

Kings and Prophets 13-09-06a

This is Friday, the 6th of September, 2013. We continue our study in Kings and Prophets. If you want to be anticipating our passage for the evening, you can be turning to the 5th chapter of the book of James.

Let's take a moment as we anticipate our study to remember how important the ministry of the Holy Spirit is. It is not enough for me to prepare and present. It is not enough to hear and understand.

We, both in the delivery and in the reception, have to rely on God's Holy Spirit so that our time is well spent, so that the truth of God enters our souls and remains there in a way that enables and empowers us to live the life that God has called us to. And it's worth taking a moment to reflect on those principles as we begin our study. So we'll take a moment to do that, and then we'll begin.

Father, what a privilege and a blessing it is to be called by Your name, to count ourselves as members of a community that belongs to You, and not just an association, not just a fellowship, but to be Your sons and daughters, to be royal family, to be priests, to be related to You through the Lord Jesus Christ Himself. We have done nothing to deserve that honor and that high privilege. Everything that we have, everything that we are, all of our benefits come from You through the Lord Jesus.

We thank You for Him. We thank You for the example He has left for us in living on this earth, in our flesh, in our midst, subject to our weaknesses and temptations, and yet accomplishing Your plan perfectly without sin, providing a way into the Holy of Holies for us. We pray that as we seek to understand Him better and understand Your plan and purpose for us, as we live out the time that is allotted to us here on earth, and as we prepare ourselves for the eternal future in Your presence, we pray that Your Holy Spirit will lead us and guide us, give us understanding and a correct grasp of these truths, that they will be meaningful, that they will return to us as we reflect on them, as we meditate, as we seek to think and act in a way that pleases You.

We pray that our study this evening will be a blessing to each one that hears it, that we will come away strengthened and motivated to lay hold of those things for which You laid hold of us, that we can walk in the good works that You have ordained, that we can shine as lights in the midst of our generation, which seems to be ever more characterized by darkness and distraction and departure. We pray that Your will will be accomplished in our lives, in and through the things that we study tonight. We pray it in Jesus' name.

Amen. Our passage for this evening is not going to be in 1 Kings or even in Chronicles, but in the New Testament, in the book of James. Our subject is the prophet Elijah, and interestingly, although Elijah did not write any of our biblical books, we know more about him and his background and the details of his life than any other prophet of the Old Testament age, with

the possible exception of Moses.

But Moses and Elijah have the most complete biographies of any prophets. We know more about Elijah than we know about Elisha. And he is such an important figure in biblical terms that even in the New Testament, you find Elijah mentioned over 30 times.

Thirty, count them, three zero and up. His presence at the Mount of Transfiguration is recorded, as is that entire episode in all three of the Synoptic Gospels. His reference and example or model or foreshadowing that you see fulfilled in John the Baptist is mentioned in gospel after gospel.

But one of the most interesting places that we find Elijah mentioned, and in our study of his life and ministry in the days of King Ahab, has brought us to James chapter 5. James chapter 5. We've noted that Elijah is one of the examples of a replicated man, a man that appears and then appears in some sort of enhanced or doubled form. You have Moses, and then you have Joshua, you have Elijah, and then you have Elisha, and so on. We've talked about this in past weeks.

This is one aspect. We've talked about the incredible, it's not incredible, it's very incredible, but it's unusual use of numbers, the numbers three and seven in particular, surrounding him, and we are in the process of discovering why that is. It's one thing to notice it, it's something else to figure out why.

But one of the things for which Elijah is notable, one of many things, is his introduction. And you remember that the first thing we see, our introduction to the prophet Elijah in 1 Kings, is his announcement to Ahab that there will be no rain except at his word. And he is presented to us as a man of prayer.

When Elijah prayed, there is no rain. When Elijah prays, there is rain. And it is his communication with God as not exactly a mediator, but as God's representative on this earth.

You can remember back in the days when the imagination of men's hearts was only evil all the day in the times before the flood, in the days of Noah, and God says, this stench has come up in my nostrils, I will go down and see what's going on. And there are times later in the life of Abraham where it appears that God largely relies on reports to know what's going on on earth. And when he becomes very interested, then he is pictured as coming down to earth to see for himself or to communicate at first person.

For example, at Mount Sinai. And this is unusual. There are other aspects of God where he is pictured as omnipresent.

His Shekinah exists in the Holy of Holies behind the veil. But all of these are accommodations to our limited human understanding. But in the days of Elijah, you don't have the glory cloud.

And why not? Could God have reinstalled the pillar of cloud by day and the pillar of fire by

night? Could he have made his presence known in Israel? Wouldn't that have been something? He apparently did it in the days of Job, where he, remember the great whirlwind that came and the voice out of the whirlwind talking with Job? Then you have the pillar of cloud and pillar of fire in the days of Moses. And why couldn't God do that? God chooses to communicate through a representative. And in the days of King Ahab, this representative is first and foremost Elijah.

Now, how does God operate today? Is there a similar combination of the ubiquitous presence of God and representatives who speak for God and communicate on his behalf? And the answer is yes. God, the Holy Spirit, operates in his convicting ministry all over the world. And there is also the mission of the church to reflect the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.

We are, in effect, his witnesses. We carry forward the gospel. We are privileged to speak the truth to one another in love and to the unbelieving world with the good news of grace and the gospel of Jesus Christ.

And we fulfill a forth-telling mission. We voice the truth of God's word. It isn't left in books for somebody to just pick up and read.

It has a voice. It has a human form. The truth travels and communicates in a living incarnate form in us, complemented and supplemented and augmented and surrounded by the invisible yet powerful presence of God himself.

