

Prayer for All Seasons (Part 3)

James 5:13-18

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*Tom Pennington, Pastor-Teacher
Countryside Bible Church, Southlake, Texas*

James 5: let me read for you, again, the paragraph that we began to look at and have looked at for a couple of weeks. But it's been a couple of weeks, now, since we looked at it together so it's important to reacclimate ourselves to these profound words. James 5:13: "Is anyone among you suffering? Then we must pray. Is anyone cheerful? He is to sing praises. Is anyone among you sick? Then he must call for the elders of the church and they are to pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord; and the prayer offered in faith will restore the one who is sick, and the Lord will raise him up, and if he is committed to sins, they will be forgiven him.

Therefore, confess your sins to one another, and pray for one another so that you may be healed. The effective prayer of a righteous man can accomplish much. 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."

It's clear that the subject of this paragraph, the theme of this paragraph, is prayer. In noun or verb form, the word for prayer occurs in every one of those verses that I just read to you. As we learned, this passage (this little paragraph) breaks into two sections. From verse 13 to the middle of verse 16 we learn about the priority of prayer. And then, from the middle of verse 16 through verse 18: the power of prayer. Let me remind you of what we learned about the priority of prayer, just very briefly. In verse 13 we learned that prayer is to be a priority for us in all the seasons and circumstances of life. Whatever we are encountering and whatever our emotional response to that may be, all of those things are to drive us to God in prayer. Either the prayer for God's help and his grace and his comfort or God's help and strength for praising Him for His blessing upon our lives. So, verse 13 reminds us that in every season, in every circumstance, whatever our emotional reaction to it should be, all of life is to drive us to the throne of God.

Beginning in verse 14, James traces the priority of prayer beyond **those** that general principle, to one very specific circumstance. And that is, we are to pray in physical illness or physical sickness. But not just any kind of physical illness. Certainly, we are to pray in all physical

illness because verse 13 tells us we're to pray in all circumstances. But, in verses 14 through the middle of verse 16, James is talking about one very specific circumstance related to illness. You remember, we saw the diagnosis. The believer in this paragraph is seriously ill and he believes that he may be seriously ill as the result of divine chastening, as a result of his sin. So, here is a Christian who has lived in a pattern of unrepentant sin, now finds himself seriously ill, and believes that that illness may be the result of divine chastening upon his life. By the way, I can't rehearse for you if you weren't here when we looked at this passage together. I can't rehearse for you all of the arguments why I believe that's what this passage is teaching. But I encourage you to go online and listen to the message or get the CD and catch up to speed with us. We discovered that as we studied it together. So that's the diagnosis: a seriously ill believer suffering, he believes, from divine chastening as a result of unrepentant sin in his life.

The prescription is very simple: if one believes he's in that situation, he is to call for the elders of the church (verse 14) and the elders of the church are to pray over him; that is to pray for his genuine repentance, that there will be true repentance in his heart, as well as they are to anoint him with oil. In both Old and New Testament oil, an anointing with oil, frequently symbolizes the consecration of people or things to the use and service of God. So here, as this believer undergoing divine chastening repents, they pray for him and the oil is used as a symbol. That's what it is. It speaks of a symbol that this believer is now being reconsecrated to the use and service of God.

Notice the prognosis in verse 15. Because of the repentant heart of the sick believer, and because of the prayer and faith of the elders, God acts. He restores the sick, He raises him up, and He forgives the sin. What you have in verses 14 and 15 is a promise of forgiveness and divine healing when, and this is key, when the illness is part of divine chastening for unrepentant sin.

Now, verse 16 steps away from that specific circumstance a little bit. The first part of verse 16 applies the principle but in less serious circumstances. We are to deal with our sin before it comes to serious chastening that may even include serious illness. We're to be quick to confess our sins to one another, that is, to the ones that we've sin against. Seeking their forgiveness, we

are to keep short accounts with our sin so that we don't expose ourselves to divine chastening, to serious divine chastening, that can even include serious physical illness. So that is the priority of prayer. Verse 13: prayer is to be a priority in every circumstance. And verses 14 through the middle of her 16: prayer is to be a priority when we find ourselves under the weight of divine chastening, even to physical chastening.

