OPENING THE SCRIPTURES

Letting Prayer Go to Work

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The prayer of a righteous person has great power in its working. ~ Jas 5.16b

As we noted at the beginning of our study of "Elijah's Example of Prayer," in studying James 5.16–18, we must keep the letter's context in mind. James was writing to people for whom trials, often in the form of attacks from others, were a regular occurrence. Throughout the letter, he appeals to his readers to respond by being steadfast and unwavering in their faith. In a way, James 5.13–16a is a summary of that appeal. Were they suffering? They should pray. Were they sick or spiritually weak? They should call for the elders whose prayer would save/heal them and see them raised up by the Lord. Was the sickness/weakness due to sin? The elders' prayer would address that, too. Could the community's troubles be resolved? Yes, but only if they acknowledged their sins and prayed about them.

As if anticipating doubt about the practicality of his counsel, James assures (or reminds?) his readers that "prayer has great power in its working." And no, they did not have to be "super saints" for that to be true of their prayers. Remember, James says, Elijah, "a man with a nature like ours," prayed for a drought, and it didn't rain. Three and half years later, he prayed for the drought to end, and it rained. Having previously considered the question of why James used Elijah's example, we turn now to a closer examination of his assurance about prayer's power.

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Assurance Declared

We begin by calling attention to the fact that the subject of James's sentence in verse 16 is *prayer* (δέησις, *deēsis*). This is the third word for prayer in verses 13–18; he used προσεύχομαι (*proseuchomai*) in verse 14, and εὐχή (*euchē*) in the first part of verse 16. But *deēsis* is a good word in verse 16b because it "appropriately focuses attention on the petitionary aspect of prayer (see esp. those verses in which *deēsis* occurs with *proseuchē* [Eph. 6:18; Phil. 4:6; 1 Tim. 2:1; 5:5])" (Moo 2000, 247). The word is also used in other texts where prayer's petitionary aspect is prominent (cf. Luke 1.13; 2 Cor 9.14; Phil 1.4, 19; 2 Tim 1.3; Heb 5.7).

Second, notice how emphatic James is about petitionary prayer. We see this more clearly when we literally translate the three words that begin the sentence in verse 16b: "Much strong is prayer" (πολὺ ἰσχύει δέησις; *polu ischuei deēsis*). The reason for prayer's strength is implied in the way James and his readers would have understood prayer, not as some sort of magical formula, but as a means of entering into the presence and benefitting from the power of God. As McCartney affirms, prayer as James understood it is powerful only "because God responds to it" (McCartney 2009, 258). This reality becomes more apparent as we examine the remainder of James's statement.

We first note the word *righteous* (δίκαιος, *dikaios*). While James uses this adjective only one other time in the letter (5.6), righteousness is one of the letter's key themes. He uses both the noun and verb three times, δικαιοσύνη (*dikaiosynē*) in 1.20; 2.23; 3.18, and δικαιόω (*dikaioō*, *justify*) in 2.21, 24–25. Being righteous or doing righteous acts are inseparable from the practice of unwavering faith, a truth we should recall as we consider 5.16b. It leads us to see that his reason for using the word *righteous* to describe the praying person is not to point to a person who, because of his superior holiness, makes the prayer powerful. It is, rather, to stress the importance of being steadfast without wavering in making petitions to the Father who gives every good and perfect gift (cf. 1.17).

This is made more emphatic by James's use of the verb translated "as it is working," the present participle form of ἐνεργέω (*energeō*). That James would use the word *work* comes as no surprise; a form of that word is used 21 times in the letter, though our translations sometimes render it with other words with a similar meaning (in addition to 5.16, cf. 1.3–4, 20; 25; 2.9, 14, 17–18, 20–22, 24–26; 3.13; 5.4). But its use in 5.16 needs further examination.

