

THE PRAYER THAT WORKS! ¹

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The prayer of the righteous is powerful and effective (James 5:, 15-16 NRSV).

Have faith in God (Mark 11: 22).

Though I have given two texts --- one from Jesus and one from his half-brother James ---when we combine them, there is one central message; *the prayer of faith works powerfully!*

I want us to go away knowing how to pray prayers that work. I want us to go away knowing how to bring the power and the glory of Heaven into our lives and how to bless others in the process. Who wouldn't want that? Who wouldn't want a living testimony that the God of the Bible is my God, and this God hears my prayers!

The first text states a fact ... The prayer of the righteous is powerful and effective (James 5:15-16 NRSV).

I like the way the KJV puts it: **The effectual fervent prayer of a righteous man availeth much.** The prayer that gets the desired answer, the prayer that gets the result, is **the prayer** that is **energised** --- that is the word translated "effective"² --- by a righteous person. There is life-changing power in effective praying! That's a fact!

The second text gives a command ... **Have faith in God (Mk. 11:22).** These words of Jesus himself are in the imperative mood, which means it's a command. For our Lord, faith is not a take-it-or-leave-it option. You can't even be a Christian without faith. When we hear the Gospel word, we believe unto salvation. Then we must go on and grow and build on that initial step --- water that seed of the word of faith --- letting it grow stronger by practice day after day.

Being a command to have faith in God, proves that faith is a deliberate choice of the will. *I will to believe God.* So when we fail to exercise faith in God every day and in every way, we are disobeying a direct command of the Son of God.

That's why the Bible says **faith is a moral choice.**

Speaking generally, God has given mankind more than enough proof and evidence of His existence and character. But men **suppress the truth in unrighteousness (Rom. 1: 20).** God's truth and reality is always trying to bubble up into men's consciousness, but in wilful ignorance, they hold the truth down. Unbelief, the Bible says, is wicked and has no excuse. That's why God **commands all men everywhere to repent** and believe the Gospel of His resurrected Son (**Acts 17: 30-31**). But we re here this morning to speak to those who do have faith in our Lord Jesus.

Speaking specifically to his own, I have no doubt that Jesus wants his followers to have power with God and before men so that his kingdom may come and God's will be done. I have no doubt Jesus wants us to know the anointing of the Spirit of God from on High, so that we will see the power of God in our individual lives, and in our homes, and in our schools and universities and workplaces, and in His church. His command is for our good!

Notice where we are to place our faith. Jesus wants us to **have faith in God.** But which God is Jesus talking about? Which God is to be the object of our faith?

To ask that is to answer it. Why, it's the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. The God of Israel. The God of the OT prophets. It is the only --- one of a kind --- unique and true God of the Bible. It is the God and Father of Jesus himself that we are to put our trust in. And now that he is resurrected and seated at God's right hand, having been

¹ This is the third in a mini-series on prayer delivered at the Mardon Road Church of Christ, Hamilton, New Zealand on Sunday 13th May.

² *Energoumene* ... is a present middle participle and carries the idea of on-going action . Even if you don't read the Greek you will still be able to detect the word energy!

given all authority in heaven and on earth, we are to have faith in Jesus who said, **You believe in God, believe also in me (John 14: 1).**

Putting our faith in the God of the Bible and in His risen Son then, is an imperative if we would pray effectively. And for the rest of this message, I want to share some simple truths from Scripture, so that our prayers will be effective!

THE WEAKEST AND MOST NEEDY ARE ENCOURAGED TO PRAY.

I know that we hesitate to pray confidently. We feel our faith is weak. We feel we could never pray the kind of prayers of faith that we read about in the Bible and in the pages of the great saints of history. But thankfully, James anticipated our objections. He wrote that,

Elijah was a man with a nature like ours, and he prayed earnestly ... and God answered him (v. 17). Now, if I was asked to pick someone in the Bible whose prayers I could gain strength and encouragement from, I probably would **not** pick Elijah.

