



I want to start my sermon in an unusual way. I want to start with a confession—I don't enjoy preaching on prayer. That may surprise you, but let me explain. As a Christian leader I am a person of action. I like to get things done. I know I need to pray, and I do, but for me it's hard work to slow down, rest, and allow God to speak to me. When I pray, it's usually in the car, on a run, and throughout the day. Every time I have to preach on prayer, I just end up feeling guilty for not praying more, guilty that my prayer life doesn't look like those in the Bible. It's true that godly sorrow leads to repentance, to change, but guilt is different. Guilt is a negative emotion, one that the enemy of our souls uses against us. He's used guilt to keep me from praying.

Another reason I don't particularly enjoy preaching on prayer is because most often you leave feeling guilty too! Many of the sermons I've heard on prayer leave me feeling like I've been slapped on the wrist and told to pray longer and harder. It works for a few days, but then the desire wears off and I'm left feeling frustrated about my prayer life again.

I want us to look at the subject of prayer from a different perspective today. What would happen if we saw prayer as an invitation from God to be with Him? Not something to check off our to-do list, but a divine invitation to be near and with the God of the universe. It's really quite amazing that God wants to spend time with us. He longs to draw near to us. Because I don't want to feel guilty about my prayer life and neither do you, let's ask the Lord this morning to help us see prayer from His perspective. This will not be a sermon that makes you feel guilty, at least I hope not. It's a sermon to encourage you to draw near to God. To do that, we will look at the prayer life of a great man of faith, but a man just like you and me—Elijah.

And Elijah said to Ahab, "Go, eat and drink, for there is the sound of a heavy rain." So Ahab went off to eat and drink, but Elijah climbed to the top of Carmel, bent down to the ground and put his face between his knees.

"Go and look toward the sea," he told his servant. And he went up and looked.

"There is nothing there," he said.

Seven times Elijah said, "Go back." The seventh time the servant reported, "A cloud as small as a man's hand is rising from the sea."

So Elijah said, "Go and tell Ahab, 'Hitch up your chariot and go down before the rain stops you.'"

Meanwhile, the sky grew black with clouds, the wind rose, a heavy rain started falling and Ahab rode off to Jezreel. The power of the LORD came on Elijah and, tucking his cloak into his belt, he ran ahead of Ahab all the way to Jezreel (1 Kings 18:41–46).

Elijah Teaches Us to Pray Faithfully

You may have noticed in our passage there is no record of what Elijah prayed for. You might even wonder if he really even prayed. James, an author in the New Testament tells us exactly what Elijah prayed for. Commenting on this passage he writes: *"Elijah was a human being, even as we are. He prayed earnestly that it would not rain, and it did not rain on the land for three and a half years. Again he prayed, and the heavens gave rain, and the earth produced its crops"* (James 5:17–18).

I love what James writes about Elijah. He says, "Elijah was a human being, just like us." In other words, Elijah was not super human, he wasn't a spiritual giant; he was a man, just like us. Yes, he was a prophet of God, but he had no greater access to God than we do. Isn't that encouraging? If you know Jesus personally, if you are living righteously (as James says), your prayers are just as effective as mine or Billy Graham's. We don't need anyone to mediate for us either, we can go directly to God with anything on our hearts and minds. James also says, "Elijah prayed earnestly" that it would not rain. One translation reads, "Elijah prayed hard." That reminds me of what we might say about a football player: He played hard!

During Elijah's time, Israel was far from God. Israel had traded the worship of the one true God for the worship of the god Baal. Baal was a fertility god. So, in the worship of Baal, the Israelites were essentially saying: Baal is responsible for fertility of the land we experience. Baal sends the rain. Baal causes the crops to grow. Baal is responsible for the bread on the table. How do you do battle with a fertility god? By stopping the fertility. And so Elijah prayed. He prayed for a drought so that Baal would be exposed for the impostor he was and the people would turn back to God. Elijah prayed a big prayer! And God answered that prayer! I want to give us six practices of effective prayer from this passage.

