

Prayer: Its Efficacy

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"The supplication of a righteous man availeth much in its working." — James, v. 16.

I think there is no subject of revelation on which there is more skepticism than on that of prayer. This skepticism is not due to little being said on the subject in the Bible; neither does it arise from any ambiguity in the Scripture statements. You will all bear witness, if you have read the Bible much, that there is no duty or privilege more frequently emphasized in the Bible than this; and that no assurance is more solemnly given than that God is a prayer-hearing God, answering the prayers of His people. This skepticism grows out of our own short-sightedness. We look around and think of the laws of nature, and remember that God does not work miracles in this day, and we don't see how He can alter things to suit our wishes and petitions. We are told He is an unchanging God; how can He then answer prayer? Thus we set limits to God's ability to act without doing miracles. God can bring about certain things by miracles, and it seems but reasonable to suppose that He can do some things without a miracle. Prof. Tyndall, who is one of the most scientific men of our day, made himself famous a few years ago by proposing a practical test, as he said, of the efficacy of prayer. He proposed to select two wards of a certain large hospital, with patients afflicted alike in each, and that for the patients in one ward a large number of devout and earnest Christians should be asked to pray, while for those in the other no prayers should be made. In the course of a few months they would see which side had the larger number of convalescent patients. I suppose he thought this a very profound and satisfactory proposal; but when I saw it published in the papers, it struck me this way: Here he wants the people to pray for a certain portion of the sick, those on one side of the hospital, and to wickedly neglect to pray for the others. Of course such prayers would not be answered. A man prays for one and deliberately neglects to pray for others—that is a wicked prayer. Who could expect an answer?

Now if James tells the truth, "the supplication of a righteous man avails much." What he says is, that it "avails much." He does not say that it avails to the full extent that the petitioner wishes it to avail; he does not affirm that it will always accomplish precisely what is asked for by the petitioner; but he affirms that "it avails much." It may be in this way, it may be in that way but, in some way, it avails much.

A man fires a rifle, taking aim, very careful, deliberate aim, and misses the mark; does that bullet accomplish nothing? Is there no force in it? In a great battle, the immense cannonading which begins the fight does little execution; most of it is vain so far as striking the mark is concerned; most of it is vain so far as killing the enemy is concerned; would you say, then, that there is no power in it? Would you say it avails nothing? Every one of those cannon balls does something. If it does nothing but split open the air, and ploughs up the earth, it does something. It is a tremendous force. So, if the Bible teaches the truth, every prayer that goes out of a good man's heart, goes somewhere and hits something.

It is a power in this world. It has force and power, even if it misses the mark at which it is aimed; and no man is wise enough to track it and see what it does. The bullet goes out of sight through the woods. Sometimes it strikes an animal out of sight and kills it, sometimes, a man. A prayer goes out of the heart of a good man into the world; you don't know what it accomplishes; you can not follow its flight and see what is its effect; but you can believe that it avails much. When He to whom prayer is offered tells you that it is heard and that it avails much, can't you believe that? His eye can trace it when ours can not. So this matter of the force of prayer is, in the main, like everything else; sometimes, like the artillery fired in a great battle, or like a rifle shot, it strikes the mark and there is visible proof of its efficacy; and at other times it misses the mark, but strikes something else. When the Apostle had laid down this great rule, had stated that the prayer of a good man avails much, he brought up as proof an instance in which it struck the mark in the very center. When we think of prayer answered in ancient times, we are apt to think that it was answered by miracles. This was often the case, but not always. If James had cited in proof a prayer answered by a miracle, we could say, that will not answer for our day. If that were his only proof, we would have to depend on his word without the example. **He therefore goes back to past times, and selects a prayer the answer to which was no miracle at all.** He says, "Elijah was a man of like passions with us" (being a prophet did not lift him above being a man, a man of passions just like ours, though, of course, his passions were held in restraint), "and he prayed fervently that it might not rain " (there are a great many prayers of that kind among the farmers in our own day), 'and it rained not on the earth for three years and six months." Did you ever inquire why Elijah offered the prayer that it might not rain? Not because it was raining too much; not because the river was overflowing; or the farmers wanted time to work—there was no such occasion for it.

