

word in the phrase, is actually the first word in the phrase when read in the Greek: Πολὺ ἰσχύει δέησις δικαίου ἐνεργουμένη. This would be woodenly translated as: “Much, *the* power of petition of *the* righteous person is accomplishing.” That the word Πολὺ (*polu*), “Much,” is placed first in the clause gives it special emphasis. James’ point is clear: we are constantly to be reminded that nothing is impossible for God. What may seem impossible, out of the question, beyond possibility in our own finite minds, is not impossible for God. Remember the words of our Lord and Savior:

And looking at them Yeshua said to them, “With people this is impossible, but with God all things are possible.” (Matt. 19:26)

And if we are praying as we are led by the Spirit, then we will always be praying that God would perform His will in any given situation. It is always right to unburden our hearts before the Lord in prayer, and to pray for that which is needed and for that which we desire to accomplish. But ultimately, in all of our prayers, we must have the perspective of Yeshua as He faced the cross and prayed, for this is a model for us to follow in all our prayers:

Father, if You are willing, remove this cup from Me; yet not My will, but Yours be done” (Lk 22:42)

Let us therefore be encouraged by this teaching of James, and with strengthened faith in the power of God to do more than we could ask or think, to be regularly in prayer, that our lives and the lives of those we are privileged to touch, would give Him the glory and honor He deserves, and that we might be lights to others, pointing them to Yeshua.

**17–18 Elijah was a man with a nature like ours, and he prayed earnestly that it would not rain, and it did not rain on the earth for three years and six months. Then he prayed again, and the sky poured rain and the earth produced its fruit.**

To emphasize the central place that prayer holds in the life of all who are believers in Yeshua, James points to Elijah as a prime example of a person of faith who lived before the coming of Yeshua. Along with Abraham, Issac, and Rahab, Elijah is the fourth biblical character from the Tanach to be used by James to illustrate a life of faith in God. Indeed,

...no biblical figure so exercised the religious thinking of post-Biblical Judaism as did that of the prophet Elijah.<sup>1</sup>

Indeed, the Scriptures themselves indicate the very high regard that post-exilic Judaisms held for Elijah, including biblical prophets like Malachi.

Behold, I am going to send you Elijah the prophet before the coming of the great and terrible day of the LORD. He will restore the hearts of the fathers to their children and the hearts of the children to their fathers, so that I will not come and smite the land with a curse. (Mal 4:5–6)

We see Elijah mentioned in all four of the Gospels.<sup>2</sup> Likewise, in the apocryphal and later rabbinic literature, Elijah is elevated as a hero of the faith and spoken of as a prophet with great power.<sup>3</sup>

As a result, many in James' day, as well as in our own, might consider Elijah to be someone who is far above the average believer, meaning that he was endowed with spiritual power and abilities that very few others would have. But this is precisely why James uses Elijah as an impetus for all to pray.

*Elijah was a man with a nature like ours...* – The Greek translated by the NASB as “man” is *ἄνθρωπος* (*anthropos*), which is not gender specific but means “person” or “human being,” thus encompassing both male and female. He stresses that Elijah had “a nature like ours,” where the Greek word translated “nature” is *ὁμοιοπαθῆς* (*homioopathēs*), making this very clear. Elijah was, in his essential being, one of us—human and not “super-human.” The same word is used in Acts 14 when at the command of Paul and Barnabas, the lame man was healed, leaped up and began to walk. The people proclaimed that Paul and Barnabas were “gods” and began calling Barnabas “Zeus” and Paul “Hermes” and prepared to offer sacrifices to them! But Paul and Barnabas tore their garments and cried out:

Men, why are you doing these things? We are also men of the same nature (*homioopathēs*) as you, and preach the gospel to you that you should turn from these vain things to a living God, WHO MADE THE HEAVEN AND THE EARTH AND THE SEA AND ALL THAT IS IN THEM. (Acts 14:15).

1 TDNT, “Ἡλ(ε)ίας,” 2:928.

2 Matt, 9x; Mk, 9x; Lk, 8x; Jn, 2x.

3 Cf. Sir 48:1–11; 2 Esd 7:109; m. Taan. 2:4; b. Sanh. 113a

...and he prayed earnestly that it would not rain – The Greek here translated “prayed earnestly” (προσευχῆ προσήύξατο, *proseuxē prosēuksato*) is literally “he prayed prayer” and mimics the Hebrew or Aramaic construction of an infinitive followed by a cognate verb, e.g., “praying he prayed” which is one way that the Hebrew or Aramaic indicates emphasis. Such emphasis might indicate repeated prayer as well.