When you think of Elijah you think of a towering man of faith. Elijah was one of the greatest prophets of all time in Israel. A spiritual giant if ever there was one! When you think of Elijah you think of the showdown with the prophets of Baal on Mount Carmel. When you think of Elijah you think of the raising of the dead boy back to life. When you think of Elijah you think of a man who performed some of the greatest ever miracles in all of Israel's history. And when you compare our little faith with Elijah's we can be discouraged and want to give up ... I could never pray like Elijah!

So yes, Elijah is one of the last people I would naturally choose to go to help lift my faltering and feeble faith. I'd probably go to somebody like the father of that epileptic lad, "Lord", he stuttered, "I believe, but help my unbelief!" A mixture of faith and doubt. Or, we might feel like that Gentile mother who pleads for her suffering daughter, "Lord, couldn't you spare a few crumbs off the table? Even dogs get the crumbs!" Jesus commended that Gentile woman for her great faith. Even the crumbs are enough! Perhaps that's how we feel when we pray.

But *Elijah*? Seriously! An example for us on how we too may pray effectively?

James answers our hesitation. **Elijah was a man subject to the same nature (lit. passions) as we are.** Elijah was subject to doubts like you, for when Jezebel threatened him, Elijah lost his faith and ran for fear and hid. Elijah was subject to discouragement like me, for in his depression he prayed that God might let him die. Elijah had the same failing nature that we are subject to. And James says, if you want to pray and see great answers to your prayers, then Elijah is your go-to example.

The point is this: God honours faith whether it's found in the greatest prophet / apostle, or in the least nobody. For God is no respecter of persons. God is no respecter of persons. He honours anybody and the nobody who believes Him --- whether of Elijah or you or me. Elijah prayed earnestly for what he needed. The weakest and the most needy is encouraged to pray earnestly. Don't look inwardly at your own weaknesses. Look up! The God of Elijah is your God and he is honoured by your faith!

1. THE IMPORTUNITY OF THE PRAYER OF FAITH

Prayers that work are specific and they don't give up till God sends the answer. James actually wrote, **The supplication of the righteous is powerful ...**³ To be effective then, our prayers need to be specific, and they must be persistent. It's like aiming for a target. To supplicate is to make specific request. It means to petition, to plead.

Of course James is simply repeating what his Lord had already said, **Ask (lit. keep on asking) and it shall be given unto you. Seek (lit. keep on seeking) and you shall find. Knock (lit. keep on knocking) and you will find (Mat. 7: 7).**

³ *Deesis* ... is the same word translated as "supplication" or "petition" in Acts 1:14; Romans 10: 1; 1 Timothy 2:1; 5:5; Philippians 4: 6, etc.

WHOLEHEARTED AND HOT!

James explains, **The fervent prayer avails much. The prayer that is being energised (energoumene) is effective.** The trouble with a lot of our prayers is that they are half-hearted. We can take it or leave it as to whether God will answer. It doesn't seem to matter whether God answers or not; our life will go on anyway.

If we are honest, a lot of us pray like **the archer** who just pulls his bow back a little way. The arrow flops at our feet. Prayer only dribbled from careless lips goes nowhere and will flop at our feet. But pull that bow back to full extension, using all your energy to aim directly, and the arrow will fly hard and fast to the target. Likewise, when our prayers are energised by the deep cry of the heart, they fly direct and straight to the heart of the Father.

HANNAH ... For years her heart was anguished. She was barren. She felt her shame keenly. She ached for a heritage in God's national plan. She wanted a child for God! But her soul was squeezed to exhaustion. Who cannot picture her in the Temple pouring her tears out to the LORD? Her mouth was moving, but no sounds came out. Seeing her in this state of wholehearted prayer, Eli the priest thought she was drunk. He growled at her, "How long will you be drunk? Put your wine away from you!"

"No, my lord, I am a woman of a sorrowful spirit: I have drunk neither wine nor strong drink, but have poured out my soul before the LORD ... out of the abundance of my complaint and grief have I spoken until now" (1 Sam. 1: 15) Her prayer was *energised*. Hannah prayed with her whole soul / life. The prayer that works is from a fervent heart.