Grammatically, the participle ἐνεργουμένη (*energoumenē*) can explain either: (1) the working or effectiveness of the prayer, or (2) the power at work when one prays. The KJV's translation illustrates the first: "The *effectual fervent* prayer of a righteous man availeth much." The ASV illustrates the second: "The supplication of a righteous man availeth much *in its working.*"

The second, adopted by the ESV, NIV, and others, is to be preferred, first, because it corresponds with the way the word is used elsewhere in the NT. While James's first readers would probably not have had access to the other writings, the way they use the word sheds light on how the first disciples understood the idea. In the parallel texts in Matthew 14.2 and Mark 6.14, it refers to the miraculous powers that were *at work* in John the Baptist. In Romans 7.5, Paul uses it with his

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personification of Sin as a power that uses the law to *work* to arouse sinful passions. In 1 Corinthians 12.6, 11, the word is used to refer to the way God *empowers* the gifts he gives to believers. In 2 Corinthians 4.12, he says that death is *working* in the apostles, but life is working in the Corinthians. Galatians 2.8 speaks of God's *work* through both Peter and Paul; Galatians 3.5 says that the Spirit was *working* miracles among the believers; Galatians 5.6 declares that, in contrast to circumcision and uncircumcision, what counts is only faith *working* through love. In Ephesians, Paul repeatedly emphasizes the way God *works* in believers, through Christ (Eph 1.11, 20; 3.20), in contrast to the evil spirit that is *working* in the sons of disobedience (Eph 2.2). He uses the word similarly in Philippians 2.13; Colossians 1.29; and 1 Thessalonians 2.13. In 2 Thessalonians 2.7, he refers to the mystery of lawlessness that is "already at *work*."

Given the context of James, in which he has consistently pointed to God and the good things he gives his people, it is hard to fathom that, when James used the word *working*, he did not intend the same sense of supernatural involvement typical of its use in the passages referenced above. Whether we take the participle to characterize the power of prayer when a righteous (defined in James as faithful) person exercises it (middle voice), or, passively, to say that prayer is effective because God activates its power (cf. Blomberg and Kamell, 2008, 245; McCartney 2009, 258; Davids 1982, 196–197), it is apparent that James intends to emphasize the power of God activated in prayer more than the power of the person praying. The NIRV's translation expresses the point well: "The prayer of a godly person is powerful. It [i.e., the prayer] makes things happen."

Assurance Applied

It remains for us to think about how this message of reassurance is best applied. Once again, we should begin with James's context. The reality is that, like James's first readers, we also sometimes suffer, are sick/weak, burdened by sin, and have troubles in the church community. We face other trials like theirs, too. James's counsel applies to us as surely as it did to his first readers.

We should keep praying; doing so demonstrates and expresses our unwavering dependence on God. This does not mean that we have to be perfect, or even match the maturity level of an Elijah. Nor does it mean God will necessarily act quickly, according to our schedules, spare us from trouble, or keep us from having questions or being discouraged. It does mean that we remember that the power to overcome is ultimately not in us, or even in our prayers. They are powerful because God responds to them.

Conclusion

We conclude with William Barclay's summary of the point:

> Above all, here is the idea that no limits can be set to the power of prayer. The Jews had a saying that the one who prays surrounds his house with a wall stronger than iron. They said, 'Penitence can do something, but prayer can do everything.' To them, prayer was nothing less than contacting the power of God; it was the channel through which the strength and grace of God were brought to bear on the troubles and problems of life. How much more must this be so for a Christian? (Barclay 1976, 153)

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An Additional Thought on James

"As a matter of fact, we are ignorant of the morrow. We do not know the weather of the morrow with certainty, in spite of our gauges and forecasts. Many railroad accidents are due to the unknown elements in the problems of travel. A faulty rail, a broken tie, a weakened wheel, a rolling stone, a careless brakeman, a sleeping watchman, a malicious robber—a hundred and one things may happen, any one of which will cause death to helpless victims. 'The best laid schemes o'mice and men gang aft a-agley.'"

~ A. T. Robertson. n.d. *Studies in the Epistle of James*. rev. and ed. Heber F. Peacock. Nashville, TN: Broadman Press, 162

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