



OPENING THE SCRIPTURES

Elijah's Example of Prayer

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Nearing the end of his letter, James singles out the suffering, cheerful, sick, and sinful among his readers and then says, “Pray, sing praise, and pray some more. If you’re sick, ask the elders to come and pray for you. And confess your sins and pray for one another” (cf. Jas 5.13–16a).

The urgency of his imperatives leads us to wonder if he sensed that some needed extra motivation. We would understand if they did; trials were a way of life for James’s readers (1.2–15). Some, for example, were victims of favoritism (2.1–7). Others likely endured the stress that comes from dealing with quarrelers (4.1–3). And some were oppressed by wealthy landowners who, though they wanted for nothing, so egregiously defrauded their workers and ignored their cries of distress that James accused them of condemning and murdering the righteous (5.1–6). “Remain patient and stand firm,” James says. “The compassionate and merciful Lord will make things right. And pray, praise, and pray some more” (cf. 5.8–16a).

Sound advice, and, since we know Scripture, what we would expect. But since we also know human nature, we would not be surprised to discover that some, while agreeing with James in principle, tempered their assent by affirming the need to be realistic. We can imagine their objections: they were *still* being mistreated, *still* dealing with people who were always spoiling for a fight, *still* being cheated, *still* being oppressed. As their trials persisted, they would only be human if they asked, “But does prayer really work?”

James is sure it does, and to prove his confidence, he reminds them that it had worked before: “The prayer of a righteous person has great power in its working. Elijah was a man with a nature like ours, and he prayed fervently that it might not rain, and for three years and six months it did not rain on the earth. Then he prayed again, and heaven gave rain, and the earth bore its fruit” (Jas 5.16b–18).

James’s confidence is bracing. But his counsel is not devoid of questions, beginning with how we should understand his use of Elijah as the exemplar of prayer’s pragmatism. Of all faith’s heroes, why Elijah? What qualifies him to be the model? And how, exactly, does his example help?

Why Elijah—and Those Prayers?

Elijah was “regarded in Judaism as second only to Moses as a prophet” (McCartney 2009, 259). But was he renowned for his prayers? We do have OT examples of him praying, notably on behalf of the Zarephath widow and her dead son (1 Kings 17.17–24) and in the famous Mt. Carmel contest with the Baal prophets (18.16–40). But, as we think about OT faith heroes who prayed, men like Abraham, David, and Hezekiah come to mind first.

But, as 2 Esdras 7 illustrates, Jewish tradition also counted Elijah among those who were renowned for prayer (Davids 1982, 197):

I answered and said, “How then do we find that first Abraham prayed for the people of Sodom, and Moses for our ancestors who sinned in the desert, and Joshua after him for Israel in the days of Achan, and Samuel in the days of Saul, and David for the plague, and Solomon for those at the dedication, and *Elijah for those who received the rain, and for the one who was dead, that he might live*, and Hezekiah for the people in the days of Sennacherib, and many others prayed for many? So if now, when corruption has increased and unrighteousness has multiplied, the righteous have prayed for the ungodly, why will it not be so then as well?” (2 Esdras 7.106–111 NRSV; emphasis added).

The reference to Elijah’s prayer for those who received the rain in 2 Esdras may partly explain why James chose the examples he did. That Elijah prayed for a drought to begin and end is not explicit in 1 Kings 17.1 and 18.41–46; Barclay suggests we can infer prayer from the phrase, “the God ... before whom I stand” in 17.1, and again from the phrase, “he bowed himself down on the earth” in 18.42 (Barclay 1976, 132). But even if he is correct, we wonder why, to make his point more forcefully, James did not refer to “the more dramatic encounter with the prophets of Baal (1Ki 18:16–40) or the more directly relevant episode of the resurrection of the son of the Zarephath widow (17:17–24).” The latter would have been especially appropriate in light of his reference to physical healing in James 5.15 (Blomberg and Kamell 2008, 246). A closer look at what James says about Elijah is required.

