



What's the longest period of time you've prayed for something? Weeks? Months? Years? If you're praying for a long time, you are waiting for God to answer. We've all asked:

How long will you delay, God?

Am I praying the right thing?

Are you listening?

Is there sin in my life preventing you from answering my prayer?

Maybe in the mystery of it all you've thrown your hands up in defeat and concluded along with singer/songwriter Garth Brooks:

Sometimes I thank God for unanswered prayers  
Remember when you're talkin' to the man upstairs  
That just because he doesn't answer doesn't mean he don't care  
Some of God's greatest gifts are unanswered prayers

At some point we might give up. That might produce guilt later, so we boost ourselves up with fresh enthusiasm and start praying again.

What's the longest period of time you've prayed for something?

Our passage of scripture today shows us that a slow response from God, although mysterious, is not cause for doubt or despair. And at the end of my sermon I'm going to provide some specific prayers I believe God wants us to be praying and continue to pray, regardless of how long we wait for an answer.

Let's recap what we know about Elijah. Elijah was living a normal life in Tishbe. God chose him to deliver a message to the evil King Ahab, "There will be no rain or dew in Israel," except when God says. Elijah goes into the "prophet protection program" for three years, first hiding in the Kerith Ravine and then at the widow's house in Zarephath. Elijah then goes back to confront King Ahab with a show of God's superiority over the false god Baal. This confrontation takes place on Mt. Carmel with 500 prophets of Baal unsuccessfully appealing to Baal to light a sacrifice on fire. With one simple prayer from Elijah, God consumes his sacrifice with fire. Elijah has the 500 prophets of Baal killed. Then the moment of decision—will King Ahab recognize God's superiority? Let's not get distracted by God's supernatural show of power and minimize that God hasn't done what he said he'd do yet—he hasn't made it rain. In 18:1 God says, "... *I will send rain.*" That

is how he will show that he's not only a powerful God, he is a giving God.

That's where we pick up the story today. Turn in your Bibles to 1 Kings 18:41–46.

**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.**

There's a lot of interesting and mysterious activity in these five verses: Elijah is bossing King Ahab around; he prays for longer than expected for an answer; he is supernaturally empowered to run 20 miles; he is running in front of King Ahab's chariot.

And all of this activity is pointing to one important lesson—God's will is certain, but he delights to do his will in answer to the prayer of his people. The prayers of Christians constitute the appointed channel by which God works his will. He is not limited to this channel, but, we might say, he highly prefers it.

How can we be people whose prayers are effective?

### **Acknowledge an Abnormality**

When we acknowledge an abnormality, we give voice to something that shouldn't be. Some refuse to admit an abnormality. Instead, they redefine normal. In Elijah and Ahab's situation, the abnormality is a 3-year drought. It isn't normal or good for rain to stop falling. Crops die, animals die and people die. That isn't the way God intended the earth to function. How do we know this? Well, in creation God made a beautiful garden. And although that was marred by the sin of Adam and Eve, Adam was

given instruction to work the land. To determine what is normal or abnormal, we have to look at what God intends.

There are many examples of abnormalities we encounter:

**Sickness and death.** Diseases like cancer, diabetes, heart failure, obesity, cataracts, the flu or the common cold are not normal in God's creation. They are a spin-off of sin entering God's perfect creation. Death itself, if we look back at what God intended in creation, is an abnormality. You know it wasn't until Adam and Eve ate the fruit that death entered the existence of humanity.

**Social injustice.** Theft, abuse, murder, child sex slavery, homelessness, illiteracy, drug addiction, starvation are not normal in God's creation. They are a spin-off of sin entering God's perfect creation.

**Spiritually lost.** People living their life separate from a relationship with God is not the way God intended it to be. That's not how he created the world.

Last Sunday night in his Academy Awards' acceptance speech for Best Actor Matthew McConaughey caused quite a stir when he said the following: "First off, I want to thank God, 'cause that's who I look up to. He's graced my life with opportunities that I know is not of my hand or any other human hand. He has shown me that it's a scientific fact that gratitude reciprocates. In the words of the late Charlie Lawton who said 'when you got God, you got a friend and that friend is you.'" The audience was stunned. A few people clapped. Tweets started flying with outrage.

Sin is the root of all the abnormalities. And Jesus came to earth to die and rise again to save us from our sin. As followers of Jesus Christ, we should acknowledge the abnormalities that surround us.

The first step in becoming people whose prayers are effective is the ability to admit that something is wrong. Some people hesitate to acknowledge this. The admission might seem harsh or confrontational, perhaps unnecessarily stark or even depressing. But we should not hesitate to acknowledge it just because we don't have all the answers.

Once we've acknowledged the abnormalities, the next step to effective prayer is ...

### **Believe that God is THE Solution**

Elijah models for us a great example of turning to God when he's facing a problem that's unsolvable, in his own power. Verse 42 says:

**Elijah climbed to the top of Carmel, bent down to the ground and put his face between his knees.**

While it doesn't tell us directly that Elijah is praying here, his posture sure implies it. He is bent down, crouched down, cast himself down upon the ground, and put his face between his

knees. This is the posture of a humble person before a holy God. More specifically, James 5:18 tells us that Elijah was praying here. *"Again he prayed, and the heavens gave rain, and the earth produced its crops."*

Elijah is showing that he believes whole-heartedly that God is the solution for this abnormality. Elijah is turning to God to do what he cannot.

