

Place: Lurgan Baptist 30:1:2005

Reading: James 5:13-20

## **PRACTICAL CHRISTIANITY**

### **32. THE POWER OF PRAYER**

In the year 1983 I had the privilege of preaching in South Africa for almost two months. While I was there some friends took me for two nights to Hluhluwe Game Reserve. There I saw all kinds of wildlife. Giraffe's, elephants, rhinoceros, buffalo, wildebeest, springbok. I can well recall getting up one morning before dawn and heading out to a water hole, to watch the animals as they came down to drink. It was fascinating. For on that morning we saw the fastest animal on earth, the cheetah.

But there is one animal that I never saw that resides in South Africa. Its called the gnu and it has a curious meeting of its enemies. You see, whenever its going to attack, it first gets down on its knees, and gets its impetus from that attitude. In other words, it springs best from the kneeling position. What a sensible beast and what an example for us all.

I don't know whether you are of the fact that the human author of this letter was likened to an animal. *A camel*. You see, there is a tradition that the nickname the early church gave to James was camel knees. It is said that his knees were as hard as camel knees, and the reason for that is not hard to seek. *James was a great man of prayer, and he was so constantly on his knees that they had worn hard.* Now while we have no means of proving that tradition, we do know that the importance of prayer comes through time and again in this letter. The two matters that James deals with most often are, Tongues and Knees. Do you recall what he said in ( 1:5-6 ) ? He said, " *If any man lack wisdom let him ask of God,*" then at the beginning of ( Ch 4 ) he examines the reasons for defective prayer. He says, " *Ye have not because ye ask not.*" Now the whole of this section from ( 5:13-18 ) is given over to prayer in one aspect or another. I want to talk to you this .... about "***The Power of Prayer.***" As we read the Word we see that prayer is to be a fact in our life. Believers are to be a praying people. Prayer is to be a custom and habit in our life.

But prayer is to be more than a *fact* its to be a *force*. What a testimony George Mueller was to the power of prayer. Mueller by prayer and prayer alone built an

orphanage that at one point was caring for more than 2000 children. The orphanage is no longer there, but the buildings he built through prayer remain as part of the Bristol College. My .... George Mueller never asked for a single penny or ever made his needs known except to God in prayer. For Mueller prayer was more than *a fact*, it was *a mighty force*. He knew something about, “*The Power of Prayer*,” Now let me give you three things this .... That I trust will open up this passage.

### (1) A PRINCIPLE WE NEED TO RECOGNISE

“*The effectual .... availeth much*,” The Amplified, puts it like this, “*the earnest, heartfelt, continued prayer of a righteous man make tremendous power available dynamic in its working*.” Now this is the hub around which the whole of the section revolves. It is the principle for the practical outworking of everything else. The Greek word translated “*prayer*,” in ( 5:16 ) ( *deesis* ) means “*a humble begging or plea or petition*.” It’s the most humble word for prayer in Greek. Its not the type of prayer that orders God to do this or that. The word suggests the picture of a needy man with his head bowed and a dirty cap in his hand. He is humbly asking for help. Now James tells us this kind of humble praying is,

#### (a) APPROACHED WITH INTEGRITY:

“*The prayer of a righteous man ....*,” Now that word “*righteous*,” is used in the Bible in two senses. Its used in a *Spiritual* sense. Do you know how the Word of God describes you if you are not saved ? It says, “*there is none righteous, no not one*.” ( Rom 3:10 ) Do you realise that you cannot stand before God in your own righteousness ? Do you recognise that you need to be clothed in the righteousness of Christ ? ( 1 Cor 1:30 ) And every Christian is. But does that mean that all our prayers are effective because we are righteous ? No ! For James is not using this word “*righteous*,” in a spiritual sense but in a *Moral* sense. Its not enough for you to say, “*Well I am a Christian*,” a person also must be righteous morally, practically if his prayer is to be heard. To be righteous is simply to be right with God. My .... To prevail with God in prayer we must be clean before God. There must be no unconfessed sin in our lives. Do you recall David’s words ? “*If I regard iniquity in my heart the Lord will not hear me*.” ( Ps 66:18 ) John says, “*And whatsoever we ask, we receive of Him, because we keep His commandments and do those things that are pleasing in His sight*.” ( 1 Jn 3:22 ) Robert Murray Mc Cheyne said, “*what a man is in his prayer close is what he is*.” No Christian is greater than his

prayer life and his prayer life can be no greater than his personal life.