Elijah’s Example

Notice that, before mentioning the fervency of his prayer, James says Elijah “was a man with a nature like ours” (5.17). His use of ὁμοιοπαθῆς (*homoipathēs*) is reminiscent of similar use in Jewish literature (Wis 7.3–4; 4 Macc 12.13), and of Paul and Barnabas who rejected the worship of the people of Lystra (Acts 14.15): “Men, why are you doing these things? We also are men, *of*

like nature [ὁμοιοπαθεῖς, *homoipatheis*] with you” (see Davids 1982, 197). As James saw him, “Elijah was simply a representative human being,” not “a larger-than-life hero, somehow holier than” the rest of us (Blomberg and Kamell 2008, 246).

What made him exemplary was the fervency (ESV), or earnestness (NIV), of his praying. Our English translations do not do justice to the Semitic method of emphasis James employs in verse 17; they render with one word what is in fact two cognate forms of the same word used consecutively: προσευχῇ προσήύξατο (*proseuchē prosēyxato*). Literally translated, Elijah “prayed with a prayer” or “prayerfully he prayed” (McCartney 2009, 261). The repetition emphasizes that it was the fact of his praying, not his superior righteousness, that made him exemplary. His commitment to praying is what James’s readers are to emulate.

How Elijah’s Example Helps

While it is useful to think in general terms of prayer’s power, we should not ignore the context of James’s Elijah example as we seek to discern how it helps with specific concerns. Moo, who also notes the “unusual choice” of James’s examples of Elijah’s prayers (see above), suggests that the reason for his choice may be found in his determination to draw an analogy between the restoration of a sick believer to health and the deadness of the land that was brought back to fruitfulness in Elijah’s day (Moo 2000, 248). Another connection may exist in the reference to the farmers who were waiting for rain in James 5.7; their circumstances would have been similar to those experienced during the drought in Elijah’s day (see Davids 1982, 197; Blomberg and Kamell 2008, 247). Alternatively, Wendell Johnston thinks the analogy is found in the idea of punishment for sin—Ahab’s in the OT, and the potentially impenitent sick person in James (Johnston 1994, 172–173; in Blomberg and Kamell 2008, 246). There may also be a connection between James’s call for his readers to confess and seek forgiveness (5.15–16) and a comparable need among Elijah’s Israelite contemporaries (Blomberg and Kamell 2008, 246–247).

James does not say why he chose the examples from Elijah that he did; he may have assumed his readers’ knowledge of Jewish tradition made the choice obvious to them. But it is clear that “James’s illustration ... shows that Elijah’s stunning petition was not merely a one-time event. The prophet was also able to beg God later for a lifting of the restrictions he himself had imposed” (Blomberg and Kamell 2008, 247). Whatever the specific connection[s] between the example and their circumstances, James intended his readers to understand that that there is power to be found in the “working” (ἐνεργουμένη, *energoumenē*; 5.16) of prayer, a point of emphasis about which we will say more in a subsequent study.

Addendum

A question that arises when we compare 1 Kings 17–18 to James is the latter’s affirmation that “for three years and six months it did not rain on the earth” (5.17). That time frame is not stated in the OT and most likely comes from Jewish tradition. “But,” as Davids comments, “Jesus cites the same number (Lk. 4:25), so presumably it was an accurate figure.” But might there be some significance to the number? In reply to that query, we should consider Davids’s intriguing suggestion that three and a half years “is probably a symbolic round figure, half of 7, for a period of

judgment (Dn. 7:25; 12:7; Rev. 11:2; 12:14; cf. Dibelius, 256–257; Mussner, 229)” (Davids 1982, 197).

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An Additional Thought on James

“God intended prayer to bring the body together, so that when one person falls ill, physically or spiritually, others in the community may intervene redemptively. Likewise, confession is not merely a mental activity as we talk to God in our individual prayer times, but a corporate activity that involves the people we have hurt or offended. Whether to bring humility and unity to a body of believers or to effect reconciliation between estranged parties, God clearly intended confession to be as much a part of life together as prayer.”

~ Craig L. Blomberg and Mariam J. Kamell. 2008. *James*. Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament. ed. Clinton E. Arnold. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 245

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