HOW GOD ANSWERS PRAYER

Why did he pray that I might not rain? It was a grand conception of his. The whole nation, under Ahab as king, and under the leadership of Jezebel, had deserted the living God, and so far as Elijah knew or believed, there was no man in all Israel but himself who worshiped the true God, The whole nation had drifted into idolatry. The nation had not fallen into this base and false heathenism without the prayers and entreaties of many good men against it ; but one by one the good men had been driven away, or died, so that he stood alone with all around him full of iniquity. Did he give up? Brethren, when a man has the right faith in God ; when he knows he has God's truth; and when he is not a coward, that man is not going to give up ; but he will have the spirit of Paul, who said, " Let God be true and every man a liar." That was the way with Elijah. What could be done? It entered the mind of Elijah, that if he could only have the power granted from God to hold back the rain for a year; and if necessary, another year; and if necessary, another year; and if necessary, another year; he would compel the people to see that Baal was no God; for all their prayers to Baal would not bring rain. He would compel them to see that Jehovah was the only God, so he prayed God for that power. That was an original conception; it was a grand conception, to ask God for such power, and for such a purpose. When Elijah found (by some token, we don't know what), that God had answered his prayer, he went boldly into the presence of Ahab, and cried out, "As the Lord God liveth, before whom I stand, there shall be neither dew nor rain these years, but according to my word." Then he went away and hid himself. He knew that when the king and his people began to be pinched with hunger, if they could find him, they would catch him and

try to choke out of him the word which would bring the rain. He went, as God told him, and hid himself by the brook Cherith, where ravens brought him food to eat. He stayed there until the brook ran dry, and then, seeing he could no longer get water there, for the ravens could not bring that in their claws, God told him to leave that place and go to a city called Zarephath. When he drew near to that place, he saw a woman come out of the gate and begin picking up sticks ; and he said to her, "Fetch me, I pray thee, a little water, that I may drink." When she started to get it, he called again and said, "Bring me, I pray thee, a morsel of bread." At this the woman turned back and said, "As the Lord thy God liveth, I have not a cake, but a handful of meal in the barrel and a little oil in the cruse ; and I am gathering sticks, that I may go in and dress it for me and my son, that we may eat it and die." "Fear not," Elijah said, "Go and do what thou hast said; but make me a little cake first, and bring it to me, and afterward make for thee and thy son. For thus saith Jehovah, the God of Israel, The barrel of meal shall not waste, neither shall the cruse of oil fail till the day that God sendeth rain on the earth." She went and did as he told her. I wonder how many women in Louisville would do this—go and get the last morsel of meal and oil, and give it to the prophet, when she and her little boy were at the point of starvation. That woman did it, and it was because God knew that she had it in her heart to do so, that He sent Elijah to her rather than to any one else. I presume He looked down from heaven and saw only that one woman who had such faith in Him. How wonderful it was that she could keep the prophet hid. When the starving people found that she always had something to eat, they doubtless came to rob her; but she could say, See, here is my barrel, I emptied it this morning. Here is my cruse with no oil in it; turn it up and see. Thus she kept her secret, yet when the time came for the evening meal, there was a fresh supply. The prophet, in the meantime, was safely hid in the loft, and he stayed there till the three years and a half of famine had passed away.

Now brethren, what made that long drought? You are ready, perhaps, to say that it was a miracle. If it should stay dry three months in Kentucky, would that be a miracle? No. A whole year ; is that a miracle? No. Another year? No. How long would it have to remain to turn a natural drought into a miracle? It was not a miracle, it was from natural causes. The rain cloud did not come up from the sea in the right direction for the wind to carry it over Palestine. The long continuance did not make it a miracle. Elijah prayed that it might not rain, and it did not rain on the earth until the prayer was changed.

At the end of three years and a half, God commanded the prophet to go and show himself to the king. I don't know whether Elijah had yet reached the conclusion that the prayer had answered its purpose, but he went and met the king, and said to him, "Gather together all the people on the top of Mt. Carmel." The king now obeys the prophet, and the people come together, and the four hundred prophets of Baal come with them. When they had all assembled, Elijah appeared in their midst and cried with a loud voice, so he could be heard by all the assembly, "How long halt ye between two opinions? If Jehovah is God, follow him; if Baal is God, follow him." Not a man said a word. Why was this? Were they not convinced which was the true God? Had they not prayed to their God for three years for rain, and did they not know it was Elijah's God who held it back? It was because they were cowards. They were afraid. If they said, "Jehovah is God," there stood Ahab, and there was Jezebel, and there were the four hundred prophets of Baal; and if they said, "Baal is God," there was that old prophet, and he would not

let it rain. So through cowardice they held their peace on both sides. But Elijah would not be outdone; if the control of the rain had not satisfied them, he would try them with fire.

"Then said Elijah unto the people, I, even I only, am left a prophet of Jehovah ; but Baal's prophets are four hundred and fifty men. Let them therefore give us two bullocks ; and let them choose one bullock for themselves, and cut it in pieces, and lay it on the wood, and put no fire under : and I will dress the other bullock, and lay it on the wood, and put no fire under. And call ye on the name of your god, and I will call on the name of Jehovah: and the God that answereth by fire, let him be God. And all the people answered and said, It is well spoken. They could say amen to that in advance without being afraid.

