

OLD TESTAMENT LESSONS FOR NEW TESTAMENT RENEWAL

Sunday, July 25th & August 1st, 2010, 10:00 a.m.

Part three - Teaching #1389 & 1391

Pastor Don Horban, Cedarview Community Church, Newmarket, ON

RECEIVING ANSWERS TO YOUR PRAYERS

1 Kings 18:31-38 - "Elijah took twelve stones, according to the number of the tribes of the sons of Jacob, to whom the word of the Lord came, saying, "Israel shall be your name," [32] and with the stones he built an altar in the name of the Lord. And he made a trench about the altar, as great as would contain two seahs of seed. [33] And he put the wood in order and cut the bull in pieces and laid it on the wood. And he said, "Fill four jars with water and pour it on the burnt offering and on the wood." [34] And he said, "Do it a second time." And they did it a second time. And he said, "Do it a third time." And they did it a third time. [35] And the water ran around the altar and filled the trench also with water.[36] And at the time of the offering of the oblation, Elijah the prophet came near and said, "O 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. [37] Answer me, O Lord, answer me, that this people may know that you, O Lord, are God, and that you have turned their hearts back." [38] Then the fire of the Lord fell and consumed the burnt offering and the wood and the stones and the dust, and licked up the water that was in the trench."

There's such an obvious attractiveness in this account from the life of Elijah. It's one of the best known passages from Old Testament history. If you were fortunate enough to have been raised in Sunday School, you've heard this story all your life. We like this story. The good guys win and the bad guys lose. Righteousness triumphs over evil. The emptiness of idolatry is exposed.

But there is something else that is so appealing here. It's Elijah's prayer. Or rather, it's the way his prayer is so **clearly answered**. And so clearly answered **right away**. It's the way Elijah makes it look so **easy**. It's the **false** prophets who shout and scream and dance and chant and cut their bodies. Elijah just comes and utters a few short sentences and the fire falls. And there's something in my heart that says, "**There. That's the way prayer should work!**"

And then, on top of that, there are passages in the New Testament that enforce that expectation in my mind: **James 5:16-18** - "**Therefore, confess your sins to one another and pray for one another, that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous person has great power as it is working. [17] 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.**"

Those words weren't written by Richard Roberts. These are the Spirit-inspired words of the Apostle James. He points to the same man - Elijah - at prayer. And the whole point of James' words is there was nothing magical or special about Elijah. Elijah was **just like I am**. That's what James says.

Our opening text boils things right down to the root issue. Are there any conditions or keys to that kind of prayer life? And if so, what are they? And the reason I wanted to take some extra time looking at this prayer from Elijah is precisely because the New Testament uses him **by name** as an example of prayer. James says Elijah was a man **the same as I**. Reverse that line of logic and it should mean I can pray just like he did.

Let's look at his prayer together:

1) ELIJAH PRAYS EFFECTIVELY BECAUSE HE HAS HIGH CONFIDENCE IN THE MERCY AND FAITHFULNESS OF GOD

You have to look under the surface of the text, but this point is clearly driven home. **1 Kings 18:31** - "**Elijah took twelve stones, according to the number of the tribes of the sons of Jacob, to whom the word of the Lord came, saying, 'Israel shall be your name....'**"

Before I comment, look at the same idea in **verse 36: 1 Kings 18:36** - "**And at the time of the offering of the oblation, Elijah the prophet came near and said, "O 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."**

Take note, twelve stones representing the **twelve tribes of Israel**. Then the prayer is offered to the "**God of**

Abraham, Isaac, and Israel.” Why all this formality? Why all this emphasis on God’s relationship to Israel? I mean, Elijah’s prayer is amazingly brief. Why take time with all this introductory stuff?

The answer has a great deal to do with the power of Elijah’s prayer. It’s at the heart of what the New Testament calls **“praying in faith.”** Elijah knows that the whole foundation of Israel’s relationship with God rests on God’s **initiation**. That’s the reason for those references to the God of **Abraham, Isaac and Israel (Jacob)**.

And here’s the point. Study the stories of those men and you see that none of them **initiated** contact with God. God came to **them**. God came when He didn’t have to come and made covenant with them. No one forced Him to come. He came in grace. In other words, Elijah is rehearsing the fact that a merciful God had freely come on His own and **made promises to them**.

And what Elijah is remembering - **celebrating** - is the fact that God’s favour was never an **earned** favour. No one ever **merited** answers to prayer. Elijah truly does do many things **right** in this dramatic account. But one thing he **doesn’t** do, and one thing he **knows** he doesn’t do, is **qualify** for answers to his prayers. And he reminds himself of that grace-packed fact right off the bat.