Now from the middle of verse 16 through verse 18, James explains why it is that prayer should always be a priority at all times - in spite of circumstances, in spite of our emotions. Here, he's teaching us the power of prayer. Now obviously these verses are, in their context, are identifying the power of prayer when it comes to the issue of physical chastening for sin. But they also teach a much broader, more comprehensive perspective about the power of prayer and perhaps you heard sermons using these verses discussing the power of prayer and that's legitimate. **That's** acceptable because they're making that broader, more comprehensive statement about prayer and its inherent power.

So, this morning I'd like for us to look at why it is prayer should always be a priority, or the power of prayer. You'll notice in verse 16, the end of verse 16, there's a timeless principle about the power of prayer. And then in verses 17 and 18, there is an Old Testament illustration of the power of prayer. Let's look first at the timeless principle regarding the power of prayer. Verse 16: "The effective prayer of a righteous man can accomplish much." Now, again, let me remind you that in its context, James is applying this statement to the prayer of the elders over the sinning brother who is seriously ill. But I think it is purposefully put in the form of a universal principle because it is also true at all times and in all circumstances. This is always true: the effective prayer of a righteous man can accomplish much.

Now who is this righteous man? I think when we read that verse, we're tempted to think we are left out because that must be describing somebody great like the prophet Elijah. It must be describing some super saint. That's not true at all. Of course, the Scripture reminds us everywhere that no one is inherently righteous - whether you are Elijah, whether you were Moses, or whether you are the least known saint. There is no one who is righteous. So, the righteous man of James 5 is a person who has been declared righteous in the grace of

justification. At the moment of salvation, God declares the believing repentant sinner to be righteous with the righteousness of Jesus Christ. He credits the righteousness of Christ to the account of the believing sinner. So, in other words, if you are here this morning and you're in Christ, God looks at you and treat you as if you have lived the perfectly righteous life of Jesus Christ. That's the grace of justification. But, here, the righteous man must mean more than that; certainly, includes that. But it must mean more than that because, notice here, the righteous man is compared to the sinning brother under God's discipline. So, in this context, not only is the righteous man someone who has had righteousness credited to him, that is, he's a true believer in Jesus Christ. But he also is ethically or morally righteous. We could put it this way: the righteous man, here, is a genuine believer who is not living in unrepentant sin.

You see, as believers, we all sin. So, how is it that any of us can ever be called ethically or morally righteous? It's if we keep short accounts with our sin. If our sin is repented of and confessed before God. We're not living in a pattern of unrepentant sin. So, the righteous man, here, is simply the genuine believer who has confessed his sin, has repented of it, and is not living in a pattern of unrepentant sin. Certainly, sin severs the connection that we have, as believers, with God. Psalm 66:18 says, "If I regard wickedness in my heart [that is if I hold onto and if I cling to it] the Lord will not hear." If you're a believer and you were holding on to sin, you can pray all you want to pray but the heavens or His brass, God has said, He will not hear. Isaiah 59 makes the same point in the first 2 verses of that chapter. Isaiah writes, "Behold the Lord's hand is not so short that it cannot save nor is His ear so dull that it cannot hear. But your iniquities have made a separation between you and your God and your sins have hidden His face from you so that He does not hear." So, sin severs that connection that you and I have with God in prayer. He will not listen, that is...Of course, God hears everything. He knows everything. It means to hear in order to come to our aid. He doesn't hear. But if, on the other hand, you and I as believers in God through Jesus Christ have confessed our sin, we're maintaining a short account with Him of our sin, then He does hear. That's the righteous man of James 5. In fact, Douglas Moo puts it this way: "Prayer is a powerful weapon in the hands of even the humblest believer. It does not require a super saint to wield it effectively." All that has to be true is that you have confessed your sin and repented of them and you are not living in a pattern of unrepentant sin.

