

The Effective Fervent Prayer Of Elijah

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[0 : 00] Well, let's turn back then to 1 Kings 18, and we're really just going back to the passage we looked at, the second part of it, verses 36 through to 39.

But our subject this evening is the effective, fervent prayer of Elijah. Now, you may recall last time we were looking at what we called the preparations and the performance of these 450 prophets of Baal, and how Elijah somewhat cheekily let them have the first opportunity, although there were 450 of them and he was on his own.

You may recall that he let them choose the bull, he let them do their thing, get the sacrifice ready, and he warned them not to try any tricks.

And then they went into their performance, you remember, and for the first half they were shouting out loud, calling upon Baal, that Baal would hear them, but there was not a word, no voice, no response.

And then we saw that at half time, at noon time, Elijah began to taunt them a bit and say, well, shout loud.

[1 : 35] He's perhaps, he is a god, isn't he, somewhat sarcastically, maybe he's having a sleep, maybe he's indisposed, maybe he's on a journey, shout loud.

And you remember, and you remember, they shouted loud, and they began to cut themselves with their lances, as was their manner. And so they were in a bit of a frenzy, but for all their efforts, there was no response from Baal.

And then we saw how, when it came to Elijah's turn, he made preparation, he made it according to the word of God, and there was no performance on his part, he turned to prayer.

And we are looking this evening at his prayer, and we saw last time that God responded, God graciously answered his servant's prayer.

He addressed God as the God of Abraham, and as his own God, as the living and true God, as the God who answered prayer.

[2 : 45] And so what we want to do this evening is just go back and look at Elijah in prayer, and see how he got a hold of the Lord, as it were, in a spiritual way.

He engaged the Lord, and he had a wonderful answer from the Lord, in that the fire came down from heaven. And for all that the sacrifice, and the wood for burning, and the altar was saturated, yet the fire of God came down and consumed everything.

And the response of the Israelites, of course, as we saw, was that they recognized that the God of Abraham, that Elijah's God, the living God, answered, and answered wonderfully.

And the thing about this is, there's a lesson, a practical lesson for you and me here today, about our attitude to God when we come to pray to him.

Our interest in him and his kingdom when we go to the place of prayer. I want us to consider, of course, the petitioning of Elijah, how he drew near to God, how he spoke to him as a man speaks to his friend, and how God graciously answered him.

[4 : 17] And we were singing about these things in the songs we used this evening. So the first thing we want to look at is, at Elijah's attitude to, and his interest in God.

This attitude of mind was important, and this, the behavior of the prophet in prayer is important. We've already noticed that he describes himself as a servant of the Lord, and a noble servant at that, a bold and courageous servant.

If you go back to the beginning of his story, you go back to chapter 17 there. At the beginning of chapter 17, you see that he is described as a tishvite of the inhabitants of Gilead, and he comes right into the presence of the king of Israel.

And he says this, he doesn't do the usual thing you'd expect. He gets straight down to the matter, and he says, As the Lord God of Israel lives before whom I stand, there shall be no dew nor rain these years except at my word.

So, that wasn't exactly good news for the king of Israel. He was told, and he was told because of his wicked ways.

[5 : 58] You remember he had married the daughter of the priest king of the Sidonians, Ephbaal. And Jezebel sought to influence the Israelites into worshipping false gods, the Baalim.

And so, the response of God was to send his choice prophet, and Elijah went there as a servant of the Lord and faced the king, and said, this is what's going to happen.

You're going to have a three and a half year drought for your sin. And that's the first thing. The whole attitude of the prophet was that he was a servant, a slave, a bond slave of the Lord.

The word in behind this word servant is not the word we associate with a servant. It's talking about, I gave an address on Friday evening over on the south side about the servant of the Lord in Isaiah. The use of the words servant of the Lord. And we started with a definition. If you look up your dictionary, there's a difference between a servant and a slave.

[7 : 20] A servant gets paid. You're nodding. Good. However lowly the servant may be, the servant gets paid, but not the slave. The slave is the property.

Of the owner. And the word servant in the Hebrew and in the Greek is slave. Eved is the Hebrew word and it is a bond slave.

Doulos in the Greek is a bond servant. The apostles called themselves bond slaves of Jesus Christ. That's the way they thought about themselves.

And that's the way Elijah described himself. That was his attitude of mind in relation to God. And his interest in the things of God was as a slave of the Lord.

He didn't count that a burden. He counted it a privilege. He served the Most High God, the Living God. And right from the beginning, once he had delivered his message to Ahab, he was told to get up and go.

[8 : 29] You remember, east towards the Jordan, beyond the Jordan, to the brook called Kerith. And he stayed there. Then when that brook dried up, he moved.