The trial was made. After the prophets of Baal had yelled and screamed for half a day, and cut themselves with knives, that the flowing blood might swell their excitement, it was clear that Baal could send no fire. Then Elijah prayed. His prayer was brief and simple, but fervent and pointed. He said: "Jehovah, the God of Abraham, of Isaac, and of Israel, let it be known this day that thou art God in Israel, and that I am thy servant, and that I have done all these things at thy word. Hear me, Jehovah, hear me, that this people may know that thou, Jehovah, art God, and that thou hast turned their heart back again." The fire came down from heaven. It consumed the offering, the wood, the very stones of the altar. The people fell on their faces and cried out, "Jehovah is God." Then the prophets of Baal were killed, in compliance with the law of Moses, and in punishment of their hellish hypocrisy. Elijah had now accomplished the purpose of his first prayer ; that is, he had brought the people back to the God whom they had deserted. What a grand conception that was, and how great the good resulting from that prayer! Having brought the people back to God, he did not wish the drought to continue, so he went up to the top of Mt. Carmel and prayed again. He sat upon the ground, drew up his knees, clasped his hands around them, bowed his head between them, and prayed. He said to his servant, "Go up now; look toward the sea." When you climb to the highest point of that part of the mountain, you can look down upon a long line of the coast reaching southward toward Caesarea, with the wide expanse of water stretching away till it meets the sky in the dim distance. The servant came back and said he saw nothing. "Go again seven times." He went: and when he returned the seventh time, he said, "Behold, there ariseth a cloud out of the sea, as small as a man's hand." Then Elijah sent word to the king to hasten away lest the rain should detain him. In a little while the heavens grew black with clouds, there was a great rain, and the earth yielded her fruits once more. How did the rain come? If it had come without the cloud, that would have been a miracle. If it had come from over the desert, that would have been a miracle. How did it come? The clouds came up from the sea, as every rain cloud does. The wind blew it eastward, and when it came in contact with cooler volumes of air, its vapor was condensed, and the rain fell. It came just as any other rain comes. It came in answer to prayer. It is not only true, then, that in a general way the fervent prayer of a good man avails much, but that sometimes it accomplishes the very thing for which it went forth out of the mind and heart. There are many thoughtful, observant Christians, prayerful men, who have seen things transpire so precisely in accordance with their prayers, that you can not convince them that their prayers are not answered. This ought to make us believe that every prayer rightly offered has been answered in some way, though in what way we may not be able to tell.

OTHER LESSONS FROM THE TEXT

I want you now to notice a little more particularly some other matters in this text. James does not say that every prayer is answered. It is unfortunately true that many foolish prayers are offered up to God, many formal prayers are offered; many, because they do not start from the heart, never rise higher than the ceiling. Notice that Elijah prayed "fervently," and that it is the fervent prayer which availeth much—one that is warm, that is earnest, that comes out of the center of the heart. No other kind of prayer has the promise. Again, it is not the prayer of every man that avails much. "The supplication of a righteous man." You all realize that this is just as it should be. If you were sick, and thought you were going to die, and wanted the comfort of prayer at your bedside, would you send for some wicked neighbor, who sometimes prays when scared? Would you send for some member of the church who barely keeps his place in it? You would not think of any such person. If you wanted some one to pray by your bedside, you would send for the very best man or woman you could reach, and you would not have any other, for you could have no confidence in the prayers of any but the righteous. That is the kind James speaks of. "The supplication of a righteous man avails much." That kind of a man is God's friend. That is the kind of a man God loves.

If God was a God who did not hear our prayers, or care anything about our prayers, He might as well be made of ice. He is a living God; a God who has friends, and loves His friends ; and this is the reason that He will do something for them when they cry to Him. Don't think of God as mere abstraction, or as a being who keeps Himself beyond the sky; but think of Him as one who lives with you, who is round about you, who lays His hand under your head when you lie down to rest. So in praying, pray with the confidence of little children. One of the bitterest cries I ever heard of, came from one of the great historians of England, when he said, "I would give all I am and all I ever hope to be, for one hour of my childhood's faith, when I looked up at the sky and called it heaven." He had lost the simple faith of his early days, and could not get it back again. We are to believe that God is with us, that His eyes are upon us, and that He hears the prayers of His saints. Pray in the morning; pray at the noontide; pray when you lie down to sleep. There are some beautiful things even in false religions. In Mohammedan countries, when the morning begins to dawn there comes a scream from the minarets calling the people to prayer. When this cry is heard, all are expected to arise from sleep and pray. Then, when the sun begins to peep over the horizon, there is heard again the call from the minaret, and every one is expected to pray again. Again at noon, again as the sun begins to dip behind the horizon, and again at dark. In old times these prayers were kept up; but unfortunately, while the cry is still heard, there is little attention paid to it, just as, in our country, the bells ring on Sunday morning calling people to prayer, and ring unheeded. Pray often; pray earnestly; and in order that your prayer may amount to anything, be righteous men and women. Walk humbly before God, and truly with the people, and your prayers will be heard.