

F.B. Meyer:

We can, to a very inadequate degree, realize the horrors of an Eastern drought. And it would have been difficult in the parched land on which Elijah gazed from Carmel, to have recognized that garden of the Lord of which Moses said: "The LORD thy God bringeth thee into a good land, a land of brooks of water, of fountains and depths that spring out of valleys and hills; a land wherein thou shalt eat bread without scarceness, thou shalt not lack any thing in it" (Deuteronomy 8:7,9).

But beside this exquisite delineation, Moses had been given a description of the certain calamities that would ensue if Israel went aside from any of the words which God commanded, to the right hand or to the left. And among other items of misery, it was expressly stated that the heaven overhead should be brass, and the earth underfoot iron, and the very rain should be transformed to powder and dust (Deuteronomy 28:23-24). This terrible prediction had now been literally fulfilled. And the anguish of the land was directly attributable to the apostasy of its people. All this was the result of sin. The iniquities of Israel had separated between them and their God. Elijah knew this, and it prompted him to act the part of executioner to the priests of Baal. They had been the {87} ringleaders in the national revolt from God, but their bodies now lay in ghastly death on the banks of the Kishon, or were being hurried out to sea.

Ahab must have stood by Elijah in the Kishon gorge, an unwilling spectator of that fearful deed of vengeance, not daring to resist the outburst of popular indignation or attempt to shield the men whom he had himself encouraged and introduced. When the last priest had bitten the dust, Elijah turned to the king and said, "Get thee up, eat and drink; for there is a sound of abundance of rain" (1 Kings 18:41). It was as if he said, "Get thee up to where thy tents are pitched on yon broad upland sweep; the feast is spread in thy gilded pavilion; thy lackeys await thee; feast thee on thy dainties; but be quick! for now that the land is rid of these traitor priests, and God is once more enthroned in His rightful place, the showers of rain cannot be longer delayed. Can you not hear the sigh of the western breeze, which shall soon become a hurricane? Be quick! or the rain may interrupt thy carouse."

What a contrast between these two men! "Ahab went up to eat and drink. And Elijah went up to the top of Carmel; and he cast himself down upon the earth, and put his face between his knees" (1 Kings 18:42). It is no more than we might have expected of the king. When his people were suffering the extremities of drought, he cared only to find grass enough to save his stud. Now, though his faithful priests had died by hundreds, he thought only of the banquet that awaited him in his pavilion. Cruel, cowardly, mean, and sensual are the least epithets we can apply to this worthless man, clad though he was with the royal robes of Israel. I think I can see Ahab and Elijah ascending those heights together: no sympathy, no common joy, no reciprocated {88} thanksgiving. The king turns straight off to his tents while the servant of God climbs to the highest part of the mountain and finds an oratory at the base of a yet higher spur from which a marvelous view could be obtained of the broad expanse of the Mediterranean, which slept under the growing stillness of the coming night.

Such contrasts still reveal themselves. Crises reveal the secrets of men's hearts and show of what stuff they are made. The children of this world will spend their days in feasting, and their nights in revelry, though a world is rushing down to ruin. If only they can eat and drink, they are regardless of the needs of the perishing and the judgments of God. Such feasted with Belshazzar when the foe was at the gates of Babylon. Such filled with the frivolities the royal apartments of Whitehall when William of Orange was landing at Tor Bay. And woe to the land when such men rule! The sequence between the sensual luxury of the rulers and the decadence of the nation was well pointed out by Isaiah when he said: "Woe unto them that rise up early in the morning, that they may follow strong drink; that tarry late into the night, till wine inflame them! And the harp and the lute, the tabret and the pipe, and wine, are in their feasts: but they regard not the work of the LORD, neither have they considered the operation of his hands. Therefore my people are gone into captivity" (Isaiah 5:11-13 RV). May our beloved country be preserved from having such leaders as these! And may our youth be found, not garlanded and scented for the Ahab feasts, but with Elijah on the bleak uplands; where there may be no dainty viands, but where the air is fresh, and life is free, and the spirit is braced to noble deeds.

There are certain characteristics in Elijah's prayer, {89} which we must notice as we pass, because they should form part of all true prayer.

IT WAS BASED ON THE PROMISE OF GOD. When Elijah was summoned from Zarephath to resume his public work, his marching orders were capped by the specific promise of rain: "Go, show thyself unto Ahab; and I will send rain upon the earth" (1 Kings 18:1). To natural reason this might have seemed to render prayer unnecessary. Would not God fulfill His promise, and send the rain, altogether irrespective of further prayer? But

Elijah's spiritual instincts argued otherwise, and more truly. Though he had never heard the words, yet he anticipated the thought of a later prophet who, after enunciating all that God was prepared to do for His people, uttered these significant words: "Thus saith the Lord God, I will yet for this be inquired of by the house of Israel, to do it for them."