Now it says, “the prayer of the righteous man”. The word for prayer, here, is a very specific word. It’s a word that focuses specifically on requests or petitions, asking for something we desire. When the righteous man (the believing person who has confessed his sin) asks God for something, notice what he says. Now let me translate it for you literally. Let me give you a brief Greek lesson. In English word order matters. **If** you want to be understood, typically you begin with the subject and then next comes a verb and then comes your direct object. In English word order matters a lot. If you change the order, then you’ve changed the meaning of the sentence. In Greek, because of the nature of the language, because endings on the end of each word, word order doesn’t matter in the sense that the direct object can be first in the sentence. Doesn’t matter. The verb can be first. Anything can be first. And whatever is first typically is put there for emphasis. So, let me translate, literally, the sentence from the Greek text. Here’s what it says: ‘powerful is the prayer of a righteous man.’ Or we could put it this way: ‘strong is the prayer of a righteous man’ or ‘able to do much is the prayer of a righteous man’. The emphasis, here, is on the inherent power of prayer. And, notice, the word effective is added. Now, the Greek word that’s translated “effective” is a participle in the Greek text. It speaks of energy that is effective. This word “effective” could modify the noun as it is the New American Standard, the *effective* prayer, or it could modify the verb, to pray, or is powerful rather. So, it could mean this, and I think this is a better translation: the prayer of a righteous man is powerful in its energy or in its effects, in its effectiveness. It has the power to get things done.

Do you really believe that? Do you really believe, as you sit there this morning, that there is by God’s design and purpose, inherent within the act of praying, power to get things done, power to accomplish things, to produce effects? You know, I’m afraid if we’re honest with ourselves, our actions belie what we really believe. Because if we really believe that the effective prayer, or the prayer of a righteous man is powerful in its effects, then we would pray a lot more wouldn’t we?

But if you doubt that principle, if you doubt that that’s really true, James says, I don’t want you to take my word for it. Let’s look at an Old Testament illustration and this he gives us in verses 17 and 18. Now, if you had would never read this passage...stay with me a moment. If you had

never read this passage and I asked you to identify the one Old Testament character whose life really epitomized the life of prayer, whom would you say? Probably wouldn't be Elijah. Might be Abraham. Might be Moses. I mean after all, Moses spent 80 days on Mount Sinai face to face talking to God. Might be David - man of prayer and the psalms record a pouring out his heart before the Lord. But it probably wouldn't have been Elijah. And yet, James chooses Elijah - one of the fieriest and most unusual characters in the entire Old Testament. And he begins by making sure that we understand that his point is not the power of Elijah. Verse 17: "Elijah was a man with a nature like ours..." The Greek word translated "a nature like ours", literally means of the same passions. Listen. Elijah, apart from the power of God, was nothing special. He was a guy just like we are. He had the same feelings, the same experiences. He had the same weaknesses as other men. There was nothing special about Elijah that brought answers to his prayers. Instead, there was something special about his God. That's what James wants you to realize and about prayer itself because of the design of God. So James, here, selects one particularly fascinating episode in the life of Elijah. Look again at verse 17: "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 [that is on the land of Israel] for three years and six months. Then he prayed again, and the sky poured rain and the earth produced its fruit." Elijah was an ordinary man but an ordinary man who prayed an audacious prayer.

Now to fully appreciate this illustration, we're going to need to go back and get some background. So, we're going to go back and forth. Keep your thumb or finger there in James 5 but turn back with me to 1 Kings 16. 1 King 16. We need the historical backdrop for this illustration that James chooses. And we get it in 1 King 16:29: "Now Ahab the son of Omri became king over Israel in the thirty-eighth year of Asa king of Judah, and Ahab the son of Omri reigned over Israel in Samaria twenty-two years." You see, to fully appreciate this illustration that James is using, you have to understand the times. Elijah ministered and lived in a very difficult time. He ministered to the northern ten tribes, up in the area of Samaria. And it was the worst of times because verse 30 says during those 22 years, "Ahab the son of Omri did evil in the sight of the Lord more than all who were before him." Jeroboam, the first king of the northern ten tribes, was an awful, godless man, and yet, God says Ahab was worse. And, in fact, as he goes in verse 31 and following, the author of Kings accuses Ahab of four unthinkable sins, all

