

Transformation through prayer: Elijah was a man just like us

JRP

6th December 2009

James 5:13–18 *Is any one of you in trouble? He should pray. Is anyone happy? Let him sing songs of praise. Is any one of you sick? He should call the elders of the church to pray over him and anoint him with oil in the name of the Lord. And the prayer offered in faith will make the sick person well; the Lord will raise him up. If he has sinned, he will be forgiven. Therefore confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous man is powerful and effective.*

Elijah was a man just like us. *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.*

We are in a series on *making Jesus known and seeing lives transformed*. I want to focus today on seeing lives transformed through prayer. James gives three types of transformation that God wants to perform: being in trouble, being sick and being in sin. The three can often be interlinked but not necessarily. He tells us to pray, to get the elders to pray and to confess. He doesn't say much about *how* we should pray. The only clue is in this cryptic reference to Elijah. So today I want to look at this example of Elijah more closely, always keeping in mind that the goal is for us to learn about prayer.

The phrase that leaps out of the page to me is **Elijah was a man just like us**. This seems to be completely ridiculous. Elijah was not only the greatest prophet of the old testament, but also a genuine grade A weirdo. Are we supposed to be like that? There are three possible explanations of this passage:

- James is not being truthful: we are not like like Elijah at all; maybe he means it in a purely rhetorical or poetic sense?
- actually, Elijah was just like us and all the stories in the old testament are somehow made up or exaggerated;
- James is telling the truth and Elijah really did those things, we really are like him, but our image of ourselves is wrong.

I believe that all scripture is breathed by God and is useful for teaching about God. So if there is a conflict between my experience and the bible, then it is my experience that needs to change. So I believe that Elijah really did many mighty things and, in God, we can do the same things.

So let's look at this example of Elijah more closely. We can find the story in 1 Kings 17 to 19. I won't read all this but I will dip in and out. James mentions two occasions when Elijah prayed. We will look at both of them.

Context. 1 Kings 12 to 16.

- Jeroboam rebelled against King Solomon's son Rehoboam. He was proclaimed king of Israel. He did evil. (1 Kings 12:20)
- Nadab son of Jeroboam was king of Israel for 2 years, He did evil. (1 Kings 15:25, 26)
- Nadab was killed by Baasha, who became king of Israel and reigned for 24 years. He did evil. (1 Kings 15:33, 34)
- Elah son of Baasha was king of Israel for 2 years. He did evil. (1 Kings 16:8, 13.)
- Elah was killed by Zimri, who became king of Israel for 7 days. He did evil. (1 Kings 16:15, 19)
- Zimri was deposed by Omri, who became king of Israel for 12 years. He did evil and sinned more than those before him. (1 Kings 16:23, 25)
- Ahab son of Omri was king of Israel for 22 years. He did even more evil than any of those before him. (1 Kings 16:29, 30)

Then after this sorry tale of more and more evil, there comes one of the most dramatic entries in the whole bible:

1 Kings 17:1 *Now Elijah the Tishbite from Tishbe in Gilead, said to Ahab "As the Lord, the God of Israel lives, whom I serve, there will be neither dew nor rain in the next few years except by my word."*

This is the first we hear of Elijah. We don't know what went beforehand. We are not told. But it appears that suddenly the accumulation of evil had reached a tipping point. Elijah is stirred to confront evil and indicates God will remove the provision of rain. This is sometimes how God inspires us to pray in faith. Seeing the evil in a situation can suddenly cause a Godly anger to rise in us and we are inspired to change the situation.

Think of Jesus cleansing the temple: **Mark 11:15-17** *On reaching Jerusalem Jesus entered the temple area and began driving out those who were buying and selling there. He overturned the tables of the moneychangers and the benches of those selling doves, and would not allow anyone to carry merchandise through the temple courts. And as he taught them he said "Is it not written 'My house will be called a house of prayer for all nations'." but you have made it a den of robbers.*

The second instance of Elijah praying is described in much more detail over the next few chapters. Let's look at this in more detail.

- (1) Hear from God. **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."*

- (2) Confront evil. **1 Kings 18:16-40** Elijah on mount Carmel. This is dealing with the underlying cause of the problem. The drought is *God's response* to the evil in the nation. Therefore if the drought is to end, the evil needs to be confronted. In this case it is the worship of Baal and Asherah by God's people. To deal with this, Elijah must confront the people and destroy the 450 prophets of Baal and the 400 prophets of Asherah. We are not (necessarily) called to murder lots of people! But we are called to root out any evil that God shows to us.
- (3) Declare what God has spoken. **1 Kings 18:41** *Elijah said to Ahab "Go eat and drink for there is a sound of a heavy rain"*
- (4) Intercede. **1 Kings 18:42-44a** *So Ahab went off to eat and drink but Elijah climbed to the top of Carmel, bent down to the ground and put his head between his knees. "Go and look towards 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."* Intercede and look for signs. When you start to see signs, you know God has begun a good work. So you can have faith that he will complete it.
- (5) Repeat the declaration. **1 Kings 18:44b** *So Elijah said "Go and tell Ahab "Hitch up your chariot and go down before the rain stops you"."* Remember that those who only see with the natural eyes will not understand.
- (6) The fulfilment. **1 Kings 18:45** *Meanwhile, the sky grew black with clouds, the wind rose, a heavy rain came on.*
- (7) Backlash. **1 Kings 19:1-4** *Now Ahab told Jezebel everything Elijah had done and how he had killed all the prophets with the sword. So Jezebel sent a messenger to Elijah to say "May the gods deal with me, be it ever so severely, if by this time tomorrow I do not make your life like one of them." Elijah was afraid and ran for his life. When he came to Beersheba in Judah, he left his servant there, while he himself went a days journey into the desert. He came to a broom tree, sat down under it and prayed that he might die. "I have had enough Lord" he said "Take my life I am no better than my ancestors".* Often spiritual victory is followed by persecution. This can leave us dispirited and depressed.
- (8) Encouragement. **1 Kings 19:5-18** When Elijah is at his lowest ebb, God appears to him, supernaturally feeds him, shows himself by the still small voice and tells Elijah he is not alone.
- (9) In the end, Elijah sees evil confronted, rain withheld and then given and finally Ahab is killed in battle **1 Kings 22:29-40** by a random arrow, though after he has repented. Finally Jezebel, who was behind much of the evil Elijah confronts is killed some time later **2 Kings 9:30-37**.