God's promises are given, not to restrain, but to incite to prayer. They show the direction in which we may ask, and the extent to which we may expect an answer. They are the mold into which we may pour our fervid spirits without fear. They are the signed check, made payable to order, which we must endorse and present for payment. Though the Bible is crowded with golden promises from board to board, yet will they be inoperative until we turn them into prayer. It is not our province to argue the reasonableness of this; it is enough to argue and enforce it. Why should it not be sufficient to silence all questions by saying that we have here reached one of the primal laws of the spiritual world, as simple, as certain, as universal, as any that obtain in the world of nature? Promises of abundant harvest smile to the husbandman from earth and sky, but he knows that they {90} will not be realized unless he puts into operation the laws and processes of agriculture. As he does so, it is not necessary for his success that he should understand the why and wherefore; it is enough for him to do his little part, and he finds that every promise is fulfilled in the produce shed at his feet from Nature's golden horn.

When, therefore, we are asked why men should pray, and how prayer avails, we are not careful to answer more than this: "Prayer is the instinct of the religious life; it is one of the first principles of the spiritual world." It is clearly taught in the Word of God to be prevalent with the Almighty. It has been practiced by the noblest and saintliest of men, who have testified to its certain efficacy. Our Lord Jesus not only practiced it, but proclaimed its value in words which have been plunged a myriad times into the crucible of experience and are as true today as ever: "Ask, and it shall be given you; seek, and ye shall find; knock, and it shall be opened unto you" (Luke 11:9). We are content, therefore, to pray, though we are as ignorant of the philosophy of the modus operandi of prayer as we are of any natural law. We find it no dreamy reverie or sweet sentimentality, but a practical, living force. Whenever we stand by the altar of incense, we become aware of the angel of the Lord standing hard by, and saying, "Fear not, O man greatly beloved! thy prayer is heard."

When your child was a toddling, lisping babe, he asked many things wholly incompatible with your nature and its own welfare; but as the years have passed, increasing experience has molded your child's requests into shapes suggested by yourself. So, as we know more of God through His promises, we are staid from asking what He cannot give and led to set our hearts on things which lie on His open palm waiting to be taken by the {91} hand of an appropriating faith. This is why all prayer, like Elijah's, should be based on promise. We stand on a foundation of adamant and have an irresistible purchase with God when we can put our finger on His own promise and say, "Do as Thou hast said."

IT WAS DEFINITE. This is where so many prayers fail. They are shot like arrows into the air. They are like letters which require no answer because they ask for nothing. They are like the firing of artillery in a mimic fight when only gunpowder is employed. This is why they are so wanting in power and interest. We do not pray with an expectation of attaining definite and practical results. We wander out like Isaac to meditate in the fields at eventide, but we fail to ascend Carmel with the compressed lip and the resolute step of Elijah, as determined, if we may, to win by prayer the fulfillment of some blessed promise, as he was to bring the longed-for rain. Let us amend in this matter. Let us keep a list of petitions which we shall plead before God. Let us direct our prayer, as David did (Psalm 5:3), and look up for the answer; and we shall find ourselves obtaining new and unwonted blessings. Be definite!

IT WAS EARNEST. "Elias... prayed earnestly" (James 5:17). This is the testimony of the Holy Spirit, through the apostle James. It was the effectual, fervent prayer of a righteous man, which availeth much. The prayers of Scripture all glow with the white heat of intensity. Remember how Jacob wrestled, and David panted and poured out his soul; the importunity of the blind beggar, and the persistency of the distracted mother; the strong crying and tears of our Lord. In each case the whole being seemed gathered up, as a stone into a catapult, and hurled forth in vehement entreaty. Prayer is only answered for the glory of Christ, but it is not answered {92} unless it be accompanied with such earnestness as will prove that the blessing sought is really needed.

Ah, what earnestness pants and throbs on every side! No listless attention! No flagging interest! No drowsy eye! Oh, for such violence, guided by holiness, to take the kingdom of heaven by force! Such earnestness is, of course, to be dreaded when we seek some lower boon for ourselves. But when, like Elijah, we seek the fulfillment of the divine promise -- not for ourselves, but for the glory of God -- then it is impossible to be too much in earnest or too full of the energy of prayer.

ELIJAH'S PRAYER WAS HUMBLE. "He cast himself down on the ground, and put his face between his knees."

We scarcely recognize him, he seems to have so lost his identity. A few hours before, he stood erect as an oak of Bashan; now, he is bowed as a bulrush. Then as God's ambassador he pleaded with man; now as man's intercessor he pleads with God. Is it not always so -- that the men who stand straightest in the presence of sin bow lowest in the presence of God? And is it not also true, that those who live nearest God are the most reverent? True, you are a child; but you are also a subject. True, you are a redeemed man; but you can never forget your original name, sinner. True, you may come with boldness; but remember the majesty, might, and power of God, and take your shoes off. The angels of His presence fly with veiled faces to do His bidding, as they cry, "Holy, Holy, Holy!" The most tender love, which casts out the tormenting fear, begets a fear that is as sensitive as that of John who, though he lay his head on Jesus' breast, scrupled too hastily to intrude upon the grave where He had slept. Our only plea with God is the merit and blood of our great High Priest. It becomes us to be humble. {93}