involving the promotion of the worship of Baal. You see, from the time Israel entered the land of Canaan, they were seduced by the Canaanite religion. Why is that? It's because of what it promised. Here's what Baal worship promised: two things. This was its attraction. Economic success in an agricultural society. Your crops would grow and prosper. And secondly, sexual satisfaction in whatever way you chose. And it was all part of the worship of the god. Those are the promises of Baal worship and the people of Israel were seduced by that in the very beginning. And Ahab bought into this pagan idolatry with a vengeance. Notice what verse 31 says: "It came about, as though it had been a trivial thing for him to walk in the sins of Jeroboam the son of Nebat, that he married Jezebel the daughter of Ethbaal king of the Sidonians..." In other words, here's his first sin: Ahab married the Baal worshipping daughter of a man whose name means, 'Baal exists'. But it didn't stop with marriage. It goes on to say at the end of verse 31 that "[Ahab] went to serve Baal and worshiped him." Wasn't just a marriage of convenience. Ahab bought into this hook, line, and sinker. In fact, he even built a temple to Baal. Verse 32: "So he erected an altar for Baal in the house of Baal which he built in Samaria." He was all out into Baal worship. And then verse 33 said: "Ahab also made the Asherah. Thus, Ahab did more to provoke the Lord God of Israel than all the kings of Israel who were before him."

Now, I'm not going to go into all the details, but let me give you a rough sketch of Canaanite religion because you really have to understand it to appreciate this illustration in this passage. El was the chief Canaanite god. He was the chief deity. He was the head of the pantheon of gods. His wife, El's wife and sister, was Asherah. She commonly is represented as a nude prostitute. She was the goddess of love, fertility, and war or cruelty. She is known as the mother goddess. She has 70 children who make up a Canaanite pantheon. And Asherah, El's consort - Asherah's presence was symbolized (her power was symbolized) by the evergreen tree. And eventually, in place of evergreens, they could set up wooden poles or groves as they were called in the Old Testament that would represent her. They'd be put on high hills so that you could be closer to the gods, to commune with him. And there was a shrine where rituals could be performed.

What I want you to see is Ahab bought into Canaanite religion completely and fully. He promoted the worship of idols in Israel. Verse 34 tells us just how bad the ethical living of the

people was. There was a total disregard for the Word of God. "In his days [that is in Ahab's days] Hiel the Bethelite built Jericho; he laid its foundations with the loss of Abiram his firstborn, and set up its gates with the loss of his youngest son Segub, according to the word of the Lord, which He spoke by Joshua the son of Nun." In other words, there was absolutely no reference to the Word of God whatsoever. In Joshua 6:26 Joshua had said, "Cursed before the Lord is the man who rises up and builds this city Jericho". Hiel comes along, in his arrogant pride, and decides that that's exactly what he's going to do. He absolutely ignored the Word of God. That was the climate of the times. The name of Yahweh was forgotten and the people of Israel, instead, worshipped Baal. These were profane, ungodly, idolatrous times. In fact, in 1 Kings 18:19 we learn that, on the government payroll, were 450 prophets of Baal and 400 prophets of Asherah: on the government payroll in Israel 850 prophets of the Canaanite religion. In fact, Scripture tells us, in fact God Himself tells Elijah, that there were only 7000 people left in Israel who had not given in to the worship of Baal. And suddenly, in that climate, into the Palace of Ahab and Jezebel, the chief sponsors of the Canaanite religion in Israel thunders a man who was announced as Elijah. You know what Elijah's name is in Hebrew? Eliyahu: my God is Yahweh. Imagine the disruption that brought that day in the palace. Chapter 17:1: "Now Elijah the Tishbite, who was of the settlers of Gilead, said to Ahab, 'As the Lord [as Yahweh], the God of Israel lives, before whom I stand, surely there shall be neither dew nor rain these years, except by my word.'"