Elijah prayed the promises of God

Elijah tells shell-shocked Ahab, "Go, eat and drink, for there is the sound of a heavy rain." I can't begin to imagine what King Ahab was thinking at this point. If the long drought had not been

terrible enough, Ahab witnessed fire raining down from heaven and the slaughter of hundreds of his priests. It was quite a day! Now Elijah is predicting rain in the forecast. Elijah says he can hear it. But, was there really the sound of heavy rain coming? There has not been a rain cloud in the sky for more than three years. Even at this point, there were zero signs of rain. So what then did Elijah hear? Not rain, but the promise of the Lord ringing in his ears. Elijah's prayer was formed on God's promises.

Look with me at 1 Kings 18:1,

"After a long time, in the third year, the word of the LORD came to Elijah: "Go and present yourself to Ahab, and I will send rain on the land."

The Lord promised to send rain and Elijah believed it was coming. This wasn't the first time Elijah had to trust the promises of God. Long before the rains came, Elijah stormed boldly into Ahab's presence and announced, *"As the LORD, the God of Israel, lives, whom I serve, there will be neither dew nor rain in the next few years except at my word"* (1 Kings 17:1). God promised a drought, but Elijah had to act and tell Ahab. God promised rain, but Elijah had to pray. Here we see the tension that's all throughout the Bible of God's sovereignty and man's responsibility.

What's the connection between God's promises and prayer? Elijah was God's prophet, which means God spoke to him in a unique way. Today, God speaks to us in His Word. Faith then is not a feeling we muster up; faith is our response to the Word of God. As we read the Bible, our confidence, our faith in God grows. That confidence then spills over into our prayer life. Elijah believed God's promises and acted in faith. Prayer then is reminding God of His promises. It's learning to pray what God has already promised in His Word.

But we need to be careful. There are some preachers that tell us all of God's promises can be claimed in the life of a Christian. You just need more faith. But that's not true. Not all of God's promises will fit into our specific situations. Some promises were given to certain individuals for a specific time in history. For example, God promised Joshua that if he marched around Jericho seven times, the walls would fall and he would capture the city. The promise was for Joshua and for that unique situation in history. No military leader today should ever claim this promise! However, there are hundreds of universal promises we should pray about and claim as our own. Two of my favorite passages come to mind: *"Trust in the LORD with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding; in all your ways submit to him, and he will make your paths straight"* (Prov. 3:5-6). *"And my God will meet all your needs according to the riches of his glory in Christ Jesus"* (Phil. 4:19).

Matthew Henry said, "We must turn God's promises into prayer, and then they shall be turned into performances." What promise of God do you need to pray for this week? This is why it's so important to be in the Word of God regularly. If we are going to pray

what God has promised, we need to know what He has promised. Practically, learn how to use the Bible to fuel your prayers. Always pray with an open Bible. Let me give you an example. Just this week I was reading in the E100 plan the story of Solomon in 1 Kings 2-3. As Solomon took the throne of Israel God asked him, "Ask me for whatever you want and I will give it to you." Solomon asked for a wise and listening heart. He asked for wisdom. What did I pray for that morning? I asked the Lord for a wise and listening heart. Prayer is reminding God of His promises.

Elijah got alone

"So Ahab went off to eat and drink, but Elijah climbed to the top of Carmel..." (v. 42a).

This was a huge victory for Elijah and the Lord. Talk about a mountain top experience; talk about a spiritual high! I would expect Elijah to celebrate with God's people, to stay with the crowd and party, to take some time to enjoy a great victory. Maybe sit down with Ahab and lay out a new plan for worship. Maybe begin to write a best selling book—How to Defeat the Gods. But that's not what Elijah does. He immediately leaves the crowd, climbs back to the top of Mt. Carmel to get alone with God and pray. It's remarkable.

Jesus did the same thing, didn't he? From the very beginning of his ministry he set the tone for prayer. In Mark's Gospel, after a tiring day of healing, preaching and traveling, we read, *"Very early in the morning, while it was still dark, Jesus got up, left the house and went off to a solitary place, where he prayed"* (Mark 1:35). Jesus did this all the time. Whenever I read this, I think to myself, "Gee, if Jesus often needed to get alone and pray, how much more do I?" Remember, if prayer is an invitation to be with God and not an obligation, then this makes sense. It's like a healthy marriage, it's good to be alone with the one you love. My wife and I work hard at dating each other because there is no one else in the world we would rather be with than each other. Sure, we love our kids and want to be with them, but before you know it, they'll be grown up and out of the house. It's good to pray with other people. But, it shouldn't be a substitute for our personal time with the Lord.