It is not the arithmetic of our prayers, how many they are; nor the rhetoric of our prayers, how eloquent they are; nor the geometry of our prayers, how long they are; nor the cadence of our prayers, how melodious our voice may be; nor the logic of our prayers, how reasoned they may be; nor the literary structure of our prayers, how orderly they may be; --- which God cares for ... Fervency of spirit is that which availeth much.⁴

2. THE PARTNERSHIP OF THE PRAYER OF FAITH

Next, the prayer that mightily prevails is the prayer generated from a righteous life. And James means the way we live in community with the church; the way we treat others : **Pray for one another (v. 16)**. We don't pray alone. In the Church we are surrounded by others of like faith who can bear us up. We pray together.

The sentence immediately preceding the statement that, **the prayer of the righteous is powerful and effective** says, **Confess your sins to one another, and pray for one another, so that you may be healed.** We see that we are not praying in isolation. By praying together with one another, and for one another, the friction of fellowship heats up our faith! Your faith inspires me to believing prayer! My faith stirs up your prayers and brings greater earnestness and energy.

But if I am not in right relationship with you my brother, or with you my sister, then my faith will be weak, and my praying hindered. So James lays it down that if we would see the prayer of faith work powerfully, then we must first mend any bad relationships within the church community, indeed in the wider community.

And is it not interesting that we are not told to just confess these personal grievances to God, but rather we are to **confess our sins to one another!** So, if we are wondering why your prayers are not getting through, it may be because they are blocked by bad blood with another.

No matter how hard it may be to confess to another our faults against them, no price is too much to pay so as to get a clear channel up to the Throne of God. Jesus said that, **when you are offering up your gift to God, you remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother or sister, and then come and offer your gift (Matt. 5: 23-24).**

And is it not also highly instructive to note that as soon as Jesus commands, **Have faith in God**, that he *immediately* follows by saying, **Whenever you stand praying, forgive, if you have anything against anyone; so that your Father in heaven may also forgive your trespasses (Mark 11: 27)?**

⁴ Adapted from Dwight L. Moody, *Prevailing Prayer*, Moody Press, p82

The prayer of faith that works is the prayer that comes from a righteous person who is seeking as best as humanly possible to be at peace with all men. God won't answer the prayers of angry, swindling, untrustworthy people!

3. THE PARTICIPATION OF THE PRAYER OF FAITH

You know of course, that faith is not primarily a feeling. Faith obeys the word of God. Faith acts on the commands and promises of God. Remember that great chapter on the power of faith, **Hebrews 11**? Every single one of the examples held up to us says that faith *did something!*

By faith Abel offered ...

By faith Enoch walked ...

By faith Noah built ...

By faith Abraham went out ...

By faith Moses left Egypt ...

By faith Rahab welcomed the spies ... etc. etc. This is a catalogue of faith in action. Faith works in cooperation with God. So, the man or the woman who prays the prayer of faith is not somebody who just asks God for what's on their heart, and then folds their arms and does nothing. **We must pray as though everything depends on God --- it does! And we must work as though everything we can control depends on us --- it does!** God is looking for the cooperation of our faith in action. The Bible talks about **the obedience of faith (Romans 1:5 ;16:26)**.

But the order is; everything *by* prayer, *not* everything and *then* prayer! Prayer comes first. Obedient action follows.

RUTH 2: 19ff ... Remember the story of the young widow Ruth? Her mother-in-law Naomi wants her to find an eligible bachelor, a man of God, so she can have a family --- a lasting inheritance in Israel. Ruth comes in one afternoon after gleaning in Boaz's fields. Ruth reports to Naomi how kindly Boaz looked after her. She evidently prays to the LORD about her need, and Ruth's need. Naomi hatches a plan.