Here's why James chooses this incident and Elijah. He chooses Elijah and this specific incident as an illustration of two facts about prayer. This is going to illustrate for us two basic facts about prayer. Fact number one: the power of prayer to invoke God's chastening. There is inherent power in prayer to invoke or to invite God's chastening on those who are disobedient. Back to James 5:17: "[Elijah] prayed earnestly that it would not rain, and it did not rain on the earth for three years and six months." So, he prayed and then he announces to Ahab this is how it's going to be. Now what's going on here? Well God had threatened, back in the very beginning in the Pentateuch, He had threatened to withhold the necessary rain and dew for Israel's crops. And remember, it was an agricultural society. So that's where its success lay. If the people were unfaithful to Him and if they worshiped idols, in Deuteronomy 11, Deuteronomy 11:16 we read: "Beware that your hearts are not deceived, and that you do not turn away and serve other gods

and worship them. Or the anger of the Lord will be kindled against you, and He will shut up the heavens so that there will be no rain and the ground will not yield its fruit.” In Deuteronomy 28 we read the same basic point. Deuteronomy 28:23: “The heaven which is over your head shall be bronze, and the earth which is under you, iron. The Lord will make the rain of your land powder and dust; from heaven it shall come down on you until you are destroyed. Elijah knew those passages. He understood that when God’s people departed from Him, God had promised physical chastening. And in light of those passages, Elijah prayed, according to James who, of course, was taught by Jesus Himself. Elijah prayed that there would be no rain and no dew. In fact, James tells us he prayed earnestly. That expression is the translation of a Greek expression that literally means, ‘with prayer he prayed’. It could refer to intensity in prayer as it’s translated in the New American Standard, ‘he prayed earnestly’. Or it could simply mean that he prayed and that’s all he did. I think that’s more likely what it means. We are to pray with intensity and earnestly; Scripture teaches us that. We’re to pray without ceasing. We’re to pray with all our hearts. But I think, in this context, Alec Motyer is right when he writes, “The meaning is not his fervency nor even his frequency of prayer but that he just prayed - that and nothing more.” Think about this: all Elijah did was pray and it didn’t rain and there was no dew for, according to 1 Kings, about three years and, specifically, according to James, three years and six months. Jesus uses the same time frame in Luke 4:25. Think for a moment about how devastating three years and six months of no rain would be on an agricultural society. It’s bad enough in Texas where we’ve had a little drought for a couple of years. Imagine if all of our livelihoods were connected to the growth of crops. It was absolutely devastating.

But there was more in the lack of rain than that. There was a greater message. You see, it was also a direct attack on the worship of Baal. Remember El is the chief deity? Asherah, his wife and consort and sister? They had 70 children. One of those children is Baal. And Baal is the most significant deity by far in the Canaanite pantheon. Why is that? Because Baal was the god of rain and storms. The Canaanite culture, like the Israelite one, was agricultural. And so, they were totally dependent on rain. And so, it was crucial that you have a right connection with Baal. And if you were a Baal worshiper, you believe that your economic prosperity - your good crops, your large flocks - all were because of Baal’s goodness. Elijah comes on the scene (my God is Yahweh) and he says Yahweh will hold the rain. You see, Elijah wanted Ahab and

Jezebel and all Israel to know that Yahweh, not Baal, is the God of rain and storm and weather. So, he prays in response to the promise and threats of the Word of God, and God sends a devastating physical chastening on the people of Israel; all in response to prayer.