He was told to go to a place right across the Mediterranean coast called Zarephath. And then eventually, towards the end of the three and a half years of drought, he returned to Samaria to face the king Ahab.

And he did all this as a humble slave of the Lord. His whole attitude was, Not my will, but yours be done.

And you see, this puts before you and me the kind of attitude we should have in the presence of God when we come to pray. We come to him humbly with a sense of our own littleness, with a sense that we are simply bond slaves of his.

We come to commune with him, to speak to him. But we come conscious of ourselves at all times, that we are the slaves and he is the Almighty.

[9 : 44] And Elijah, therefore, you see, is filled with this, and his mind is full of this. It is the will of God that he is concerned to do.

He's careful of his relationship with the Lord. To use a turn of phrase from the Psalms, he's careful not to let sin spoil his relationship with the Lord.

He guards it. He knows that the Word of God, even as he had it in his own day, told him that your sins have withheld from you good things.

And he makes it his business to guard that fellowship, that friendship he had with the Lord. Though he was but a bond slave, he guarded his whole life towards God.

And you can see when he comes to pray, he has that confidence. He comes, verse 36 there, he says, Lord God of Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, let it be known this day that you are God in Israel, and that I am your slave, and that I have done all these things at your word.

[11 : 18] Your will be done. Jesus said, and it's interesting to take, although we're talking here about Elijah living about something like 870 years before Jesus came, but you find that the truth of the thing is the same.

Jesus said to his disciples, if you remain in me, if you stay close to me, and my words remain in you, you will ask what you will, and it shall be done.

By this, my Father is glorified. And so, you see, it's helpful for us to think about our whole attitude to God when we come to him in prayer.

Are we seeking to please him or ourselves? Are we seeking his honor or our own? Are we seeking that he may demonstrate his own power and advance his own kingdom, and then graciously confirm that we belong to him?

See how Elijah put it, Lord God of Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, let it be known this day that you are God and Israel, and that I am your servant.

[12:43] He wants that too easy. He wants to have this honor from God. And therefore, he's not concerned what the king thinks.

Ahab has his own ideas. Ahab would get rid of Elijah. Elijah. But Elijah cares not what the king has to say.

He will operate as one whose interests are in God's honor and God's kingdom. And therefore, on the matter of prayer, he's watchful into prayer.

He keeps before him that there are rules of engagement. By that I mean there are rules of engagement in prayer with God.

When we do this sacred, precious business of seeking the Lord, it's no use thinking that we can go to him with hearts that are hardened by sin.

[13:48] Or we've got a bottle of resentment sinness. We sing it in the Psalms, Psalm 66. We sing that if I regard iniquity in my heart, the Lord will not answer me.

He answers us graciously and freely, but he sets the rules. If we come to him and we're holding grudges and resentments, we can't expect him, even in grace, to answer.

And therefore, what we're saying here is, here's a man who is wholly committed to the Lord and he watches himself and to pray.

You see, sometimes in Christian circles, people talk about prayer as if God's obliged to answer us, as if he must answer us.

That's not the case at all. He doesn't need to answer us at all. He answers graciously and freely.

We don't have automatic answers, not even when we pray in the name of Jesus.

[14:59] God sets the rules. And we can deceive ourselves by drawing near to God and harbouring sin in our hearts and resentments and all the rest.

And he's simply, to use an Old Testament picture, he covers himself as with a cloud. In other words, he puts a distance between us and himself and he will not be inquired of in that way.

And this is why it's important to have, as we were saying this morning, to have a conscience void of offence. Not to have resentments.

Not to have obstacles in our relationship with God. and therefore we are to consider first this aspect when we think about prayer.

We have to have the right attitude to God himself and to his kingdom and in that connection the right attitude to our own relationship to him.

[16:09] The second thing we want to look at is at Elijah's prayer to the Lord. This is very instructive to us and it shows us how rooted Elijah was in the truth of God's word.

Verse 36, the second part, Lord God of Abraham. That's his starting point. He goes back to the great champion of the faith.

And he addresses God as the God of Abraham. In fact, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. For those who don't remember it, Jacob became Israel.

He was given that new name. And so Elijah's approach to the Lord is based on God's commitment to his people.

God said, I will be your God and you shall be my people. walk before me in a blameless way. And so Elijah, you see, comes to prayer and he begins to pray on the basis of God's covenant dealings.

[17:19] God meeting with God, coming to his people and taking them into a real relationship with himself. Therefore, he's talking about God as the God he has come to know.

The God that Abraham walked with, that Isaac walked with, that Israel walked with, and that he himself walks with. You see, it's not enough for us to approach God using the tried phrases we're familiar with.

