“Principles For Effective Prayer”

1 Kings 18:41-46

Turn with me in your Bibles this morning to the eighteenth chapter of 1 Kings, and in just a minute, we will read from verse 41-46. Of all that we’ve seen about Elijah thus far in our study of his life, one thing that should stand out to you above the rest is the fact that he is a man of prayer. In fact, that is exactly how James describes him in the New Testament. A man who is like us in every way, not a superhuman with an extraordinary ability, but an ordinary man who prayed. And so this morning, I want us to look at prayer through the lens of Elijah’s life. In this chapter, we’ve seen the confrontation of the people, the refutation of the idol, and then we see a powerful demonstration of the Lord. And a fourth heading involves the restoration of the rain in verses 41-46. What we will notice is that God does it all in response to Elijah’s praying. (Read)

Prayer is a great privilege that belongs to every Christian. It is important for fellowship with God, essential in spiritual warfare, and effective for pulling down strongholds. And yet most of us will freely admit that maintaining a consistent and vibrant prayer life is difficult. Everything we do in the Christian life is easier than prayer. We all feel inadequate in this area, we are all dissatisfied to some degree, and it is certainly not my intention to burden you with shame. We live in a secular environment that has no real concept of prayer and its relevance for life.

Paul Miller—*“American culture is probably the hardest place in the world to learn to pray. We are so busy that when we slow down to pray, we find it uncomfortable. We prize accomplishments, production. But prayer is nothing but talking to God. It feels useless, as if we are wasting time. Every bone in our body screams, “Get to work.”*

It was Oswald Chambers who said that prayer doesn't fit us for greater works—prayer is the greater work. If we were honest, most of us would have to admit that we don't have the kind of prayer life that we'd like to have. We all know that prayer is important. We would even say that it is the most important thing that we can give ourselves to. But we talk about prayer a whole lot more than we pray.

D.A. Carson—*"If you really want to embarrass the average Christian, just ask them to tell you about the details of their personal prayer life."*

That's not my goal this morning. I don't want to embarrass you. I want to encourage you. And I would say that there is not a single one of us in the room or watching online that does not want to grow in our understanding and practice of effective prayer. To that end, Elijah will help us. We ought to read these verses in 1 Kings while keeping in mind what James 5 has to say about Elijah's prayer life:

James 5:16-18—"The prayer of a righteous person has great power as it is working. Elijah was a man with a nature like ours, and <u>he prayed fervently</u> that it might not rain, and for three years and six months it did not rain on the earth. Then <u>he prayed again</u>, and heaven gave rain, and the earth bore its fruit."

Elijah is an example that illustrates the power of prayer in the life of a believer. Not for some super-saint, not for an extraordinary Christian man or woman, but for an ordinary person like me and you. Elijah has something to teach us about the importance of prayer. There are some principles for effective prayer that we can discern from this text. And it is not rocket science, nothing earth shattering. But four simple, practical principles that can transform the way you and I pray.

Number one, when you pray:

1—Believe God will do what He says (18:41-42a)

"And Elijah said to Ahab, 'Go up, eat and drink, for there is a sound of the rushing of rain.' So Ahab went up to eat and to drink. And Elijah went to the top of Mount Carmel."

The key word here is confidence. Elijah is an example of what it means to pray with confidence. He illustrates for us that prayer is powerful because of the One who hears it. The implication is not that prayer has power all by itself, but that it makes its appeal to the God who has all power. And that's what Elijah does here. In these chapters of 1 Kings, we've seen him pouring out his heart to God, asking that He bring a child back from the dead, or by asking that God answer his prayer by sending fire to consume the offering on the altar. And once again, we see Elijah asking God to do what is humanly impossible. It is the prayer of faith that is confident God will do what He has promised. This is the prayer that has power as it is working.

The New Testament word for 'prayer' describes an attitude of complete dependence, of prostrating oneself before God and His omnipotence, omniscience, and omnipresence. It is frail humanity bowing in dependence before omnipotent deity. It is the God-given communication link between heaven and earth, time and eternity, the finite and the infinite. Listen to this definition:

Tony Evans—*"Prayer is the divinely authorized means to access the kingdom of heaven and to get that kingdom to intervene in the affairs of our earthly life…it is the divinely authorized methodology to access heavenly authority for an earthly intervention."*

Effective prayer does not depend upon the greatness of the person doing the praying, but upon the greatness of the One to whom we pray! Elijah is a man like

us, and prayer is available to us just as it was to him. In other words, it is available to ordinary people like you and me. Prayer is not simply for a pastor or a church leader, but it is for a busy mom. Prayer is for the man who works with his hands for a living. It is for a high school student, the teacher, the senior citizen, and for the unemployed. Prayer is the privilege of all who know the Lord. The same God who Elijah called on is the very same God who invites ordinary believers like us to boldly, confidently approach Him in prayer. But in order for us to pray with this kind of confidence, we need to know what God has said He will do.