But regardless of how we understand “prayed earnestly,” the emphasis James intends us to grasp is therefore clear: even as the prayer of Elijah accomplished great things in accordance with God’s will and purposes, so as we bring our praise and requests to God in prayer, we affirm that the same divine power that stopped the rain and brought it back again at Elijah’s request, will bring about God’s will in our lives and circumstances.

But in fact, the historical record given to us in 1Ki 18:42 does not specifically state that Elijah prayed that the rain would stop and a drought would come, but it uses language that surely pictures prayer, for to “stand before the Lord” undoubtedly means to come into His presence in prayer.

Now Elijah the Tishbite, who was of the settlers of Gilead, said to Ahab, “As the LORD, the God of Israel lives, before whom I stand, surely there shall be neither dew nor rain these years, except by my word.” (1Ki 17:1)

And though different wording is used in 1Ki 18:42-44 when the drought ended and rain was restored, it once again is clear that the text pictures Elijah in prayer.

So Ahab went up to eat and drink. But Elijah went up to the top of Carmel; and he crouched down on the earth and put his face between his knees. He said to his servant, “Go up now, look toward the sea.” So he went up and looked and said, “There is nothing.” And he said, “Go back” seven times. It came about at the seventh time, that he said, “Behold, a cloud as small as a man’s hand is coming up from the sea.” (1Ki 18:42–44)

... and it did not rain on the earth for three years and six months. – Once again, in the historical telling of the events in the Tanach, the time period of three and a half years is not found. What is stated is that the drought ceased “in the third year” (1Ki 18:1). Yet we know, by the very words of Yeshua, that the drought lasted three and a half years.

But I say to you in truth, there were many widows in Israel in the days of Elijah, when the sky was shut up for three years and six months, when a great famine came over all the land...; (Lk 4:25)

Various explanations have been given as to how the “third year” of 1Ki 18:1 is to be understood.

- Some see “three years” simply as a round number, meaning “about three years.”
- Others see “three and a half years” as being a common reference to a time of national calamity, foreshadowing the time of trouble that is prophesied for the end-times. In Dan 7:25; 12:7; Rev 11:2–3, “time, times, and a half-of times” (עֵדֶן וְעֵדֶן וְעֵדֶן וְחֵמֶשׁ יָמִים) may well indicate “one year, two years, and half-of-a-year.” This may likewise parallel the 42 months found in Rev 11:2–3, which would calculate to three and a half years.
- Others take the three and a half years to be three years plus the time it would take between the April and October rains, as well as noting that a famine is not removed immediately with the return of the rain.<sup>1</sup>

The final view seems most likely to be the best explanation, but the second view also may shed light on the use of “three and a half years” as a known metaphor for a time of severe trouble.

*Then he prayed again, and the sky poured rain and the earth produced its fruit.* Regardless of how the exact timing of “three years and six months” is resolved, the primary point is this: a common man, Elijah, was used of the Lord to bring about His will by showing that the God he served was indeed the One Who controls all things, including astronomical events which are entirely impossible for mankind to control. And for James, this demonstrates the power of prayer as God’s people submit to Him and give themselves to further His will and purposes, waiting upon Him with enduring faith to see His ordained will established for His people.

The application of these words of James for each of us is clear. Elijah existed as a human being, called of God to serve Him, having the same human finiteness that we too experience. Unfortunately, the Roman Catholic Church, along with some of the various Christian denomi-

1 See Darrell Bock, *Luke in Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament* (Baker Books, 1994), 1:421.

nations that have historically divided away from the Catholic Church, have established the position of “Saints” to describe those who have been given special (and in some cases enduring) divine power to do what common mortals cannot do. It is very unfortunate that the word “saint” in our English language has been used this way, since in the Scriptures themselves it simply translates קְדוֹשִׁים (*qedōshim*) in Hebrew or ἅγιος (*hagios*) in Greek, both of which mean “holy ones,” and is used throughout the Scriptures to describe those who are children of God through faith in the Messiah, Yeshua.