This is not a new action for Elijah. He knows how to turn to God to do what he cannot! When the widow's son died in chapter 17, Elijah cried out to the Lord, *"Lord my God, let this boy's life return to him!"* And the boy came back to life. On Mt. Carmel Elijah turned to God, *"Answer me, Lord, answer me, so these people will know that you, Lord, are God, and that you are turning their hearts back again."*

Now he is turning to God again to bring the rain, something that Elijah cannot do himself. For all of his dynamism and charisma, Elijah has no miracle-working power. He can only confess his helplessness and God as **the** solution. This is humility. He is not confident in his ability but he is confident in God's ability.

When we're facing abnormalities we need to be cautious about putting too much confidence in worldly solutions. Some problems can be helped with money, education, surgery, therapy, a job or better laws. But **the** real solution we are searching is the establishment of God's Kingdom. And this is not accomplished by human means. It is only accomplished by God himself because he is **the** solution.

As Elijah is bowed on Mt. Carmel, he is acknowledging the abnormality of his situation and believing that God is **the** solution, but nothing is happening. In his prayer for rain God is teaching us that sometimes the answer will only come with persistence. Note the contrast from the two earlier prayers from Elijah—he prays one short prayer for the widow's son and the fire on Mt. Carmel—and God performs a miracle. Sometimes God works like that.

But sometimes, God doesn't work quickly and persistence is required. Elijah knows with confidence that God wants to bring rain; he said so himself in verse 1! And God will accomplish his will through Elijah's prayer, but it won't be a quick prayer this time.

The third step in becoming people whose prayers are effective is ...

### **Don't Despair When the Answer is Slow**

God often works slower than we'd like. Jesus taught that God's work is like a farmer—seasons of planting, seasons of the crops growing slowly, seasons of a harvest, seasons of giving the soil rest. When we're waiting for God to answer a prayer, tension reigns. Imagine Elijah bowed down on Mt Carmel.

"OK God. Bring the rain."

"Servant, go check for a rain cloud." Nothing.

"OK God. You've shown your power with the fire. Now bring the rain."

"Servant, go check for a rain cloud." Nothing.

Hmmm. "God most high, ruler of the universe. Most high God. The God who said you'd bring rain. Show your power again."

"Servant, go check for a rain cloud." Nothing.

"God, I'm not doubting you here or questioning you. But I'm confused. You said there'd be rain. What's up with the delay? Why are you making me wait? Why?"

"Servant, go check for a rain cloud." Nothing.

It wasn't until the 7th time that the servant saw a cloud on the horizon. God puts Elijah through an agonizing process before sending his delayed wet answer. This brings up a question that people have been asking since the beginning of humanity: Why does God work quickly sometimes and slowly at others? Ultimately, I don't think we can know. There is a mystery to God's ways we aren't meant to understand.

In his book, *Too Busy Not to Pray* Bill Hybels, although he doesn't answer all the mystery, brings a healthy perspective.

If the request is wrong, God says, No.

If the timing is wrong, God says, Slow.

If you are wrong, God says, Grow.

But if the request is right, the timing is right and you are right, God says, Go.

The last step in becoming people whose prayers are effective is ...

### **Align Our Heart and Prayers with God's Will**

When I was a kid I'd lay in bed and night praying that God would give me the magic power to move things with my mind. I prayed this persistently! I told him that if he'd give me this ability I would use it for good and tell everyone about him. Who's prayed something like this?

The kind of persistent prayer Elijah is modeling for us is not like this. Instead it is prayer aligned with the heart of God. This was easy for Elijah because God directly told him what his will was.

For King Ahab, he could know God's will by listening to Elijah and reading the Torah. I love the gracious invitation God gives King Ahab in verse 46.

**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.**

Historically, kings would have their servants run before their chariots as a herald to let people know the king was coming. In this situation God supernaturally empowers his prophet, who is not Ahab's servant, to run the 20-mile distance as an offer of partnership to King Ahab.

Here's the invitation: God's prophet could be a servant to you rather than an opponent. Instead of animosity, King Ahab could work with Elijah for unity in God's kingdom and spiritual reform.

Elijah doesn't have to be a constant annoyance to Ahab; he could be his partner! Will Ahab accept this offer and work with Elijah or will he continue down his treacherous and wicked path?

For us, we determine what God's will is by reading and knowing his Word. As we read the scriptures, our heart is aligned to his. And we know with confidence that after Jesus returns, God will align everything to his will. That is our confidence. Until then, we pray that God will bring his Kingdom.

Let's apply this to CPC South by praying about what we talked about at the beginning: Abnormalities surrounding us—who is sick and who do you know that needs healing? Social injustice— theft, abuse, murder, child sex slavery, homelessness, illiteracy, drug addiction. Spiritually lost—who are the people that are spiritually lost?

I believe God wants us to be praying and continue to pray, regardless of how long we wait for an answer.

*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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