If you glance back up in verse 1, back before the events of the chapter, notice it says, "After many days the word of the Lord came to Elijah, in the third year, saying, 'Go and show yourself to Ahab, and I will send rain upon the earth." God had already given Elijah His promise that He would send the rain. So why pray? This brings up the question that I have heard many times—"If God already knows what He is going to do, then why should we pray at all? Does prayer really make a difference?" I would ask for a show of hands of those who have wondered that, but I have a feeling that it would just about be everybody. One of the reasons that we don't pray more than we do is due to this. We might not verbalize it, but from a practical standpoint, we don't think prayer is effective—"If God has already made His mind up, I am wasting my time praying." That's our rationale. But let me go ahead and tell you that it is totally mistaken. In His sovereignty, God has determined to do the things He has purposed to do, but often as the result of our praying. It is evident from the Bible that prayer is the <u>means</u> by which He brings His purposes to pass. It is a mystery!

Life is full of mysteries that will blow your mind. I can still remember the shock it was to my system to learn the fact that the same guy who voiced Miss Piggy in

the Muppets was also the voice of Yoda in Star Wars. Or why we drive on the parkway, but park in the driveway? I guess we will have to live in the tension of not fully understanding some things. And if that is true of lesser mysteries that will not matter in eternity, how much more true is it of divine mysteries which will? Friend, I don't have to reconcile God's sovereignty with my responsibility. I will live in the tension of that which is intended to bring me to a place of simple trust and confidence in Him. Sometimes, I think we forget that prayer is the means of fellowship with God, not simply asking Him for 'stuff.' Prayer is treated like a good luck charm or a lucky rabbit's foot to ward off evil or something to psych us up. That's how the prophets of Baal approached prayer to their false god, but not Elijah. He is praying with the confidence and belief that God will do what He has promised. If you want to be effective in prayer, you must believe that God will do what He says. But there is a second principle I want to point out:

2—Recognize your need for Him (18:42b)

"And he bowed himself down on the earth and put his face between his knees."

A second thing Elijah teaches us about prayer is that we ought to pray out of a sense of desperation. What I mean by that is that we must shut ourselves up to the truth that we are entirely dependent upon God. If the rains were to return, it would only be God who could send them. Again, keep in mind how important the rain was for an agricultural society. There is a lot that we can do—prepare the ground, plant the seed, work the field. But one thing you cannot do is make it rain. Elijah prays with the desperate approach of someone who has no other alternative, no plan-B, and no backup. And that is not just true of Elijah, but you see this sense of desperation in the lives of other men and women in Scripture.

There is the example of:

- Jacob—a blessing he could not secure (Gen. 32:24-20)
- Moses—mercy he could not provide (Ex. 32:11-14)
- Hannah—a child she could not conceive (1 Sam. 1)
- David—deliverance he could not accomplish (Ps. 13)
- Canaanite woman—a daughter she could not heal (Matt. 15)
- Paul—a thorn he could not remove (2 Cor. 12:7-9)

And the one thing that each of these people have in common is circumstances that brought them face-to-face with the limitations of their own abilities. And that is where effective prayer always begins. We come to God out of a complete sense of trust and reliance, recognizing our need for Him. Prayer demonstrates our dependence upon God unlike anything else. And of course, the best example of desperate prayer is that of Jesus agonizing in the garden of Gethsemane, fully knowing the suffering that awaited Him in submission to the Father's redemptive plan. He prayed in agony, "Father, if You are willing, remove this cup from Me. Nevertheless, not My will, but Yours be done." I think that the most effective prayer isn't the kind that demands relief as much as it is the prayer that submits to the will of God, no matter the outcome.

