really believe, to push past doubt and really trust God. Jesus taught, ‘If you have faith and do not doubt ... you can say to this mountain, “Go, throw yourself into the sea,” and it will be done. <sup>22</sup>If you believe, you will receive whatever you ask for in prayer (Mt 21:21-22 NIV).’

Next up, the climax of the story.

### 4. Mount Carmel & Kishon.

‘Later on, in the third year of the drought, the Lord said to Elijah, “Go and present yourself to King Ahab. Tell him that I will soon send rain!” <sup>2</sup>So Elijah went to appear before Ahab. Meanwhile, the famine had become very severe ... Elijah replied. “You and your family are the troublemakers, for you have refused to obey the commands of the Lord and have worshiped the images of Baal instead. <sup>19</sup>Now summon all Israel to join me at Mount Carmel, along with the 450 prophets of Baal and the 400 prophets of Asherah who are supported by Jezebel (1Ki 18:1-2, 17-19 NLT).”

Elijah addresses the people of Israel who have been led astray. “How much longer will you waver, hobbling between two opinions? If the Lord is God, follow him! But if Baal is God, then follow him!” But the people were completely silent (1Ki 18:21 NLT).’

Elijah then challenges the priests of Baal.

- Let’s have two altars, two sacrifices, and “The god who answers by setting fire to the wood is the true God!” And all the people agreed (1Ki 18:24 NLT).’
- He lets the priests of Baal go first. As the storm god, lightning should be easy. ‘The only god who counts as real is the one who acts.’<sup>6</sup>
- ‘They raved all afternoon until the time of the evening sacrifice, but still there was no sound, no reply, no response (1Ki 18:29 NLT).’
- The priests of Baal worked themselves into a frenzy, cutting themselves with knives.

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<sup>6</sup> DeVries, *1 Kings*, 228.

- Meanwhile, Elijah begins to taunt and ridicule them. Maybe Baal is sleeping or in the bathroom. They work themselves into a complete fit.
- Pagan prayers try to manipulate God or get God to owe them some favors.

“Then Elijah called to the people, “Come over here!” They all crowded around him as he repaired the altar of the Lord that had been torn down. <sup>31</sup> He took twelve stones, one to represent each of the tribes of Israel, <sup>32</sup> and he used the stones to rebuild the altar in the name of the Lord. Then he dug a trench around the altar large enough to hold about three gallons. <sup>33</sup> He piled wood on the altar, cut the bull into pieces, and laid the pieces on the wood. Then he said, “Fill four large jars with water, and pour the water over the offering and the wood (1Ki 18:30-33 NLT).”

- The altar of God is rebuilt, ‘a visible reminder of the people’s broken spiritual condition.’<sup>7</sup> Come, return to the Lord.
- They poured water on the altar three times to handicap the Lord. There was so much water that it filled up a trench they had dug. This is crazy, but Elijah is doing what God desires.

Then Elijah prayed his second prayer. “O Lord, God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, prove today that you are God in Israel and that I am your servant. Prove that I have done all this at your command. <sup>37</sup> O Lord, answer me! Answer me so these people will know that you, O Lord, are God and that you have brought them back to yourself.” <sup>38</sup> Immediately the fire of the Lord flashed down from heaven and burned up the young bull, the wood, the stones, and the dust. It even licked up all the water in the trench! <sup>39</sup> And when all the people saw it, they fell face down on the ground and cried out, “The Lord—he is God! Yes, the Lord is God!” <sup>40</sup> Then Elijah commanded, “Seize all the prophets of Baal. Don’t let a single one escape!” So the people seized them all, and Elijah took them down to the Kishon Valley and killed them there (1Ki 18:36-40 NLT).’

There is no ecstasy, no cutting, or false prophesying, just a simple plea to show Himself as the true God, Elijah as a true prophet, so that the people will know God and return to Him. God answers immediately.

### Powerful Prayer

- Flows from knowing God.
- Is a conversation with God, not monologue.
- Requires obedience.
- Must have faith – to follow through with God’s desire Perhaps what bothers me most about the name-it, claim-it belief is the pride and self-glorification. Like paganism, it demands that God does our bidding – puts us above God. But true prayer ...
- Glorifies God not the one who prayed.

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<sup>7</sup> Austel & Patterson, *EBC*, p. 770.

- Turns people's hearts to God. Here, the people repent and turn back to God.

They go down the mountain to Kishon to take care of the people who deceived them.

Don't look down on these ancient Jews, it is easy to believe the marketing and societal pressure of our culture's false god. Today, secularism is a religion with specific foundational truths.

Now for the finale.

## 5. Mount Carmel & Jezreel.

'Then Elijah said to Ahab, "Go get something to eat and drink, for I hear a mighty rainstorm coming!"<sup>42</sup> So Ahab went to eat and drink. But Elijah climbed to the top of Mount Carmel and bowed low to the ground and prayed with his face between his knees (1Ki 18:41-42 NLT).'

The drought is deep and harsh, but Elijah hears by faith the sound of rain – God has spoken to him that the drought is over.

- Nevertheless, Elijah must pray. This will be his third prayer.
- God was going to restore regular rain.
- Note the humility: He goes back up the mountain to where he last heard God's voice, and he bows low to the ground. Like the tax collector in Jesus' story who stood at a distance and did not even look up to heaven. He could only say 'have mercy on me, a sinner.' Elijah's prayer was heard.

I encourage you to have a regular place of prayer. A place where just the two of you can converse.

'Then he said to his servant, "Go and look out toward the sea." The servant went and looked, then returned to Elijah and said, "I didn't see anything." Seven times Elijah told him to go and look.<sup>44</sup> Finally the seventh time, his servant told him, "I saw a little cloud about the size of a man's hand rising from the sea." Then Elijah shouted, "Hurry to Ahab and tell him, 'Climb into your chariot and go back home. If you don't hurry, the rain will stop you!'"<sup>45</sup> And soon the sky was black with clouds. A heavy wind brought a terrific rainstorm, and Ahab left quickly for Jezreel (1Ki 18:43-45 NLT).'

## Powerful Prayer

- Flows from knowing God.
- Is a conversation with God, not monologue.
- Requires obedience.

- Must have faith – to follow through with God’s desires.
- Glorifies God not the one who prayed.
- Turns people’s hearts to God.
- Starts with humility. The bold prayer of faith starts with a deep humility before God.
- Sometimes requires persistence. Jesus told a story to encourage the disciples to ‘pray and never give up (Lk 18:1 NIV).’ A widow became a nuisance to a judge. Eventually he granted her justice because she wore him out.

Elijah had to pray seven times for God to break through. We don’t know what goes on in the unseen heavenlies. Sometimes, Elijah could call down fire instantly. At other times, like Jesus said, ‘this kind can come out only by prayer and fasting (Mk 9:29 NIV).’

If you want to pray powerful prayers, you must know God deeply. You must know His heart and will and be humble before Him.

Conclusion.

This year, Connie and I have been married 45 years. We usually even work together. We have gotten to know each other so well I could probably order food in a new restaurant for her and be close to her desires.

How do I know what she wants? I have spent a lot of time with her.

In the same way, spend time with God, get to know Him. The closer you get to God, the more powerful your prayer will seem.