They are not content to just ask the LORD for what they want. Naomi says to Ruth, "Wash yourself. Anoint yourself. Put some nice perfume on. Put your best clothes on. Then go down to the threshing floor where the end of harvest party is happening. But don't make yourself obvious ... until Boaz has finished eating and drinking. Put yourself in the man's pathway!

In other words, now that we've prayed, we must do our bit. Ruth, be the most attractive woman you can be. Use all fair means at your disposal to get his attention. Stir up not only his Godly duty as our kinsman-redeemer, ⁵ but also his masculine interest in you, and God will hear our prayer. (It's a bit like **Oliver Cromwell** telling his men, "Trust in God and keep your gunpowder dry!")

After making your special requests known to God your Father, there is nothing wrong with doing everything in your power to help it come to pass. Your cooperation of faith releases God into your day! Work hard on those things you can control, and let God take care of the rest.

Want a husband or wife, a godly life-partner? Ask God! Then prepare yourself, get out there where godly men and women hang out. And that's not the night club! Put yourself in the way where that prospective partner can see you doing His will. A godly man or woman will be drawn to your faithful service. Work hard on being the best you that you can be in the work of Christ.

Want a pastor for your church? Set yourselves as a church community to ask God for the right person. Then put yourselves out there on the web, research, write to those God brings to mind, and so forth.

⁵ Boaz was the nearest available relative to Ruth and was being appealed to, to exercise the Levirate Law of marriage, to rescue the childless widow.

Want health and healing? Then ask God, eat the right foods, take your proper sleep, exercise, and should you need to go to your specialist, pray then go! Faith cooperates with the God of Heaven who hears your prayers.

Want to live a long, happy, fruitful life? Tell God your heart's desire. Then obey your parents (the first commandment with the promise that you shall live long!), honour your elders, forgive those who trespass against you so bitterness doesn't build up the acid in your stomach, and ask God for a work He wants you to do, and God's promise to you is that you will live long and happy in the land.

Want a decent job and income? Ask God for it, then study hard, prepare well, discipline yourself and get the skills you will need. Get the qualifications necessary. Get the degree you need. Get the trade you need. Put your faith into action, expecting God to answer.

Want a decent retirement so you can continue to be useful in God's kingdom work? Then ask God to help you put aside the right amount of savings, (remembering first to put aside your offering for his church and kingdom work!) then work hard! What you sow you will reap.

My grandfather used to say, "God feeds the birds, but He does not drop it in their nests!"

The prayer of faith is the prayer that *acts* in obedient expectation!

4. THE PRONOUNCEMENT OF THE PRAYER OF FAITH

Faith that is not spoken, not openly confessed with the mouth, is not effective. Even in the matter of our salvation this holds good,

If you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For with the heart one believes unto righteousness; and with the mouth confession is made unto salvation (Rom. 10: 9-10). Some believers never have assurance of salvation because they never tell anybody about their faith in the Gospel. The more you confess your faith in Christ, the stronger your faith.

The Bible is full of teaching that you must speak out your faith if it is to be released with power.

GOD HIMSELF SPEAKS OUT BY FAITH!

As we have already noted, when Jesus said, **Have faith in God**, he was insisting his followers have the God of the Bible as their object of faith. But there is another tantalising nuance in his words here. The text reads literally, **Have the faith of God**. Does this mean **Have the kind of faith God has; Have the God-kind of faith?**

At first sight, this might seem a rather long stretch. I mean, do we really think God Almighty works from the principle of faith? Does God really work from trust in His own word? My personal opinion is that Scripture may so teach.

Isaiah 55: "My word that goes forth from my mouth shall not return unto me void; it shall accomplish what I send it out to do." God has faith in His own word! And he speaks it. He pronounces the prophetic word.

This, for example, is the principle by which God worked in the Genesis of creation. Did He not *speak* this world into existence? *No creation occurred until God spoke the word*. Not a single star, not a single galaxy, not a single planet, nothing happened until God Himself spoke His word into being. And we are created in His image!