So how does this process work in our lives when we are in trouble, sick or in sin? Why did James use the example of Elijah to illustrate this teaching on the transforming power of prayer? Lets look through each stage in turn.

- (1) Seek God for guidance. God speaks to us in many ways, for some they know his voice deep inside, rather like their conscience; for others, they will receive a picture or a vision; many times God speaks to us through the wise counsel of others; on other occasions he speaks to us out of our reading of the bible. However he speaks, it is important that we get his perspective on a situation. In **John 10** Jesus says *I am the good shepherd, my sheep know me, they listen to my voice*. We all know him and can hear him, and we listen to him.

James talks about the prayer of faith. **Romans 10:17** says *faith comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard through the word of Christ*. NB word here is spoken word not written word.

When we are in trouble, a situation may seem intractable. But if we hear God saying to us “I will never leave you or forsake you” then we can gain courage to persevere.

I hope that for many of us, the phrase *Elijah was a man just like us* will today transform our self image and cause faith to rise: that if God could use Elijah so powerfully then he can use us too.

- (2) Confront evil. There may be something that we can do to deal with the situation. We do it in God’s strength and power.

It may be that there is an issue that needs to be dealt with which God is highlighting to us. We don’t wait passively for him to deal with it, but armed with his strength, we confront it and bring his rule into the situation.

I know many Christians are distressed at the changes we have seen in society over the last few decades. We now live in a post-Christian society. Their response is often to lobby the government to change the law. I do not believe this is the right response. The bible is very clear that the law is powerless to make us righteous, it merely identifies sin. The only way to live a holy life is through the power of God. Therefore I welcome the changes in society because they mean the church can shine brighter; there is less confusion between good works and faith in God. We must shine a light of hope to a dark world with the message that Jesus is the only way out of this darkness.

- (3) We declare what God has revealed to us. We must be careful that this is not wishful thinking or our own human assessment of the situation. But if we believe God has spoken we must, as he prompts us, speak that out.

Our words have power. Jesus has given us power. Jesus healed the sick by the word of command. He has given us the same authority.

- (4) We intercede. There can be many times that, just like Elijah, we go and pray “I believe this is what you want to do; please do it. Come with your power and change this situation”.

- (5) We look for signs that God is working. If we are praying for the sick, we might ask “Is anything happening? Do you feel better? Can you do something now you couldn’t do before?” **Mark 8:23-25** *Jesus took the blind man by the hand and led him outside the village. When he had spat on the mans eyes and put his hands on him, Jesus asked “Do you see anything?” He looked up and said “I see people; they look like*

trees walking around.” Once more Jesus put his hands on the mans eyes. Then his eyes were opened, his sight restored and he saw everything clearly. It is OK to ask if any change has happened, and OK if only partial change has happened. We can pray again. But often, only seeing the small beginning is enough to know that God is on the job, like the small cloud Elijah’s servant saw.

- (6) It can sometimes happen that persecution follows successful prayer. We don’t look for it nor do we pessimistically expect it. But we should be forewarned. It can be natural to despair, like Elijah, and say “On no, its all too much, I’ve had enough.” At these times we need to look to God. It is often helpful to have others praying for us and standing alongside us.
- (7) We continue with faith. In Elijah’s case the rain came immediately, later Ahab repented, but the underlying cause of the evil, namely Jezebel was around for quite some time. Nevertheless she is dealt with eventually. Sometimes God works immediately, sometimes gradually and sometimes he takes a long time. But he still does it. As we pray, we will see lives transformed. As James says, *the prayer of a righteous man is powerful and effective.*

James 5:13–18 *Is any one of you in trouble? He should pray. Is anyone happy? Let him sing songs of praise. Is any one of you sick? He should call the elders of the church to pray over him and anoint him with oil in the name of the Lord. And the prayer offered in faith will make the sick person well; the Lord will raise him up. If he has sinned, he will be forgiven. Therefore confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous man is powerful and effective.*

We will now have a ministry time. The band will come back and I would like to invite anyone who is happy to sing songs of praise. This is not just to fill time. As we praise God he is able to move with greater freedom. Your praise will help the ministry team. We will have ministry team members here to pray for anyone who is in trouble. The elders will pray for those who are sick; we have oil here to anoint them. If anyone wants to confess sin then the ministry team or elders are here. You may wish to go to someone else who you trust. I believe that God wants to deal with longstanding, serious issues. **Galatians 5:1** *It is for freedom that Christ has set us free. Stand firm then, and do not let yourselves be burdened again by a yoke of slavery. God wants to set captives free today.*