

PRAYER IS A POWERFUL FORCE

JAMES 5 v 16b-18

The prayer of a good person has a powerful effect. Elijah was the same kind of person as we are. He prayed earnestly that there would be no rain, and no rain fell on the land for three and a half years. Once again he prayed, and the sky poured out its rain, and the earth produced its crops.

When there is a terrible tragedy or when something really bad happens to a person or a community, people assure them of their thoughts and prayers. In October 2018 there was a shocking tragedy at the King Power Football stadium, home of Leicester City Football Club in England, when a helicopter, carrying the club owner and four other passengers, crashed in the stadium carpark shortly after it had taken off at the end of a match. People in the football world and in the wider community conveyed their sympathy to the relatives of those who were killed, as well as assuring them and the officials and players of Leicester City Football Club of their prayers. I have heard people who are atheists say that they are praying for people who are in trouble. One notable example is the former Australian Prime Minister, Julia Gillard. When people say that they are praying for others, what do they mean? Are they really praying? Do they think their prayers, whatever they consist of, are going to make any real difference to a situation? Or is the assurance of prayers for people in trouble just a glib expression which is a token gesture of support, or is there something of substance behind it? How do you feel about prayer? Do you think prayer makes any difference to a difficult situation? Or do you consider it a waste of time? James believed in the great power of prayer; 5 v 16b. The word that James uses here for prayer is interesting. It is the Greek word 'deesis' which is not the usual word for prayer in the New Testament. It puts the emphasis on the sense of specific need. It has a feeling of urgency and importance about it. Rendell Harris translates v 16a in this way; "*The energized prayer of a righteous man is of great force*". James emphasises the inherent power of prayer. The Greek word 'ischys' points to inherent strength, the strength which makes a person or thing sufficient for the task. It means potency, power waiting to be released. Sometimes we talk about untapped resources. Unpromising tracts of land hide rich deposits of minerals; grey seas cover a wealth of natural gas. This is the picture suggested by the word. It's not the unpromising appearance, but the hidden powers. This is true of prayer. It can look unimpressive; it can sound unimpressive; it is easy to say it doesn't do any good. But prayer has great resources waiting to be tapped. It has a huge potency to release.

The meaning of the Greek verb 'energoumene' translated 'effective' or 'in its effects' is power 'to get things done' i.e. effective power. The Greek word is a participle which could be translated either passive or middle. If passive, the translation is 'prayer is very powerful when it is energized by God'. Implied in this is a specific qualification on the effectiveness of prayer from the standpoint of the will of God. However, most commentators think the word is more likely to be middle with the meaning 'prayer is

very powerful in its working, or in its effect'. Alec Motyer wrote; **“When we pray about something, the inherent power of prayer is released as an effective power which accomplishes its objectives”**.

James describes the person who is praying as righteous. The word 'righteous' makes us feel that we don't measure up because we think the word 'righteous' refers to perfect moral character and integrity. When James refers to a righteous person, he doesn't have super saints in mind. The term 'righteous person' designates one who is whole-heartedly committed to God and sincerely seeking to do his will. James introduces Elijah as an example of a righteous person whose prayers had great effect; v 17b & 18. The situation James describes is recorded in 1 Kings 17-18. The point that James is making is that the drought which came as judgment on the people of Israel, and the rain which came when they returned to the Lord and abandoned their idols, all happened in the context of Elijah's prayer. His prayer produced supernatural results. N T Wright comments on Elijah's prayer; **“Every Christian has not only the right but the vocation to engage in prayer like that, prayer for one another, prayer for the sick, prayer for the sinners, prayer for the nation and the world. If everyone were to determine to devote half an hour every day to this task, the effect could be incalculable”**. Take this as both a challenge and an encouragement. Don't underestimate the power of your prayers. It was Lord Tennyson who said; **“More things are wrought by prayer than this world dreams of”**. Prayer is a powerful force.