My .... we cannot divorce our living from our praying !

Do you know something its possible to preach without being right with God. I know for I have done it. Preaching is a person to person encounter. We can teach a Sunday School class, witness to a lost soul without being right with God. These are person to person encounters, *but prayer is a person to God encounter*. Its an audience with God with whom all things are open and naked. Do you know something ? We can't fake it with God. What we are when we are alone with God is what we are. It is “ *the effectual .... a righteous man,*” (a)

**(b) ASKED WITH INTENSITY:**

Do you see what it says ? “ *the effectual fervent prayer,*”

Now those two words “ *effectual, fervent,*” translate a Greek word, Its from the root of this word that we get our English word “ *energy,*” and that helps us unlock the meaning of this phrase. Now in order for our prayers to be effective they don't have to be phrased in a certain language. An American lady who visited Israel very late in life came home and started taking a course in Hebrew.

When someone asked her why she was taking this difficult language she replied, “ *well it won't be long before I die and when I do I would love to greet my Maker in His native tongue.*” My .... there is no need to be pray in a certain language for your prayers to be effective. Nor do you need to pray a certain length for your prayers to be effective. Have you ever noticed that most of the prayers recorded in the Bible are very brief ?

( Matt 14:30 Lk 18:13 Jn 17:1 )

Our praying does not need to be a certain loudness for them to be effective. What is important according to James is fervency in prayer. One old commentator put it like this, “ *if the arrow of prayer is to enter heaven we must draw it from a bow full bent.*” Actually, we could translate these words “ *effectual fervent,*” like this, “ *stretched out,*” it's the picture of an athlete bursting for the tape with his last gasp of energy. Now let me ask you, do you pray as a professing Christian ? How do you pray ? Do you pray “ *stretched out,*”? Not stretched out in bed muttering a few words before you drop off to sleep, but praying fervently, earnestly, intensely. (a) (b)

**(c) ANSWERED WITH IMMENSITY:**

For it “ *availeth much,*” ( 5:16 ) The words literally mean “ *is strong, is able to do*

*much.*” This kind of praying is powerful praying. It is the kind of prayer in which man asks and God answers. ( Jer 33:3 ) Some time ago a missionary spoke about a letter he received from a little girl whose Sunday School class had been writing to foreign missionaries. Their teacher told them that missionaries were very busy and might not have the time to answer their letters, for the one he received said simply this. “ *Dear Mr. Smith, we are praying for you. We are not expecting an answer.*” My .... has that little girl not summed up many of our prayer lives ? “ *We are praying for you. We are not expecting an answer.*” Yet James says that prayer works, or to put it more accurately, God works through prayer. (1)

## (2) A PICTURE WE NEED TO VISUALISE

For here James gives us an O.T. illustration of persistent, effective prayer. Now he could have chosen many O.T. example of the effective praying of righteous men. He could have chosen Moses who “ *fell down before the Lord forty days and forty nights.*” ( Deut 9:5 ) Or he could have chosen Samuel who “ *cried unto the Lord all night.*” ( 1 Sam 15:11 ) What about Daniel ? He “ *kneeled upon his knees three times a day, and prayed, and gave thanks before his God.*” ( Dan 6:10 ) But he chooses Elijah possibly because to the Jews Elijah represented the prophets in the same way that Moses represented the law. Do you recall also that at the Transfiguration it was Moses and Elijah who appeared with Christ on the mountain-top. ( Matt 17:4 ) Now James tells us two things about Elijah. He speaks about,

### (a) HIS NATURAL WEAKNESS:

“ *Elijah was a special prophet of God, we can expect God to answer his prayers in a wonderful way.*” No !