IT WAS FULL OF EXPECTANT FAITH. "What things soever ye desire, when ye pray, believe that ye receive them, and ye shall have them" (Mark 11:24). Faith is the indispensable condition of all true prayer. It is the gift of the Holy Ghost. It thrives by exercise. It grows strong by feeding on the promises: the Word of God is its natural food. It beat strongly in Elijah's heart. He knew that God would keep His word, and so he sent the lad -- possibly the widows' son -- up to the highest point of Carmel and bade him look toward the sea. He was sure that before long his prayer would be answered, and God's promise would be kept. We have often prayed and failed to look out for the blessings we have sought. The stately ships of heaven have come up to the quays, laden with the very blessings we asked; but as we have not been there to welcome and unload them, they have put out again to sea. The messenger pigeons have come back again to their cotes with the tiny messages concealed beneath their wings, but we have not been there to search for them and take them.

Sometimes we have to exercise faith on the simple warrant of God's Word. At other times, God seems to give us special faith for things which are not directly promised. THE presence or absence of faith is a great test in prayer. Where it is present, we are so sure of the answer as to turn petition into thanksgiving. But where it is persistently absent, and where continued prayer fails to light up the spirit with the conviction of coming answer, then it would seem as if the Urim and Thummim stone is darkening with one of God's loving refusals and He says, "Ask me no more concerning this matter."

There is a faith which God cannot refuse; to which all things are possible; which laughs at impossibility; which can move mountains and plant them in the sea. May {94} such faith be ours! It can be ours only by careful and eager nurture. Such faith was Elijah's.

IT WAS VERY PERSEVERING. He said to his servant, "Go up now, look toward the sea." And he went up, and looked, and said, "There is nothing." --How often have we sent the lad of eager desire to scan the horizon! and how often has he returned with the answer, There is nothing!-- There is no tear of penitence in those hard eyes. There is no symptom of amendment in that wild life. There is no sign of deliverance in these sore perplexities. There is nothing. And because there is nothing when we have just begun to pray, we leave off praying. We leave the mountain brow. We do not know that God's answer is even then upon the way.

Not so with Elijah. "And he said, Go again seven times" (1 Kings 18:43). There is a truer rendering of this: "Then said he seven times, Go again." It is not that the lad was told to run to and fro seven times, without interrupting the prophet in prayer; but it would appear that again and again the lad came back to his master with the same message. "There is nothing;" and, after an interval, he was bidden to go again.

He came back the first time, saying, "There is nothing" (1 Kings 18:43). Elijah said, "Go again." And that was repeated seven times. It was no small test of the prophet's endurance; but he was not tried more than he could endure, and with the ordeal there came sufficient grace, so that he was able to bear it.

Not unfrequently our Father grants our prayer, and labels the answer for us; but He keeps it back, that we may be led on to a point of intensity, which shall bless our spirits forever, and from which we shall never recede. The psalmist says, "Yea, let none that wait on {95} thee be ashamed" (Psalm 25:3). Then when we have outdone ourselves, He lovingly turns to us, and says, "Great is thy faith: be it unto thee even as thou wilt!" (Matthew 15:28). He waits, that He may be gracious unto us.

AND THE PRAYER WAS ABUNDANTLY ANSWERED. For weeks and months before, the sun had been gathering drops of mist from lake and river, from sea and ocean, drawing them as clouds in coronets of glory and around himself. Now the gale was bearing them rapidly toward the thirsty land of Israel. "Before they call, I will answer; and while they are yet speaking, I will hear" (Isaiah 65:24). The answer to your prayers may be nearer than you think. It may already have started by the down-line. On the wings of every moment it is hastening toward you.

God shall answer you, and that right early.

Presently the lad, from his tower of observation, beheld on the horizon a tiny cloud, no bigger than a man's hand, scudding across the sky. No more was needed to convince an Oriental that rain was near. It was, and is, the certain precursor of a sudden hurricane of wind and rain. The lad was sent with an urgent message to Ahab, to descend from Carmel to his chariot in the plain beneath, lest Kishon, swollen by the rains, should stop him in his homeward career. The lad had barely time to reach the royal pavilion before the heavens were black with clouds and wind, and there was a great rain.

The monarch started amid the pelting storm, but fleeter than his swift steeds were the feet of the prophet, energized by the hand of God. He snatched up his streaming mantel and twisted it around his loins. Amid the fury of the elements with which the night closed in, he outstripped the chariot and ran like a common courier before it to the entrance of Jezreel, some eighteen miles distant. {96} He did this to convince the king that in his zeal against idolatry he was actuated by no personal disrespect to himself and prompted only by jealousy for God.

Thus by his faith and prayer this solitary man brought back the rain to Israel. More things are wrought by prayer than this world knows of. Why should not we learn and practice his secret? It is certainly within the reach of us all. Then we too might bring spiritual blessings from heaven, which should make the parched places of the church and the world rejoice and blossom as the rose.