We don’t have time to press much more out of this truth, but I do want to relate that covenant to Elijah’s prayer. Things are not well with Israel when Elijah comes to pray this dramatic prayer. He has so little reason for what we’d call the **prayer of faith**. The people are godless. The religion is corrupt. The leadership is immoral. And any others who might care a hoot about God and righteousness are hiding from Jezebel in caves.

Yet Elijah has the nerve to pray that God would vindicate His glory, destroy the powers of sin and darkness, and turn the hearts of the people back to Himself. It’s almost unbelievable. And as he prays, he **has** to feel - because he **is** a man of like passions as we are - he **has** to feel how **undeserving Israel is to receive any answer from God at all!**

And we need to ponder this about Elijah’s prayer. It’s vitally important to know this because **you’ve** felt that when you pray. In fact, that’s what usually keeps people from praying in the first place. And maybe it’s as much for himself as anybody else that Elijah starts out praying (picking up twelve stones as he pushes these words through his lips), **“I know how wicked we’ve all been. I know we haven’t been faithful to you. But we didn’t choose you. You chose us. And you never lie. You, far more than we, are faithful. And that’s the only ground I’m standing on right now as I pray. God, the fact that we’ve been called at all is Your idea. So prove Yourself again!”**

This wonderful text confronts a real distortion in a lot of **“faith teaching.”** If your prayer is to be propped up on the foundation of your positive mental state or self-esteem or sense of personal self-worth, you won’t pray long except in your peak moments. Elijah starts out his whole prayer for a mighty move of God aware of nothing but weakness, but weakness in the face of a gracious, covenant-keeping God. Pray on the basis of promise, not personal fortitude.

2) ELIJAH PRAYS EFFECTIVELY BECAUSE HIS FIRST CONCERN IS THE GLORY OF HIS GOD

1 Kings 18:36-37 - **“And at the time of the offering of the oblation, Elijah the prophet came near and said, “O 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. [37] Answer me, O Lord, answer me, that this people may know that you, O Lord, are God, and that you have turned their hearts back.”**

These are incredibly rich verses. There are many powerful truths that could be mined. What I want to focus your attention on is the repetition of **Elijah’s motive** in his request. Twice in two verses he says he wants God to answer his prayer so that people will know God is God.

This shouldn’t be taken lightly. It’s not always easy to summon this motive in prayer, especially **urgent** prayer. The blunt truth is Elijah had **many** good reasons to cry out to the Lord. The crops are dying. But that’s not the heart of Elijah’s prayer. The lakes and streams had long dried up. But that’s not the heart of Elijah’s prayer. The few remaining prophets of God are being hunted down like animals and are hiding in caves (and isn’t it an important thing to pray for the safety of missionaries?). But even that’s not the heart of Elijah’s prayer.

No, there’s something deeper aching in Elijah’s heart. There’s something keeping him up at night. He can’t shut it in any longer. Twice in two verses it just bubbles over his lips. **“God, the people don’t recognize You as God.**

They don't give you the glory you deserve. And I can't stand it any more!

That's the heart of Elijah's prayer. It eats him up inside that the God he loves and serves and lives for is ignored. There is **nothing** that means more to him than God's glory. And everything in his life is directed to turning that around. Including his prayers.

Now, you can't **fake** this kind of zeal just by shouting when you pray. You can't work this up at an altar. Elijah **prays** this way because Elijah **lives and breathes** this way. And nothing purifies prayer like a zeal for God's glory. Elijah couldn't stand to see the land littered with idols and wrecked altars. He couldn't stand to see leaders who would treat God as if He was of no consequence.

This was the biggest concern in Elijah's prayer. It's the very first thing that came to his mind when he started praying because it was the first thing on his mind **all the time**. Elijah was a living manifesto of Paul's decree that **"...whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God"**(1 Corinthians 10:31).

Elijah wasn't the only great prayer in Scripture to teach this truth: **John 12:27-28** - **"Now is my soul troubled. And what shall I say? 'Father, save me from this hour'? But for this purpose I have come to this hour. [28] Father, glorify your name."** Then a voice came from heaven: **"I have glorified it, and I will glorify it again."**

We so blessed to overhear Jesus' heart in His praying. "I bring my desires into my prayer but they aren't the chief element. More than I want to have this cup pass from me, I want your name, Father - **your name** - to be given glory and honor! Your glory is what I want over everything else!"

And I'm not enough like that. And that's terribly, terribly, wrong.

When Paul says whether we eat or drink we are to do all to the glory of God, he's not talking about how you hold your fork. He's talking about the direction of your thoughts in everything you do. He's talking about what occupies your mind even while you're eating or drinking or driving or playing or writing or raising your kids or painting your house or going to and from the office. Everything else about my existence is colored by my passion for the glory of God. So much so that I notice, first of all in my own life, but also in the world around me, **where God is not being glorified**. And if there is any one thing I simply can't **rest** about, that's it. When I make my prayer list, **I put those things at the top**.