James says, he “ *was a man subject to like passions as we are.*” In the Greek scholars tell us the order of the words is this, “ *Elijah, man was he of like infirmities with us.*” Or “ *Elijah was as perfectly human as we are.*” My .... this is the first thing that James wants us to notice in his illustration. He is not using some kind of superman, an extraordinary man to make his point. Elijah was a man just like us. He *was a prophet but he was not perfect.* He was prone to all of our failures and weaknesses and sins. He was susceptible to all of our diseases. He was simply a man. Now nowhere does that come out more vividly than in the account of what happened after Carmel. *I wonder can you recall an hour in your life when you have been overwhelmed with the temptation to despair, the temptation to give up ?* Well, Elijah was. Do you recall that he came face to face with the threat of the

wicked Jezebel and ran for his life. He ran off into the wilderness, lay down under a juniper tree and wished himself dead, crying, “ *O Lord take away my life, for I am not better than my fathers.* ”

( 1 Kings 19:4 ) Elijah had come from the mountain of victory to the valley of defeat. He had come from the pinnacle to the pits. “ *A man subject to like passions as we are.* ” ( 5:17 ) A man who could put his head between his knees and wish himself dead. And why should that encourage us ? Because it this man as Thomas Manton put it, “ *who seemed to have the key of heaven, to open and shut it at pleasure.* ” It was this man sometimes at the end of his tether, who was such a mighty instrument in the hands of God. Yes there was (a) but there was,

### **(b) HIS SUPERNATURAL POWER:**

History shows how mankind has progressed from manpower to horsepower, and then to dynamite and T.N.T. and now to atomic power. But greater than atomic power is prayer power. The power of prayer. You see, Elijah prayed for his nation and God answered prayer. Will you notice that,

#### 1. Elijah prayed EARNESTLY:

Look if you will at ( 5:17 ) Literally it means, “ *he prayed in his prayer.* ” Do you do that ? Isn’t it refreshing to hear a new convert pray without all the clichés and jargon that the rest of us use ? Some years ago a man was saved in Dallas, Texas on a Thursday night. He showed up the following Sunday at the services and when Wednesday night came he was at the midweek meeting. Before the prayer session he turned to a man sitting next to him and said, “ *do you think they would mind if I prayed ?* ” “ *Of course not,* ” replied the believer “ *that’s what we’re here for.* ” “ *I know but I’ve got a problem I can’t pray the way you people do.* ” The Christian said, “ *that’s no problem at all.* ” Well, after a number prayed, he rose to his feet and he said, “ *Lord, this is Jim I’m the one that met you last Thursday night, forgive me Lord, but I can’t say it the way the rest of the people do, but I want to tell you the best I know how, that I love you Lord.* ” Amen. Do you know what ? He ignited the prayer meeting. The rest had been doing a fantastic job scraping the Milky Way, but he prayed. 1.

#### 2. Elijah prayed PERSISTENTLY:

“ *He prayed .... and he prayed again.* ” ( 5:17-18 ) Prayer was answered. That day on Mount Carmel Elijah persisted in prayer. ( 1 Kings 18:44 ) Can you see his servant returning to Elijah and saying, “ *there is nothing.* ” ( 1 Kings 18:43 ) Do

you know the experience ? Have you sought the Lord for someone, for something, and you've for an answer and there is nothing. No tear of penitence in their eye, no symptom of change in their sinful lifestyle. Nothing ! What's been your reaction ? Have you said, " *I thought so.* " Have you stopped praying ? Elijah did not for he said, " *Go again seven times,* " or " *He said seven times go again.* " He was not answered immediately but he persevered. After five times the servant came back, " *Nothing.* " " *Go again.* " The sixth time, " *Master there is nothing.* " " *Go again.* " The seventh time " *behold there ariseth a little cloud out of the sea, like a man's hand.* " ( 18:44 ) Elijah persevered. My .... do you know what it is to hold on to the Lord ? Are you persevering in prayer ?  
( Gen 32:26 Is 30:18 )