Jesus taught us the importance of being alone with him as well, *"But when you pray, go into your room, close the door and pray to your Father, who is unseen. Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you"* (Matthew 6:6). Do you have a place where you meet with God? I have three young kids at home, zero closet space, and my 2-year-old gets up at 5:30 am. It's impossible to find a quiet place to pray at Casa de Hall. So I choose to take the first 30 minutes of my day, to study God's Word and pray in the quiet of my office most mornings. I heard a story of a pastor who set up a curtain in the corner of his garage to make a quiet place for him to pray. Whatever works for you, the key is to designate a place to be with the Lord.

Elijah humbled himself

“(Elijah) climbed to the top of Carmel, bent down to the ground and put his face between his knees” (v. 42b).

Can you picture that? The position Elijah assumes in prayer here is the same position often used by Jewish women in giving birth. The prayers of Elijah will give birth to a new reality. Isn't it true that the position of our body says a great deal about what we are thinking and feeling? It's been said that nonverbal communication makes up 93% of all communication. If you came to meet with me about a serious issue, you wouldn't expect me to lay down on my couch and close my eyes! No way. I would sit up right and listen intently to your problem. I think Elijah knew how intoxicating success can be. It's usually after a great spiritual victory we are most vulnerable. Instead of letting pride and ego creep in, he humbles himself before God, gets alone, puts his head between his legs and prays. I'm reminded of the great encouragement from Apostle Peter, *“Humble yourselves, therefore, under God's mighty hand, that he may lift you up in due time. Cast all your anxiety on him because he cares for you”* (1 Peter 5:6-7).

When was the last time you prayed on your knees? Have you ever been so desperate to hear from God that you prostrated yourself on the floor? To be honest, it's been quite awhile for me. Not that there is anything magical about getting on your knees, but it's a posture that says, “Lord, I surrender all to you. I am humbling myself and showing my deep desire to be with you.” Take some time this week to pray on your knees.

Elijah's prayer was specific

“Go and look toward the sea,” (v. 43).

Billy Graham once said, “Heaven is full of answers to prayers for which no one ever bothered to ask.” Elijah prayed with precision, he prayed specifically. Don't beat around the bush when praying to God. If you need a job, pray for a job. If you need an amount of money to pay a bill, pray for that amount. I think too often our prayers go unanswered because we are not specific enough. When actress Brooke Shields was suffering from postpartum depression, speaking about her prayer life, she said: “I'm always praying for my friends. Not just when they're in dire straits. I pray for them specifically. I believe that the more specific the prayer the better. So I stay in touch. That way my prayers are focused. Prayer, for me, is about the private, quiet plea for help. My friends know I pray for them. That's important. When I felt there was nothing I could do to help myself, knowing that I was prayed for was often the only thing that stood between me and despair.”

Elijah was persistent

“Seven times Elijah said, ‘Go back.’” (v. 43b).

Elijah was not perfect. We'll see next week his own struggle with fear and depression. He wasn't perfect, but he was persistent. We live in an instant gratification society. We don't like to wait

for anything. Sometimes we feel God is obligated to answer us because we've done the hard work of praying. But God doesn't bend to our agendas or timetables. God often tests us by making us wait. Six times Elijah sent his messenger back to look for a cloud on the horizon, any sign of rain. Nothing, nothing, nothing. The seventh time his prayer was finally answered.

Seven is a very significant number in the Bible. It's associated with completion, fulfillment and perfection. God rested on the 7th day and commanded us to do the same. The Feast of Unleavened Bread and the Feast of Tabernacles lasted seven days. I'm not sure if the number 7 in this instance was significant, but I do believe Elijah's persistence in prayer is important. Think about your own prayers—how often do our prayers come back with the same answer: nothing, silence, no change, and no sign of deliverance. There are things I've been praying about for a long time and God hasn't answered yet. How long do we pray? Until we see a white cloud, until we have some kind of evidence out there, or assurance in here, that God has heard the prayer, and we are released from praying for that with the same level of intensity.