3) **ELIJAH PRAYS EFFECTIVELY BECAUSE TO THE BEST OF HIS ABILITY HIS WHOLE LIFE IS LIVED OBEDIENTLY TO GOD'S WILL**

1 Kings 18:36 - **"And at the time of the offering of the oblation, Elijah the prophet came near and said, "O 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."**

Elijah says he's **"God's servant"** in this one verse. But he didn't just turn that idea on when he prayed. It's a truth that is demonstrated throughout this whole story and throughout his entire life.

We tend to use that phrase **"serving the Lord"** as a generic term describing anyone who claims to be a Christian and is still breathing. "How are the kids?" "O, they're all **serving the Lord**." The evangelical translation for that is they're not in jail. They still go to church. They're not involved in the occult. So they're **"serving the Lord."**

But when Elijah says he's God's servant, he means something very different. He means he gives his time and energy to God the way a waiter or waitress looks after you in a very good restaurant.

God sent Elijah to **King Ahab** with the rather cheery news that there wouldn't be any rain for three and a half years due to the king's wickedness. Ahab didn't take that news with a gentle heart. And Elijah, though he knows it could mean his neck, goes and gives the message. God tells Elijah to go to Cherith and he would be fed by ravens in the morning and the evening. And Elijah goes without a question. God tells Elijah to go to the village Zarephath and he'd be cared for by a poor widow who didn't have enough food for her last meal. And Elijah doesn't even stop to ask how he will **know** her when he **sees** her.

That's just some of the background of this man's life as he builds this altar in this great showdown with the prophets of Baal. That's the kind of life he lives all the time. That's what servants **do**. No wonder he builds the altar

and then says, ***“Let everyone know that I am your servant - I don’t kid around when I serve you! - and have done all these things at your word!”***

And what I learn here is my prayer life ***starts long before I close my eyes or fold my hands***. Elijah directly links God’s answer to his prayer with the fact that he, Elijah, has been faithful to carefully obey everything God had given him to do. You can read it for yourself: **1 Kings 18:36** - ***“And at the time of the offering of the oblation, Elijah the prophet came near and said, “O 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.”***

So God’s answer demonstrated two things in Elijah’s mind. First, it proved ***God to be real in a way the idols were not***. Second, ***it validated Elijah as a man of immediate and complete obedience to God’s revealed will***. Those are the two ***reasons*** Elijah wants God to display His power. And they’re both very powerful, fruitful reasons.

And I know this sounds hopelessly old fashioned - to some, even out of date - but I believe this needs to be stressed all over again today. There are certain elements that ***are*** very important in prevailing prayer. I ***do*** have to be a believer in Jesus. And we ***are*** taught the importance of praying in His Name. But we need to look into what it ***means*** to believe in Jesus when we pray. Because it’s not enough just to mouth certain words or phrases.

Here is one of the most important verses about what John meant when He talked about the importance of ***believing*** in Jesus - **John 3:36** - ***“Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life; whoever does not obey the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God remains on him.”***

In a very deliberate twist of his pen, John underlines an important contrast in this verse. Here’s what I would have ***expected*** John to say: ***“Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life; whoever does not believe in the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God remains on him.”*** That flows beautifully. But John doesn’t say that.

And the ***reason*** John doesn’t say that is he wants to communicate something deeper than that. He wants to ***explain*** what ***“believing in Jesus”*** really is. And the way he does it is to tell us the ***opposite*** of believing in Jesus. The opposite of ***believing*** is ***disobeying***. Which means believing in Jesus has its roots in ***loving, devoted, holy obedience***.

Look at the same idea expressed by Jesus Himself. And note the way Jesus links this idea up with power in prayer - **John 15:7** - ***“If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you.”***

Jesus is saying I must ***train my habits*** so constantly and continuously in the words of Jesus that I too start to say, “Not my will, but Yours be done,” in virtually every situation where this fallen world pushes me into living by my own rights. There must be such daily submission of life and mind to Jesus that my desires and wishes fuse with His.

Or reconsider these well known words about pleasing God and the life of prayer: **1 John 3:22** - ***“...and whatever we ask we receive from him, because we keep his commandments and do what pleases him.”*** Here we see this beautiful picture of a life committed each moment ***not to the pleasing of self-interest***, but totally engrossed with ***finding out what pleases the Lord and doing it***.

“Well, you’re making it sound so hard and complicated, Pastor Don. What about just coming to the throne of grace so we can find grace to help in our time of need?”