Have you gone to the edge of the mountain six times and yet there is nothing ? Hold on, the answer may be nearer than you think. Mother, hold on to the Lord for your wayward boy, father hold on for your unsaved children, wife hold on to God for your unsaved husband  
for we have a God who hears and answers prayer !  
( Ps 99:6 ) (1) (2)

### **(3) A PRACTICE WE NEED TO UTILISE**

Do you see what James says in ( 5:16 ) ? Now this is the only directive in this section. The middle part is a principle. The third part is an illustration of the truth but here we have the instruction. " *Confess .... healed,* " Now James is speaking here about,

#### **(a) SOMETHING HORIZONTAL:**

" *Confess your faults one to another.* " Now this is the verse that the Roman Catholic system uses to base its doctrine of auricular confession, confession to a priest which is obligatory for Roman Catholics at least once every year. Yet this interpretation will never do. Martin Luther once said, " *A strange Confessor his name is one-another.* " On the other hand this verse does not teach that every Christian in the world is to go around confessing all his sins to every other believer he meets. The result would obviously be carnal chaos. My .... we are privileged to go straight to God through the Lord Jesus to confess our sins. But there are times when to be right with God we must be right with each other. When we sin against another believer, we must personally ask that person to forgive us. This is personal confession.

Do you recall the challenging words of the Lord Jesus ? “ *If thou bring thy gift to the altar, and there rememberest that thy brother hath ought against thee, leave there thy gift before the altar, and go thy way, first be reconciled to thy brother, and then come and offer thy gift.* ” ( Matt 5:23-24 ) My .... this is Christ’s order of worship. “ *First be reconciled to thy brother, sister.* ” Is this something you need to do ? (a)

**(b) SOMETHING VERTICAL:**

“ *And pray for one another,* ” ( 5:16 ) Scholars tell us that the tense of these verbs is the present imperative. James was saying in effect, “ *make a practice of agreeing with and praying for one another. Don’t wait until the need arises always do it.* ” My .... James will not allow us to stray away from this subject of prayer. Whether the problem is physical, mental, spiritual, moral or any other kind, he only knows one answer .... pray. If a man is sick, pray. If you have faults, pray. “ *And pray one for another.* ” What a contrast that is to ( 5:9 ) where we read, “ *Grudge not one against another.* ” My .... which attitude marks us this .... ? Are we praying for each other or we grumbling about each other ? (a) (b)

**(c) SOMETHING SPIRITUAL:**

“ *that ye may be healed,* ” ( 5:16 ) This may well refer to spiritual recovery rather than physical for the word is often used in that sense. ( Matt 13:15 Heb 12:13 1 Pet 2:24 ) And the emphasis on confession here does seem to point to the spiritual. The Amplified Bible brings this out by translating it, “ *that you may be healed and restored to a spiritual tone of mind and heart.* ” Can you think this .... of how many quarrels and divisions would be healed, if only we followed James’s teaching about mutual confession and earnest prayer one for another.”

*The Power of Prayer !* Thomas Guthrie said, “ *the direct power of prayer is, in a sense omnipotent. Prayer moves the hand that moves the world.* ” My .... do you realise that nothing lies outside the reach of prayer except that which lies outside the will of God ? ( 1 Jn 5:14-15 )

*The Power of Prayer !* R. A. Torrey said, “ *prayer is the key that opens wide the inexhaustible storehouse of divine grace and power. There is only one limit to what prayer can do, that is what God can do.* ” Torrey speaking of D. L. Moody described him as a far greater pray-er than preacher. He spoke of how time and again Moody was confronted by obstacles that seemed insurmountable, but he

always knew the way to surmount and overcome all difficulties. Torrey said,  
“ *He knew the way to bring to pass anything that needed to be brought to pass.*”

*The Power of Prayer !* Jonathan Edwards said, “ *there is no way that Christians in a private capacity can do so much to promote the work of God and advance the kingdom of Christ as by prayer.*”

My .... there is *Power in Prayer !* Do you know anything about this power ? Do you know from personal experience that “ *the effectual .... availeth much,*”?