Speaking out your faith --- proclaiming the word of God --- creates new reality --- brings the life of God into play. The Bible says, God is the God **Who calls those things which are not as though they were (Rom. 4: 17)**. Or, if you prefer, God is the God who **calls into existence the things that do not [yet] exist**.

Like God, our words of faith are creative. Our words of faith unleash the power of God into your circumstances. When Jesus commanded, **Have faith in God/ Have the God-kind of faith**, observe he immediately explained, **For truly I say unto you, That whosoever shall say unto this mountain, 'Be taken up and thrown into the sea,' and if you do not doubt in your heart, but believe that what you say will come to pass, it will be done for you (Mark 11: 22)**.

SUNG CHUL AND THE ORPHANS

For years Chris & I sponsored a little Korean orphan boy called Sung Chul ... meaning 'the Strong One'. So named because they found him by the train tracks in the snow, half frozen dead. They took him to the Churches of Christ orphanage and he survived, then thrived ... 'the Strong One!

Well, Pastor Chung's manse was next to their orphanage, and he used to visit all their children every morning and do a Bible story and a prayer with the kids. One day Chung told them that Jesus said, "If you say to this mountain, 'Be cast into the sea, and if you do not doubt in your heart that what you say it will be done for you'".

Well, those kids took Jesus seriously. You see, they had to walk around the mountain next to their orphanage every day to get to school. A journey of about 8 miles, or a good 2 hour walk. (You can see why Jesus' words really got their attention!)

When Pastor Chung came the next day to do his devotions with them, the kids met him with excitement declaring they believed Jesus' words, and had indeed asked him to move that big old mountain. Chung thought they would forget about this, but for the next weeks, indeed months, every day they told him they knew Jesus was going to move their mountain.

Ah, what to do? Chung did not have the heart to disappoint the kids. He couldn't bring himself to say, "Your theology is wrong. Jesus really meant the mountains that stand in the way of preaching the Gospel, etc. So Chung just met them with polite smiles and tried to divert their thoughts elsewhere.

Well, one morning Chung was awoken by a rumbling. The windows and doors of his house were rattling. What could that be? As he looked out the window, he saw a whole convoy of earth moving equipment. Graders, diggers, trucks ... the government had decided they needed the rock in that mountain for construction sites elsewhere!

Chung says that over the next few months that mountain disappeared before their eyes. How excited the kids were that the mountain literally got up and walked away, and so they could now walk in a straight line to their school! Sung Chul became a strong one, with his mates, in more ways than one!

The Bible is full of teaching that you must speak out your faith if it is to be released with power. Often our words trap us into a cycle of unbelief and kill off the answers to our prayers.

LORD, PLEASE BE WITH US?

Let me show you. When I hear folk asking God to please be with me, please be with us, I cringe on the inside. For has not the word of our faithful God spoken and promised, **I will never leave you nor forsake you?**

No. No. When you pray, say, confess, "Father, thank You that You are always with us, and never will leave us. Because You are with us, let Your power be evident now. Let Your anointing now flow."

I love **Hebrews 13: 5-6**, He has said, 'I will never leave you or forsake you.' (Now where does that quote come from? That's right. The OT. That promise, 'I will never leave you nor forsake you' was spoken first to the children of Israel in **Deuteronomy 31: 6**, **Be strong and courageous, do not be afraid of tremble at them. For the LORD your God is the one who goes before you. He will not fail you or forsake you.** But it wasn't just for them back then!

The promise is repeated in **Joshua 1:5**. **I will be with you; I will not fail you or forsake you.** But the promise wasn't just for him then!

And just in case we are still tempted to say, "Well, that was just for Israel in the OT, that was just for Joshua for a unique time in history, and it does not apply to our day (dispensation), the writer to the Hebrews takes the promise and says it's yours in Christ too! The writer to the Hebrews takes that specific promise: **He has said ... so we may say!**

The NT principle is, For as many as may be the promises of God, in him they are yes; therefore also by him is our Amen to the glory of God through us (2 Cor. 1: 20-21). When you find a promise God gave to His people, **say** your Amen!