That is not meant to imply that we pray in order to get the attention of God, as if He is reluctant to hear. Jesus taught His disciples to pray to their Father in heaven, to pray with sincerity and purpose. Not like the religious hypocrites who pray to be seen. And not like the pagans who think they're heard because of their many words. They approach prayer as if they have to somehow try and impress God to hear to them. If I say the right things in the right way, with the right volume and intensity, then He will be impressed enough to be inclined to

hear me. There are those who approach prayer as if God's favor is something to be earned through our many words. I don't care if it is Muslim chants, or rosary beads, or language we use to impress. The point is that prayer isn't a means for us to earn anything with God. Gospel prayer is born out of recognition that we have in Christ all the acceptance that we will ever need. We pray to a Father who loves us, who is ready to receive us, who already knows what we need before we ask Him.

When our kids were small, Anita would often come by the church office after picking them up from school. It didn't matter what was going on. Unless she knew I was in a meeting with someone, they'd always come in the door and make a beeline for my candy jar. To everyone else, it was the inner sanctum of the "senior pastor." But to my children, it was where they could find daddy. Friend, you have a Father in heaven who invites you into His presence. You don't have to have an appointment or impress Him into giving you a hearing.

James says that Elijah prayed 'fervently.' The idea is emphatic. He didn't just approach prayer like some religious formality. It wasn't a magic formula or a few rehearsed words. Elijah prayed fervently and persistently. We see that in verse 43 as he sends his servant to look toward the sea some seven times. We saw the same thing in chapter 17, and I told you how this is praying with 'importunity.' Think of it as a 'holy boldness.' It is the persistent act of repeatedly asking for something in an urgent way. The word suggests pressing a request with such determination that we refuse to be easily turned away. This is how Jesus taught His disciples to pray:

Luke 18:1-8—"And He told them a parable to the effect that they ought always to pray and not lose heart. He said, 'In a certain city there was a judge who neither feared God nor respected man. And there was a widow

in that city who kept coming to him and saying, 'Give me justice against my adversary.' For a while he refused, but afterward he said to himself, 'Though I neither fear God nor respect man, yet because this widow keeps bothering me, I will give her justice, so that she will not beat me down by her continual coming.' And the Lord said, 'Hear what the unrighteous judge says. And will not God give justice to His elect, who cry to Him day and night? Will He delay long over them? I tell you, He will give justice to them speedily. Nevertheless, when the Son of Man comes, will He find faith on earth?"

Jesus said this is how we ought to pray. Not because God is reluctant to hear, but because asking is reflective of our faith. It expresses unwavering confidence that God alone can provide what we desperately need. Elijah prays, and he does so with confidence and in desperation. A third principle for effective prayer:

3—Don't quit when you don't see results (18:43-44)

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. 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."

The key word here is persistence. The effective, fervent prayer of a righteous man avails for much. As in Elijah is praying, verse 43 says he sends his servant to a vantage point from which he can see the sea in the distance (I've been right there, and you can see the Mediterranean just off to the west). When the servant comes back, he says that he didn't see anything. And notice how Elijah sends him seven times. So that by the seventh time, the servant sees a small cloud

beginning to rise from the sea off in the distance. Elijah then sends him to the king with the news, "Get your chariot ready and go down, lest you get caught in the rain." God promised to send the rain, and yet Elijah still prays, and he prays with persistence. God doesn't answer his prayer until the seventh time.

Why does God delay His answers to our prayers? Some of the things that God desires to do in our lives will only come through persistent prayer. And yet when our prayer doesn't get an immediate answer, we're easily tempted to quit and throw in the towel. But let's just suppose that you've been praying for something, and for whatever reason, it remains unanswered. Are there reasons for unanswered prayer? I believe there are, and let me mention a few:

God has something greater in mind

We often latch on to things that we desire, things we think will make us more happy and satisfied if we have them. It is often a good thing—a spouse if we're single, a better job with less stress, living in a better neighborhood. However, we forget that just because something will make us happy doesn't mean it is good for us from an eternal perspective. God knows things that we don't. And one thing is for sure, He always has our eternal best interest in mind. That is the promise of His Word in the verse we often quote:

Romans 8:28—"And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to His purpose."

It is the right request, but not the right time

Sometimes, our prayer will go unanswered because we are asking for the right thing, but it is not the right time. And by that I am referring to God's timing on a matter. The Bible says in Ecclesiastes 3:1, "For everything there is a season,

and a time for every purpose under heaven." You're asking the Lord for something right now now in your life, and He is not responding as quickly as you'd like. Don't give up and quit, but persevere and trust that He will work things out in His own time. Jesus explained this kind of persistence to His disciples:

Matthew 7:7-8—"<u>Ask</u>, and it will be given to you; <u>seek</u>, and you will find; <u>knock</u>, and it will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives, and the one who seeks finds, and to the one who knocks it will be opened."