Have you ever thought about that - that prayer has within it the power to invoke or invite God's chastening on the person who is living in unrepentant sin? I've seen this very personally. A number of years ago, while I lived in California, I knew a man who was a godly man with a long record of faithfulness to the Lord. But, as he grew older, he began to tolerate some dangerous thoughts and behaviors in his life - things that exposed him to serious sin and to the very real risk of undermining his reputation and the reputation of Christ, more importantly. So, those around him privately confronted him with their concerns. But they were absolutely, completely rebuffed. So, they began to pray and part of their prayer was this: 'Lord, use whatever means You have to keep him from destroying his life and the lives of those around him even if it means taking his life prematurely'. Within a short period of time, this man was diagnosed with terminal cancer and, within a couple of years, he was with the Lord. This is deadly serious. Prayer has the capacity, as it did with Elijah, to invoke the chastening of God upon the person who is unrepentant. Those who are concerned can pray that God would bring that chastening. That's what Paul did. You remember in 1 Corinthians 5:5, his concern for that Corinthian man who was involved in the incestuous relationship? He said, "I have decided to deliver such a one to Satan for the destruction of his flesh, so that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus." 'I'm more concerned about his soul than I am what happens to him in this life.' This is the kind of circumstance that James is describing - a believer, because of unrepentant sin, is suffering from divine chastening in the form of a serious illness.

But the main point of James' illustration is not to show the power of prayer to invoke divine chastening. Rather, the main point of this illustration is the power of prayer to bring an end to physical chastening when there is repentance. Back in James 5:18: "Then he prayed again..." He prayed the first time and brought chastening. He prayed again "and the sky poured rain and the earth produced its fruit." Turn back to 1 Kings again, 1 Kings 18:1: God, after many days, spoke to Elijah in the third year saying, "Go, show yourself to Ahab, and I will send rain on the face of the earth." God says, 'The time is coming soon when I am going to bring

rain.’ But what I want you to see in chapter 18 is that that rain did not come until there was repentance. Do you remember what happens in 1 Kings 18 - the confrontation on the top of Mount Carmel between Elijah and the prophets of Baal? Watch how they respond - verse 36 of 1 Kings 18. Again, you remember the prophets of Baal have tried to call down fire and consume the altar to no avail? Verse 36 says, “At the time of the offering of the evening sacrifice, Elijah the prophet came near and said, ‘O Lord, the God of Abraham, Isaac and Israel, today let it be known that You are God in Israel and that I am Your servant and I have done all these things at Your word. Answer me, O Lord [Yahweh], answer me, that this people may know that You, O Lord [Yahweh], are God, and that You have turned their heart back again.’ 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. When all the people saw it...” Watch their response. Remember these are Baal worshipping people. “...they fell on their faces; and they said, ‘The Lord [Yahweh], He is God; the Lord [Yahweh], He is God.’” And their repentance takes action. Verse 40: “Then Elijah said to them, ‘Seize the prophets of Baal; do not let one of them escape.’ So they seized them; and Elijah brought them down to the brook Kishon, and slew them there.” The people of God, recognizing again, Yahweh is the true God. And notice God’s response and Elijah’s response to their repentance. Verse 41: “Now Elijah said to Ahab, ‘Go up, eat and drink; for there is the sound of the roar of a heavy shower [downpour].’” 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.” Here is Elijah praying. On the top of Mount Carmel, he’s praying. And “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, [well it’s not much but] behold, a cloud as small as a man’s hand is coming up from the sea.” There’s a tiny little cloud on the horizon. “And he [Elijah] said ‘Go up, say to Ahab, ‘Prepare your chariot and go down, so that the heavy shower [downpour] does not stop you.’ In a little while the sky grew black with clouds and wind, and there was a heavy shower [deluge]. And Ahab rode and went to Jezreel.”

What I want you to see here is that, in response to the repentance of the people, Elijah prayed and the physical chastening on the land for three and a half years was removed and the rain came. Elijah’s prayer brought an end to God’s physical chastening on Israel. That is why James

chose this illustration from the life of Elijah. You see the analogy? Just as God responded to Elijah's prayer and removed the divine chastening from the people of Israel after they repented, so in James 5 God will respond to the prayer of the elders and will remove His divine chastening from the repentant, seriously ill believer. There is power in prayer.

You know, we began this year by learning about the importance of prayer as we studied the Lord's prayer together. In God's providence, on the last day of 2006, we end where we began, underscoring the importance and power of prayer. Let me ask you a soul-searching question. As we end this year and as we begin a new one tomorrow, is your prayer life any different than it was when we began this year? If not, then let me remind you of the commitments I encouraged us all tonight when we finished our study. Let me urge you to repent and to pursue importance of prayer again.

