**PROVIDENCE (#4)**

***Prayer and Providence***

James 5:13-18 has always been an eye-opening passage to me. Would you take a moment to read it with me, noting especially verse 16.

13 Is anyone among you suffering? Let him pray. Is anyone cheerful? Let him sing psalms. 14 Is anyone among you sick? Let him call for the elders of the church, and let them pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord. 15 And the prayer of faith will save the sick, and the Lord will raise him up. And if he has committed sins, he will be forgiven. 16 Confess your trespasses to one another, and pray for one another, that you may be healed. The effective, fervent prayer of a righteous man avails much. 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 land for three years and six months. 18 And he prayed again, and the heaven gave rain, and the earth produced its fruit.

I’m certainly not a deist that believes God exists but is uninterested and uninvolved in world affairs. I believe God seeks an intimacy with us far more than any husband / wife or parent / child relationship. The closest bond on earth is found in the fellowship of the sons of God with their heavenly Father. As the Psalmist beautifully said it, “*Whom have I in heaven but you? And besides You I desire nothing on earth*” (Psa. 73:25).

If it’s true that I love God “*with all my heart, soul, mind and strength*” (Mk. 12:30), and that He loves me so much that “*He gave His only begotten Son*” (Jn. 3:16), then surely we can believe that our prayers are heard by God and that He moves heaven and earth to answer our petitions and intercessions. Isn’t that the very meaning of “*the effective, fervent prayer of a righteous man avails much*?”

The ESV: “*The prayer of a righteous person has great power as it is working*”
The NET: “*The prayer of a righteous person has great effectiveness*.”
The NLT: “*The earnest prayer of a righteous person has great power and produces
 wonderful results*”

God not only hears a righteous man’s prayer but inserts His divine power into it to “*produce wonderful results*.”

But I know what you’re thinking. “Sure, great men like Elijah the prophet are heard, but who am I that God would hear my prayer?” After all, wasn’t Elijah teamed up with Moses, another superstar, to join Jesus on that mount of transfiguration (Matt. 17:1-11)? But read the text carefully. “*Elijah* was *a man with a nature like ours.*” He was a common man just like us, not some big-wig super-saint in the pantheon of God’s Hall of Fame. He would shake hands as equals with people like the anonymous two-mite poor widow (Mk. 12:42), or the nameless humble publican who smote his breast as a sinner (Lk. 18:13).

When this common man prayed, “stop the rain!” God did. So much so that He never let it so much as sprinkle for 42 months until he requested it. If Elijah was just like us, and we are just like Elijah, then James is inferring that God hears our prayers too! Yes, God hears us. Yes, God answers us. But how?

God has shown us in the Bible that He often operates providentially behind the scenes in answer to our prayers. A case in point is found in Romans 1:9-11. He told the Roman saints what he was praying for. Listen:

*“For God is my witness, whom I serve with my spirit in the gospel of His Son, that without ceasing I make mention of you always in my prayers, making request if, by some means, now at last I may find a way in the will of God to come to you. For I long to see you…”*

Then, at the end of his letter (15:30-32) he asked them to pray this:

*“Now I beg you, brethren, through the Lord Jesus Christ, and through the love of the Spirit, that you strive together with me in prayers to God for me, … that I may come to you with joy by the will of God and may be refreshed together with you.”*

Did God answer his prayer, and their prayers? Yes, but in a very strange and unexpected way.

After his third missionary journey he went to Jerusalem to deliver the benevolent funds he had collected. He was arrested and imprisoned. The Lord promised Paul he would reward his courage by telling him*: “Be of good cheer, Paul; for as you have testified for Me in Jerusalem, so you must also bear witness at Rome”* (Ac 23:11). But not yet. He was imprisoned for two more years in Caesarea (Ac 24:27), then at his trial he appealed to Caesar for justice (Ac 25:11). He had to then endure a life-threatening shipwreck only to be assured by an angel, “*You must stand before Caesar*” (Ac 27:24). The following spring Paul arrived in Rome (Ac 28:16). His prayers, and that of the saints, had been answered, but in the mysterious workings of God’s providence.

Later, writing his prison epistle from Rome he told the Philippian church these amazing words: *But I want you to know, brethren, that the things which happened to me have actually turned out for the furtherance of the gospel, so that it has become evident to the whole palace guard, and to all the rest, that my chains are in Christ; and most of the brethren in the Lord, having become confident by my chains, are much more bold to speak the word without fear”* (Phil. 1:12-14).

Like Joseph before him, Paul no doubt wondered during his years of imprisonment how this was a good thing. But, like Joseph, he came to see the providence of God in answer to his prayers. The twists and turns of getting to Rome had “*actually turned out for the furtherance of the gospel*” – leading other Christians to gain courage and a greater faith.

As in the case of Paul God works in mysterious ways. God says, “*Ask, and it will be given to you… for everyone who asks receives*…” (Matt. 7:7-8). And God says, *“… if we ask anything according to His will, He hears us. And if we know that He hears us, whatever we ask, we know that we have the petitions that we have asked of Him”* (I Jn. 5:14-15). God definitely hears and answers us. *How* He does that is His business, not ours. To do otherwise is to whittle on God’s end of the stick.

Today, write down your prayer list. Take it before God in faith, no doubting (Jam. 1:5-6). Leave the answer in His hands and watch His “*great power produce wonderful results*” (Jam. 5:16). That’s providence!

I love you. – Rick