He says, "Which one of you, if his son asks for bread, will give him a stone? Or if he asks for a fish, will give him a serpent?" I mean no one in their right mind would do such a thing to their child. We give our children good things, the things that are for their well-being and not for their harm.

Luke's gospel frames this within the context of persistence:

Luke 11:5-8—"Which of you who has a friend will go to him at midnight and say to him, 'Friend, lend me three loaves, for a friend of mine has arrived on a journey, and I have nothing to set before him;' and he will answer from within, 'Do not bother me; the door is now shut, and my children are with me in bed. I cannot get up and give you anything'? I tell you, though he will not get up and give him anything because he is his friend, yet because of his impudence he will rise and give him whatever he needs."

That's a bold request, born out of a sense of desperation. It is the same idea a few chapters later in Luke 18 where Jesus talks about an unjust judge and a persistent widow. And the whole point that He is making is that our heavenly Father is not reluctant to give His children good things. I am not inclined to get up late at night for a stranger who comes knocking at my door. But do you know

who I will get up and respond to when I hear them crying? My kids. Over the years, I've woke up in the middle of the night to Allie or Andrew standing beside my bed, "I need a drink." Or, "I don't feel good." And would you know it, every time I've responded, "Your mom is on the other side of this bed, and she'd love to help!" I'm kidding, but you get the point. We respond to the cries of our children. And it that is true of us, don't you think it is more true of our Father above?

Our children have no problem making their 'bold requests' of us. And neither should you and I think that our Father is reluctant to answer us. But we must persist in prayer, and recognize that it is a matter of His timing.

God is growing you

Another reason your prayer may be unanswered right now is due to the fact that God has you in a place where He is growing you. Doing something in you is more important to Him than doing something for you. His highest purpose in our lives is not making us happy, but making us like Christ. I mentioned Romans 8:28 a minute ago, but have you kept in mind the very next verse? Verse 29, "For those whom He foreknew He also predestined to be conformed to the image of His Son." God is indeed working for your good, but His ultimate purpose in your life is to conform you into the image of Christ.

I can't help but believe that even unanswered prayer is part of His plan to grow me into what He intends for me to be in eternity. Let me quote the great theologian for you…Garth Brooks—"Sometimes I thank God for unanswered prayer." Every now and then we're able to look back in retrospect and see that something we wanted was not in keeping with His good plan for our life. If that is the case now, imagine how it will be the case when we see Christ in His glory.

You may not be asking in faith

How we pray is just as important as what we pray. The Bible says in:

James 1:5-8—"If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask God, who gives generously to all without reproach, and it will be given him. But let him ask in faith, with no doubting, for the one who doubts is like a wave of the sea that is driven and tossed by the wind. For that person must not suppose that he will receive anything from the Lord; he is a double-minded man, unstable in all his ways."

A couple of chapters later, James says this:

James 4:2-3—"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."

In the original language, that word 'passions' carries the idea of selfish, self-centered desire. It is spiritual adultery. Sometimes God doesn't answer prayers because we pray like an adulterer. And we pray that way when we ask Him for something we think will fulfill a need in us, yet we ought to be finding in God. It is the difference in using God as a means to an end versus simply loving God. My wife meets my needs, but my love for her is in no way on that basis. I love her because of who she is. We ask God for things we want, but our passions overrule our affections and we ask wrongly. But for us to ask in faith is to keep God central in our hearts for who He is, not just for what He can give us.

There is unconfessed sin in your life

I'm not saying that we will ever pray from a state of sinless perfection. On your very best day, you still fall short of the glory of God. Jesus is our High Priest, and we pray on the basis of His righteousness and finished work. And though we will never lose the relationship we have with God due to our sin, our fellowship with

Him can be hindered. When there are areas in our life that are out of alignment of His revealed will, our prayer lives can be hindered.

Isaiah 59:1-2—"Behold, the Lord's hand is not shortened, that it cannot save, or His ear dull, that it cannot hear; but your iniquities have made a separation between you and your God, and your sins have hidden His face from you so that He does not hear."

Psalm 66:18—"If I regard iniquity in my heart, the Lord will not hear."

And in 1 Peter 3, God has something to say to husbands who are to live with their wives in an understanding way, showing honor, "so that your prayers may not be hindered." Marital conflict and relational disfunction can interrupt our prayer life. So ask, "Is my attitude toward others in check?"