Here are three, very basic commitments I encouraged us all to make when we completed our study on the Lord's prayer. Number one - and let me urge you to remake these, resolve to pursue these again. Number one: deliberately schedule times each day to pray. Don't wait for prayer to happen. Make it happen! I encourage you to consider a modified form of what John Calvin urges us to do and that is: pray within one hour of waking, pray when you begin the work of the day, pray before each meal, and pray before you go to bed. Deliberately choose to make sure that you set aside time to pray at each of those junctures: when you get up, before you begin the day's work (whatever that is), before each meal (don't make it a passing acknowledgement to God but pray), and before you go to bed. Secondly, at least one time each day, follow the pattern of the Lord's prayer, flowing through each of those six categories that we learned about. And number three: schedule time, at least once a week, to pray with another Christian. We learned, in our study of the Lord's prayer, that prayer is to be a corporate thing as well as an individual thing. Maybe it's your friend or your roommate or your spouse or your family or your ministry partner or your home fellowship group but make it a deliberate point to pray together with other Christians, at least once a week. Those are some very basic commitments, but we must make them. You see, prayer is to the believer and to the believer's life what breathing is to our physical life. If, as you sit here this morning, you have no desire to pray and prayer just isn't a

part of your life, it may very well be that you have no spiritual life whatsoever; that you are dead because that's without prayer as a part of our lives as believers.

One author described the power of prayer in these words: "Prayer has divided seas, rolled up flowing rivers, made flinty rocks gush into fountains, quenched flames of fire, muzzled lions, disarmed vipers and poison, marshalled the stars against the wicked, stopped the course of the moon, arrested the sun in its rapid race across the sky, burst open iron gates, released souls from eternity, conquered the strongest devils, commanded legions of angels down from heaven. Prayer has bridled and changed the raging passions of man and routed and destroyed vast armies of proud, daring, blustering atheists. Prayer has brought one man from the bottom of the sea and carried another in a chariot of fire to heaven. What has prayer not done?" John Blanchard puts it this way: "Prayer works. Or to put it more accurately, God works through prayer. It is one of the means of grace He uses to bring about His sovereign purposes in the world."

You ever thought about prayer that way? The same God who decreed what would be the ends, also decreed the means through which those ends would be accomplished, and that includes our prayer. When we pray, we become part of God's sovereign, eternal plan. Here's the grounds for our confidence in prayer: look at what God did in answer to Elijah's prayer. Think about that. In answer to one man's prayer, God changed the entire hydrological cycle for a portion of the globe for three and a half years. But don't misunderstand. That doesn't mean that God will always respond to believing prayer with our own private miracle. Most of the people who pray in the Scriptures don't get a miracle. We don't pray because God must give us a miracle but because He can and will do what He knows is best. I think Alec Motyer is right (listen carefully) when he says, "Very often, the really striking things the Bible records, like Elijah's prayer for rain, are intended to get a foundation to our faith rather than a model for our expectations." In other words, don't expect God to work some miracle for you; He can do that but don't expect that. Instead, let the fact that He did that for Elijah serve as an encouragement for you to pray. Behind prayer lies not only faith in God's power to do whatever He chooses, but behind prayer also lies faith in God's wisdom to choose what is best. Truly, James wants us to know, folks, that prayer is for all seasons.

Let's pray together.

Our Father, we have to confess to You that we are not people of prayer. Father we confess to You that while You have invited us, in fact, commanded us to come into Your presence and pour out our hearts before You, yet too often we fail to take advantage. We fail to obey and do just that. Father, I pray that with the new year upon us, that You would give us a fresh resolve as Your people to be men and women and young people of prayer. Lord help us to set aside time deliberately to pour out our hearts before You. And Father I pray for person here this morning who feels no compulsion to pray, who doesn't pray. Lord help them to see that they are is truly spiritually dead as if their body stopped breathing. And I pray that today would be the day You would draw them to Yourself, that they would fall down before You, cry out in repentance and faith toward Your son, our Lord Jesus Christ. We pray it in His name and for His glory alone, Amen!