Clearly James desires to do away with such thinking, teaching us that the same power by which Elijah made known the Divine will is the very power by which our prayers are used of God to show His divine work among His people. As Calvin notes:

Lest any one should object and say, that we are far distant from the dignity of Elias, he places him in our own rank, by saying, that he was a mortal man and subject to the same passions with ourselves. For we profit less by the examples of saints, because we imagine them to have been half gods or heroes, who had peculiar intercourse with God; so that because they were heard, we receive no confidence. In order to shake off this heathen and profane superstition, James reminds us that the saints ought to be considered as having the infirmity of the flesh; so that we may learn to ascribe what they obtained from the Lord, not to their merits, but to the efficacy of prayer.

It hence appears how childish the Papists are, who teach men to flee to the protection of saints, because they had been heard by the Lord. For thus they reason, “Because he obtained what he asked as long as he lived in the world, he will be now after death our best patron.” This sort of subtle refinement was altogether unknown to the Holy Spirit. For James on the contrary argues, that as their prayers availed so much, so we ought in like manner to pray at this day according to their example, and that we shall not do so in vain.<sup>1</sup>

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1 Calvin, *James*, pp. 360–361.

**19–20 My brethren, if any among you strays from the truth and one turns him back, let him know that he who turns a sinner from the error of his way will save his soul from death and will cover a multitude of sins.**

*My brethren* – Even as James began his epistle by addressing the “brethren” (ἀδελφοί, *adelphoi*),<sup>1</sup> so he ends it with this same title, emphasizing the unity that exists in the body of Messiah and should therefore be lived out to a watching world. The fact that all true believers are adopted sons and daughter in the family of God ought to energize us to help one another as well as to treat each other as family. Clearly James considers those he addresses as his close brothers and sisters in the Lord, for he refers to them as “my brethren.”<sup>2</sup>

... *if any among you strays from the truth and one turns him back* – Here it is clear that James is speaking to the local assembly of believers, and it is therefore also clear that even a true believer in Yeshua may, for a time, “stray from the truth.” The phrase “stray from the truth” (πλανηθῆ ἀπὸ τῆς ἀληθείας) uses the verb *πλανᾷω* (*planaō*), which can have the sense of “to wander or go astray from a specific way, to mislead or deceive, or simply to proceed without a sense of direction.”<sup>3</sup> Surely every believing community experiences this to one measure or another. But the point that James desires for us to grasp is that we ought to be ready to help such a person who strays, and of course, to do so with wisdom and love. For the Lord Himself may use us to rescue the wanderer and to bring him or her back to a genuine life of faith and obedience to the Lord.

Note that in the phrase “strays from the truth,” James uses the articular “the truth” (πλανηθῆ ἀπὸ τῆς ἀληθείας) which means that there is a divinely ordained standard for “truth” in this regard, and that standard is the word of God, the Bible. Indeed, in the opening verses of this epistle, James teaches us the very means by which we came to Yeshua as our Savior:

In the exercise of His will He brought us forth by the word of truth, so that we would be a kind of first fruits among His creatures. (James 1:18)

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- 1 The address “brethren” (ἀδελφοί) is found 15 times in James: 1:2, 16, 19; 2:1, 5, 14; 3:1, 10, 12; 4:11; 5:7, 9-10, 12, 19.
  - 2 That *adelphoi* includes both male and female is clear, since James address the community as a whole. Cf. *BDAG*, “ἀδελφός,” p. 18.
  - 3 *BDAG*, “πλανᾷω,” p. 821.

Thus, to wander from the truth is to neglect or transgress what the Scriptures teach. This can be the result of accepting false teaching, and in fact James uses the same verb, *planaō*, in 1:16 to describe being deceived.

Do not be deceived, my beloved brethren. Every good thing given and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shifting shadow. (James 1:16–17)

Such deception can be thrust upon people who unwittingly follow those who twist the Scriptures for their own designs and to gather a following for their own gain.

How is it, then, that one is able to turn back someone who has been deceived and wandered from the truth? It can only be by prayer and by clear and direct application of the Scriptures. In praying for the one who has strayed from the truth, their heart may be opened to listen and consider the truth when it is given to them. Further, through prayer the one who seeks to turn the wanderer back may be given wisdom in the proper approach and use of the Scriptures. And we may have full confidence that the word of God is alive and active, and that by the work of the Spirit, will bring repentance and a turning back to God in truth for the child of God who has been led astray.

For the word of God is living and active and sharper than any two-edged sword, and piercing as far as the division of soul and spirit, of both joints and marrow, and able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart. (Heb 4:12)