Back to my question, why does God delay His answers to our prayers? I think the best answer is for His own glory. So that somehow, He is glorified through our persistence. Persistence makes the roots of our faith grow down deeper in Him. When is the last time you prayed for something with persistence? Not a half-hearted, general request. But something bold and specific. We're all too quick to quit praying for something because we don't get an immediate answer. We assume the answer is 'no.' The answer you received to your prayer may cause you to think that God did not take your prayer seriously. But could it be that the answer you received to your prayer indicates that God thinks you didn't take the prayer seriously?

Which brings us back to Elijah. He prays on the basis of God's promise, he understands that God alone can send the rain, persists in prayer when he doesn't see immediate results, and then one last thing I'll mention. For prayer to truly be effective, we must always:

4—Give God the glory when He answers (18:45-46)

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

Elijah has confidence in prayer, has persistence in prayer, and notice his influence in prayer. God answers his prayer as verse 45 says, "And in a little while the heavens grew black with clouds and wind, and there was a great rain." It wasn't just a few drops. It was more like a monsoon! And it was what the land desperately needed.

Think about his prayer earlier in the chapter, particularly in verses 36-37. He prayed that the people would know that the Lord was God and that their hearts would be turned back to Him. Elijah wasn't seeking some demonstration of supernatural power to enhance his personal reputation. It wasn't about his glory, but God's. His primary concern was that God would be glorified and His people restored. And the same emphasis is seen in his prayer for rain. God had promised to send it, and Elijah prayed in dependence upon the Lord's promise. And God answers in a way that brings Him glory. This is the way that Jesus taught His disciples to pray in the Lord's Prayer, or better the Model Prayer. He says to us, "Pray then like this." Let this be a pattern for your own prayer life:

Matthew 6:9-10—"Our Father in heaven, hallowed be Your name. Your kingdom come, Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven."

At the very outset, our attitude in prayer is worship that is concerned first and foremost for the glory of God. To say that our Father's name is 'hallowed' is to say that it is the most beautiful. It is our way of saying that God is better than

anything else, including what we're going to ask Him for later in our prayers. And it also means that He is most worthy, that His glory is the loftiest purpose in the universe. The point of my life is not to make a name for myself or to catch a little glory for myself, but to point people to God. It is in this sense that Elijah has sought the Lord's glory.

There's a sense of victory and encouragement that Elijah has in verse 46. Ahab rode to Jezreel, and the hand of the Lord was on Elijah so that he gathered up his garment and ran before Ahab to the entrance of Jezreel. This could mean that God supernaturally empowered him to get ahead of the king. Or, it could imply that Elijah now goes with a sense of divine authority. In those days, kings often had runners who traveled ahead of their entourage. It could be that Elijah is running ahead of the king out of a sense that he is about to lead a revival in Israel. I mean surely he will receive a prophet's welcome, and Ahab will officially do away with the Baal worship that had polluted the land, and lead to the people to once again serve the Lord. But as we will see, that is not what happens…

As I bring this to a close, go back through these principles and evaluate them as far as your prayer life is concerned:

- Do you pray believing that God will do what He says?
- Do you have a sense of your own need?
- Do you persist and not quit when prayer is unanswered?
- Do you give God the glory when He answers?

All of that is necessary for truly effective prayer. And so I will ask you, "How's your prayer life been lately?" Can you say that it has been <u>effective</u>? Whether you're a prayer weakling or a prayer warrior, we all begin from the same position

as believers—the unconditional, unmerited, undeserved grace of God in Jesus Christ. And that is good news!

J.D. Greear—*"Effective praying comes from the favored status that God has given us in Christ. Prayer that moves heaven comes from a heart that is confident in Jesus. Prayer that brings the peace that passes all understanding is prayer that arises from the understanding that God is in all things molding His children into the likeness of their big Brother and from the assurance that He will not fail or falter in that purpose."*

Which means that if you are trusting in the Lord Jesus Christ as your Savior, you have God as your Father. He delights in answering the prayers of His kids. Sometimes His answer is no, sometimes His answer is slow, and sometimes His answer is go. But no matter the answer, His purpose for you never changes. If you're not saved, then know that the prayer He will answer in your life is this one —"Lord, have mercy on me, a sinner!" Confess your sin to Him, and place your faith in Jesus. He died on the cross for you. He is the One who opens up the way of access to God the Father. And the Bible says that He ever lives to make intercession for us.