The more we have engaged in prayer, those who pray in public in the prayer meeting, you know this very well, but it'll bear repetition. One of our biggest problems when we're asked to pray, called upon to pray in the prayer meeting, is that we may not always be just in the spirit of prayer.

Maybe we're preoccupied with things, and you know as I do, it's easy to slip into tried expressions, into things we've used before, or heard others use. words. But that's not what prayer is about. It's not enough to use the right phrases and say the right things, because the words can lack, simply lack, the force of personal faith, of experience, of spiritual energy.

[18 : 53] energy. And you see, when Elijah comes to prayer, there's no lack of personal faith involved here. there's no lack of prior experience.

He had lots of experience of the Lord, and he comes to pray with this energy. Listen to him, he says, he came near and said, Lord God of Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, let it be known this day that you are God in Israel, and that I am your servant, and that I have done all these things at your word. He's really engaging with the Lord, and he's concerned to identify himself with Abraham and Abraham's God.

He knows, you see, that God, the God of Abraham, is the God who reaffirmed his commitment to his people, and he did so to Isaac, and to Jacob, who became Israel.

He's standing in that line of believing people, and he's calling upon the Lord who answers prayer. And our addressing God, therefore, must be on the basis of his word.

[20 : 28] I'm not saying that all that we say in prayer, when we fall back on tried phrases, I'm not saying the phrases themselves are wrong, I'm saying our attitude sometimes can be wrong.

What we need to do is engage by faith. We need to engage on the basis of our experience of God in his word, and call upon him, using his own word to him, taking it back to him, with a heartfelt belief in him, as the answerer of prayer.

And every experience of an answer strengthens us to go in a confident way. We need to be stirred up to this fervency in prayer, stirred up from a heaviness, a listlessness, or a formal way of doing the thing, a coldness.

We address him by living faith, by confidence in him. And you can, if you let your imagination go a wee bit, you can picture Elijah there on the top of Mount Carmel, he's on his own, he's on his own in terms of being the man of faith, the man of God, God's servant.

All Israel's there, and all Israel has committed to Baal. And Baal hasn't answered. And so here he is, 450 priests, and the whole of the nation, and the king, and so on.

[22 : 16] And he's now got to get down to calling upon the Lord. And he's doing it as one whose attitude to the Lord is right, and whose interest in the kingdom of God is paramount in his thinking.

Your kingdom come, your will be done. And he comes to prayer, using what God has given, and to bring it back to him.

Lord God of Abraham, of Isaac, and of Israel, let it be known this day that you are God in Israel, and that I am your servant, your slave, and that I have done all these things at your word, on the basis of your word.

He wants God to act, and that's where I want to dwell, just for a few moments here. He dwells on this first petition, your kingdom come.

He dwells on God answering for his own kingdom's sake, for the glory of his name, in relation to Israel.

[23 : 38] that the people may know that you are God in Israel, and that you are vindicating me, your servant, who has sought to obey your word.

The whole prayer brings before us the approach we are to take to ourselves. We come to God, not in a haphazard manner, but in a clear and definite approach.

We ought to think beforehand about what we are going to ask. Yes, of course, prayer is about adoring God. Yes, it's about thanking him for mercies.

Yes, it's about confessing our sins, of course, but it is also about making our requests known to him. God's name.

And here is the prophet making his request known. And he begins with this, your kingdom come, your will be done.

[24 : 45] He wants the people to come back from the wilderness of idolatry to Israel's God. And he wants his own work to be acknowledged as true and faithful.

there's nothing undignified about that. The preacher and teacher of the word needs that. He needs to see God at work vindicating the work that's done, putting his seal on it.

Just the same with the witness of the Lord's people. We need that. We need to see the Lord bringing this one or that one into the faith. Your kingdom can.

And as he approaches prayer in this way, he's absolutely transparent. There's nothing in it for him other than the advancement of the kingdom of God and this, that I have done all these things at your word.

Set your seal upon the work of death. There's no, as we were thinking this morning about Paul, the apostle and his missionary friends, they were concerned with the attitude that there were those who were casting aspersions on their character and saying and saying they were greedy, they were in it for the many, they were immoral and so on.

[26 : 28] And they needed God to vindicate them. And they asked the Thessalonian Christians, well, you tell us what you think, you know us. And here is Elijah saying, Lord, you know, you know where I stand, you know my heart, you know my desire, is that you would be glorified in this and that you would show the people that you live and are the God of Israel.

He wants God to have the glory in the answer of prayer. And of course, that involves the second petition, doesn't it?

Your kingdom come, your will be done. He wants this, that the turning of the people back to the Lord is your kingdom come, your will be done.

That the people would turn back to the Lord, that he would save them from themselves and idolatry. And here I think we can learn from Elijah that when we come to prayer, we ought to do it with this attitude.