The NT principle is, All things belong to you, whether Paul or Apollos or Cephas or the world or life or death or things present or things to come; all things belong to you, and you belong to Christ; and Christ belongs to God (1 Cor. 3: 21-23).

The NT principle is, You brethren, like Isaac, are children of promise. In Christ we inherit the lot!

Don't fret about your needs. For He has said, 'I will never leave you or forsake you.' So **we can say with confidence**, 'The LORD is my helper; I will not be afraid. What can man do to me?'

Speak it! Confess your faith. And it shall be done for you.

LORD, PLEASE GIVE ME THE VICTORY?

Let me give you another example of how **not** to pray. Are you having a struggle with a certain sin. You have been praying for perhaps years, "Lord, please give me the victory here." But the more fervently you pray, the more victory seems to elude you. You are in despair. You cry out, "Oh, wretched man that I am!" What to do?

May I suggest, your's is a prayer of unbelief? And God will not honour unbelief. Does this seem harsh to you? Well, I suggest that God has already told you, that by virtue of your union with Christ, you already share his victory over the power of sin and death. Your old self that lived under the old creation has been crucified with Christ once for all,

Knowing this, that our old self was crucified with him, so that the body of sin [the body which is sin's puppet] might be destroyed, and we might no longer be enslaved to sin (Rom. 6:6).

Yes, our old self loves to listen to sin. But in our striving to live right, we try to eradicate the root of sin that seems to grow so vigorously in our body. Yet, all the while God declares His Gospel truth: **Our old self was crucified with Christ**. We were united with Christ in our obedience in the waters of baptism.

God declares that in Christ Jesus you are now a new creature. God declares that a fact. Therefore, you don't have to ask God to do what He says He has already done. God's fact does not become factual because we believe it. It's a Gospel fact whether you choose to believe it or not! So stand on your victory in Christ!

So I suggest that the way to victory is to begin to thank God for what He has already done in Christ --- joined you to the resurrection life of His Son --- and begin to **say**, My old self has been crucified with Christ. Sin does not have dominion over me. Declare **The law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has made me free from the law of sin and death (Rom. 8:2)!**

Every morning you wake up get into the habit of making a bold confession. **Say, I am united to the risen Christ who sits at the right hand of God Almighty. My life is hidden with Christ. I am a new creation in Christ. The old has been crucified. I now walk in the power of the law of the Spirit of life. I am set free from the law of sin and death. Thanks be unto God who always gives me the victory in Christ Jesus!** In this way you do not let sin have dominion over you. This is the prayer that works!

And please do not misunderstand what I'm saying. I'm not saying, just imagine anything you want, then believe it, receive it by faith, then go out and tell everybody what God is giving you. That's not what I'm saying. All that is, is the power of positive thinking. That's just human effort. I am saying, get yourself lined up with what God's word promises, find out what He says you have or what He wants you to have, then exercise your faith and believe Him and ask Him to make good what He's promised in your life. So ...

Never again say, "God, please be with me." That is a prayer of unbelief. But when you pray, say, "Father God, thank you for always being with me. Thank you for always being my Helper. I therefore bring this need to You confident of Your help now."

Never again pray before our church services, "O God please be with us." No. Let us pray and say, "Thank you Father that You go before us. Now manifest Your power. Let Your anointing be upon our worship. Fill us afresh with Your life."

Never again ask God to give you victory over sin. Tell Him that you know you have been united to Christ, that your old self is crucified, and that you know you are joined to the risen, victorious life of the Son of God.

That is how to grow your faith. Your confession of faith in His word gives glory to God.

The prayer of faith that works is the prayer that is specific, fervent, wholehearted, energised by righteous relationships within community; The prayer of faith that works is the faith put **in** the one and only God of the Bible, and it is the faith **of** the God of the Bible, for it is the faith that acts on God's faithfulness and that speaks in agreement with His unfailing promises.

The prayer of a righteous person is powerful and effective! You can pray like Elijah!

Have faith in God --- and have the God-kind of faith!