Elijah was expectant

“The seventh time the servant reported, ‘A cloud as small as a man's hand is rising from the sea’” (v. 44).

During a drought many years ago a preacher called his church together to pray for rain. On the day they gathered to pray, the preacher suddenly announced that they may as well go home. When asked why, he replied, “We gathered to ask God for rain, however, I notice no one has brought an umbrella.” Do you pray expectantly? Do you pray with an eager anticipation that God will answer you? The cloud was just a small speck on the horizon, but it was enough for Elijah. That's all he needed to tell Ahab to get going! That small cloud would turn into a ferocious rainstorm. Rain is both needed for the drought but also symbolic of God's control over nature and human affairs. God sends both fire and rain from heaven. God is the one true king. Let's pray expecting Him to answer.

The passage ends with a funny and bizarre turn of events; I'm not sure what to do with it! Apparently, the power of the Lord came upon Elijah in a unique way and he was able to run, faster than Ahab's chariots, 17 miles to Jezreel. I can just picture Ahab watching Elijah dart past him thinking, “This day just got even more weird! What else is God going to do?”

In his book, *The Pressure's Off* psychologist Larry Crabb uses a story from his childhood to illustrate our need to be with God:

One Saturday afternoon, I decided I was a big boy and could use the bathroom without anyone's help. So I climbed the stairs, closed and locked the door behind me, and for the next few minutes felt very self-sufficient.

Then it was time to leave. I couldn't unlock the door. I tried with every ounce of my three-year-old strength, but I couldn't do it. I panicked. I felt again like a very little boy as the thought went through my head, "I might spend the rest of my life in this bathroom."

My parents—and likely the neighbors—heard my desperate scream.

"Are you okay?" Mother shouted through the door she couldn't open from the outside. "Did you fall? Have you hit your head?"

"I can't unlock the door!" I yelled. "Get me out of here!"

I wasn't aware of it right then, but Dad raced down the stairs, ran to the garage to find the ladder, hauled it off the hooks, and leaned it against the side of the house just beneath the bedroom window. With adult strength, he pried it open, then climbed into my prison, walked past me, and with that same strength, turned the lock and opened the door.

"Thanks, Dad said—and ran out to play.

That's how I thought the Christian life was supposed to work. When I get stuck in a tight place, I should do all I can to free myself. When I can't, I should pray. Then God shows up. He hears my cry—"Get me out of here! I want to play!"—and unlocks the door to the blessings I desire.

Sometimes he does. But now, no longer three years old and approaching sixty, I'm realizing the Christian life doesn't work that way. And I wonder, are any of us content with God? Do we even like him when he doesn't open the door we most want opened—when a marriage doesn't heal, when rebellious kids still rebel, when friends betray, when

financial reverses threaten our comfortable way of life, when the prospect of terrorism looms, when health worsens despite much prayer, when loneliness intensifies and depression deepens, when ministries die?

God has climbed through the small window into my dark room. But he doesn't walk by me to turn the lock that I couldn't budge. Instead, he sits down on the bathroom floor and says, "Come sit with me!" He seems to think that climbing into the room to be with me matters more than letting me out to play.

I don't always see it that way. "Get me out of here." I scream. "If you love me, unlock the door!"

Dear friend, the choice is ours. Either we can keep asking him to give us what we think will make us happy—to escape our dark room and run to the playground of blessings—or we can accept his invitation to sit with him, for now, perhaps, in darkness, and to seize the opportunity to know him better and represent him well in this difficult world.

Elijah was a man just like us. Elijah was one person, who turned a nation away from pagan gods, back to the one true God. Elijah teaches us the power of one person praying. He prayed God's promises, he got alone, he humbled himself, he was specific, he was persistent and he was expectant. More importantly, Elijah understood that prayer is an open invitation to be with God, to allow him to enter into our mess, our darkness, and sit with us.

This manuscript represents the bulk of what was preached at CPC. For further detail, please refer to the audio recording of this sermon.

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