We want to do it with the attitude that we want to see God's kingdom come and God's will be done. We're not to come to prayer simply because we've been taught to do that all our lives.

[28 : 10] Some of us, thank God, that it is good for us to have been taught. But you know, coming to pray to the Lord is not about, well, you should do it, you were taught to do it, you were taught to say your prayers, and so on.

It's not even remember that when you were a child you were told, go to your room and pray. It's not about just the right thing to do. Helpful though that advice may be.

Elijah shows us that we're to come to the Lord with a living and a lively faith in the Lord, with a desire for his honour in the life of people and nations, that the people may know that you are God in Israel, that they may come to acknowledge you.

And he shows his zeal for the Lord and the Lord's glory as he comes to this prayer. He's fervent in it, he's energetic in it, he's hard at work in it.

Hear me, verse 37, oh Lord hear me, I've said to you before, the word hear is really to answer. The idea is to hear is to answer.

[29 : 35] The same word in the original and it means simply to answer, in hearing answer. And you see, there's a reminder in his whole approach here, in the energy in it, in the faith in God in prayer, that prayer is hard work, it's not an easy thing, it's not just uttering a few phrases that are right and proper and biblical, it's engaging God.

It's locking in there and hanging on and pleading with him. this is a wee aside, but you'll see why. I was reading recently, in my own reading, in Luke's Gospel, and something struck me, it never struck me before, about the passage that says the harvest is great, and the labourers are few. Pray you, therefore, that the Lord of the harvest would raise up labourers for his harvest field. The thing I happen to be using in my Greek New Testament, and the thing I never noticed before, is that the word pray ye, is actually beg, beg, that the Lord of the harvest would raise up labourers, and it struck me with force, that's what prayer is about, it's begging him, it's pleading with him, it's a Jacob-like wrestling with him.

And you see, the Lord of the harvest himself told us to beg him to raise up labourers, we would say, what's the point? It's his harvest field, why bother?

We bother because he says do it. And here's Elijah, God could have turned the hearts of the people, no bother at all, but he didn't do it until a certain course was followed.

[31 : 48] And here's Elijah begging God to come and answer. And it's the same with us if we want an assurance that we're in the kingdom of Christ.

We can't be laid back about it, we can't wait for it to somehow happen, we've got to beg for an answer. That's what prayer is about.

It's fervent pleading with him. Yes, from where we stand in Jesus' name. But we are to beg him and plead with him that he would give an answer that it would be for his glory.

And however long our answer may take in coming, we're not to be discouraged. We're not to, I say reverently, we're not to take no for an answer or we're not to take silence for an answer.

We're to hang on in there. If you listen to these words, there's energy in them, there's faith in them, there's confidence in them, but there is that labor in prayer.

[33 : 08] Lord God of Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, let it be known this day, this day, that you are God in Israel, and that I am your servant, and that I have done all these things at your word.

Verse 37, answer me, O Lord, answer me, that your kingdom may come and your will be done, that this people may know that you are the Lord God, and that you have turned their hearts back to you again.

And the fire of God fell, and gobbled up the sacrifice, and the wood, and the stones, and the water. And what was the reaction?

the people fell on their faces, and confessed, the Lord, he is God. The Lord, he is God.

And let's therefore take some encouragement here, on this great business of prayer. You know, sometimes, and I'm talking to folk who have been a long time in the way, and who have prayed for not ten years, or twenty years, or thirty years, but perhaps forty and more.

[34 : 38] If you read Christian biography about the great Christians of the past, it's easy to get discouraged when you read about them in prayer. How they seemed to have such a, I say this reverently, a hold on the Lord.

How they seemed to get places in prayer. You read about Calvin, or Luther, or some of the Puritans. There was a man, a Scotsman, Welsh, who prayed for four hours a day, Mary McShane, another.

And even those that we've known in our own time, it's easy to be discouraged when you think about the time and effort people have put into prayer.

But it's important to remember that it's not about the time that's put in. It's not a case of hours equal answers.

It's about the attitude of our mind. This servanthood attitude, this slave-like attitude to the Almighty God, this confidence in him that he is the answerer of prayer, that he will answer for his glory, thy kingdom come, your will be done.

[36 : 02] We are to engage him in this way, and we are to stir ourselves in, to be clear and focused in making known our need to him who answers prayer.

Lord, teach us to pray, said the disciples to the Savior, and we can certainly learn from Elijah in this, to come with clarity, with God's honour at heart, with God's kingdom at heart, and with the eternal good of people at heart.

answer me, O Lord, answer me, that this people may know that you are the Lord God, and that you have turned their hearts back to you again.

Well, may he bless to us our, albeit a brief study, on the effective fervent prayer. Amen.