Listen, those are very precious words of promise from the book of Hebrews. But that’s not all the book of Hebrews teaches about coming to the throne of grace. It also teaches me ***how*** I should come to that throne: **Hebrews 10:22** - ***“...let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water.”***

I’m to come to the throne with nothing staining my life or conscience. That ***doesn’t*** mean I can’t come until I’ve achieved perfection. No one would ever come if that were the case. But I let no area of my life ***soak in neglect***. I’m not ***casual*** in the pursuit of God’s will for my life. I’m to come washed and clean and with total assurance that there’s no known rebellion in my heart at any point. Let me tell you, nothing will take the leanness out of your prayer time faster than being able to stand before the Lord and know that you know that you know that you can say, ***“Lord, I’m here as your servant. I’ve done everything at your command.”***

What I'm trying to say is this - a prayer life that becomes nothing more than the motions of the religious slice of your life will wilt like a flower pulled out of the earth. The **first** step in drawing near to the Lord is putting away anything that is offensive to Him. Pray for cleansing fire **before** you pray for refreshing rain. First Elijah prays for **fire**. Then he will pray for **rain**. All the people **knew** they needed rain. But what was needed first was the purifying judgement of apathy, idolatry, and spiritual carelessness.

Now, some thoughtful person might be sitting here thinking these thoughts: "I wish you'd make up your mind, pastor Don. In fact, you preachers are all the same. First you start your sermon out talking about relying on the promise and faithfulness of God - about how free God's grace is - and how dependable He is even when I fail. Then, when you're trying to get us to be holy, you tell us how important righteousness and holiness are if I'm going to get anywhere with God. Which is it? ***In other words, is God's grace free or are there conditions?***"

And the answer to that question is, "**Yes.**" It's unfortunate that there is such broadly scattered confusion about this in the church of Jesus Christ. The reason for stressing both of these points - the **vastness and freeness of grace** and the **necessity of obedience** - is that ***while grace is always free it is never without conditions.***

Even in salvation, God's **free** grace isn't **conditionless**. People have to repent. People have to turn from their wicked ways. People have to acknowledge Jesus Christ. God's salvation is there free for the world. But not everyone meets the conditions of receiving it.

Now, in exactly the same way, just as God's grace is **free**, it is also given with a **goal**: ***Titus 2:14*** - "**....who gave himself [Jesus] for us to redeem us from all lawlessness and to purify for himself a people for his own possession who are zealous for good works.**"

God's grace isn't extended to enable people to indulge themselves in sin with immunity. In fact, His grace **won't** be extended to those people. Grace - **free** grace - is **never** given to people like that. It's given to ***call people into a zealous pursuit of holiness and good works.***

In fact, the good works are what prove grace is received deeply into the life. Dear one, grace and works aren't enemies. They're opposite sides of the same coin. You just can't split up heads and tails. And nowhere is that more clearly seen than in the act of prayer. It's the "***fervent prayer of a righteousness man***" that avails much.

"Well then, do we **earn** answers to prayer by works of righteousness?" No, we prove the reality of grace received and faith placed squarely on Jesus Christ, the solid rock. We prove we **really** trust and prize Christ above all, rather than come to Him like a magic genie when we're in a jam. Just like Elijah, we prove how much we love His glory above all by the way we cherish its manifestation in our hearts and wills.

4) **ELIJAH PRAYS EFFECTIVELY BECAUSE HIS HEART IS MOVED BY THE SPIRITUAL NEEDS OF THE PEOPLE AROUND HIM**

1 Kings 18:37 - "**Answer me, O Lord, answer me, that this people may know that you, O Lord, are God, and that you have turned their hearts back.**"

This is very gutsy praying. There is not one soul standing visibly united with Elijah at this point on Mount Carmel. But as he prays, he's thinking about God's people. I wonder if he named each tribe as those twelve stones were laid at that altar. I wonder if he thought of how the twelve tribes were now ten tribes and two. I wonder if he wept over the years of idolatry and waste.

"That you have turned their hearts back." Please think of those for whom you have stopped praying altogether. Or think of those who you name out of habit, but can't imagine ever coming back to God. Or think of some great cause that breaks your heart. The abortion issue. Families torn apart by hatred and separation. People so bound in sin that you don't think they will ever see the light of day.

And then remember Elijah. He prays for a nation so backslidden she didn't even care to pray for herself. Only Elijah prayed. And what's one praying person among so many prayerless and godless hypocrites?

And aren't you glad he didn't stop to deal with those questions? The fire fell. Sin was judged. Then the rains came. The people bowed in worship to the Lord God. Most of them probably never knew how fortunate they were that Elijah was holy and Elijah knew how to pray.

There is always so much relying on your prayers. On **your** prayers. There is so much at stake that **you** live for God's glory. You can't even imagine the difference it makes.