Well, in various ways, this has been God's model going back to the earliest times. But we see Elijah, and we're looking at him tonight, in another way, not just as God's spokesman, not just as the mighty prophet calling the northern kingdom to repentance, not just a man of symbol, a man of foreshadowing, but we're going to look at him tonight as the Bible so often presents him a man of prayer. This is the way we find him in James 5. And we're going to really accomplish two objectives in this study.

We're going to see and explore that particular facet of the prophet Elijah. And it is also, I think, going to greatly clarify and open up the meaning of this reference to Elijah in James. And I will tell you that when we did the book of James, I did not understand this part of chapter 5 as I understand it now.

And I will probably take this study and swap it in for this section of chapter 5 of James because I have learned through research and through studying the work of people that have really poured over this passage and have brought things to light that didn't occur to me a fresh and, I think, a much superior understanding. It doesn't negate or invalidate any of the things that we've seen earlier, but I think this is a fuller and better grasp of what James is really talking about as he references the prophet Elijah. So this is a twofer.

This is a buy one, get one. It's Old Testament, New Testament, it's Kings, it's James, it's Prophets, it's the Lord Jesus, and it informs us about the Church Age role of prayer in this particular context. So let's take a look at our passage.

We are aiming for James 5.17. The first word in James 5.17 is Elijah. That's our target. That's where we're headed.

But to get there, to respect the context and understand why Elijah pops up in verse 17, we're going to begin in verse 13. So we're going to read verses 13 through 18 and then we'll break it down. Is anyone among you, this is James 5.13, Is anyone among you suffering? Let him pray.

Is anyone cheerful? Let him sing psalms. 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. 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. 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.

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. And he prayed again, and the heaven gave rain and the earth produced its fruit. Now, how sequentially normal and obvious do you find the reference to Elijah in this passage? What's the most salient and prominent topic in this section that we've just read? What's the part that's most interesting? Isn't it the prayer of faith will heal the sick? That's what interests me.

I've been sick. I know sick people. I know people that are continuing to battle physical ailment, and this is church age.

This is post-Pentecost, and it doesn't make any reference to supernatural healing gifts. It says, look, if you're sick, call the elders, rub on some oil, do a prayer, and God will raise you up. So here's my question.

Why aren't we doing this? Everybody with an ongoing ailment, mentally, raise your hand and say, yeah, send the elders. I am ready to be raised up, and I mean now. Stop the Bible class, and let's get this.

Lori probably has some olive oil back there, super extra refined virgin olive oil. It doesn't even say it has to be good olive oil. Get the oil.

We've got some elders here. Let's pray a prayer. God will raise them up.

Are we just spiritualizing this away? It doesn't say somebody has to have a gift of healing, does it? It says the elders of the church. So what is going on? And if that is the case, how does this follow? Because what I'm thinking is, Elijah prayed for the widow's son and stretched himself on him three times, and he came back from the dead. That's my Elijah episode, my Elijah pericope for people in a bad way.

You can't get any sicker than the widow's son. He died. It was fatal.

His heart quit beating. He was cold, gray, stiff, flat-lined dead. Now that is sick.

That is as sick as you can get. You're not coming back from that. You're not getting well from that.

So does this follow? The prayer of faith will heal the sick. Look at Elijah. He stretched himself three times and appealed to God, and the widow's son came back from the dead.

How much more can your elders, who are of a more modest caste and less ferociously spiritual than Elijah, but they can at least send up some prayers and get you well. I don't know about you, but this passage and our understanding of it has never sat well with me. When we did the book of James and I got to chapter 5, I banged my head on this for hours and hours and hours.

I did my best with it, but I still thought, you know, I don't feel like I've really grasped what James is getting at. Well, tonight we're going to tackle this afresh and see if we cannot arrive at an understanding that comports with what is in the scripture and what prevails in this context. Now, and by the way, as I said, I have learned this by canvassing the earth and reading everything I could find, and I have found a guy here and a guy there and synthesizing different things.

I am saying that I didn't go in and parse a bunch of Greek words and arrive at this understanding on my own. People other than me and before me have paved a way and provided clues that I think improve our understanding of this passage. So I am indebted to those who have gone before, as all good pastors are.

So don't say, wow, Sam, you really cracked a hard case here. I have learned from people who have done a lot of diligent work, and all of us benefit from those who do so. Now, in the first case and in the first blush, this is a vastly variously interpreted passage.

Interpretations are all over the map. A lot of people say, well, this is just a flat-out go-to-Corinthians and it's a gift of healings thing. God does supernaturally heal.

And all of you stick-in-the-mud, desiccated, sit-soak-in-sour churches that aren't getting your healing, it's your own fault. You don't have enough faith. You are not really willing to trust God for physical healing, and that's why you are sick.

You stay sick because you are not really willing to step out in faith and say, okay, God, we are going to actually lay it on the line. We are going to have an anointing oil service. We are going to pray, and we are going to keep on anointing, and we are going to keep on praying until this person is raised up because you have said so in this passage.

People have actually done this, and the person has actually not been healed, and it destroys the church because their attempt is based on a misunderstanding. Now, there have been cases where God has miraculously healed in the modern day. And I mean miraculously.

I mean God, from time to time, does miracles. He suspends the laws of physics and biology and whatever other laws are sourced in Him at will. Here is the thing.

It is at God's behest. It is when and where God chooses. There is not a formula.

God is not a slot machine, and if you just have the right change, you are going to get the candy bar of healing or the candy bar of prosperity. You just have to have correct change. You just have to do it right.

If you just got the right ritual and the right degree of faith, and if you just empathize and sympathize and faithify hard enough, God will come through. And if He doesn't come through, there is something wrong with you. God does not prescribe a method whereby you can get automatic results from Him of a supernatural nature.

God will do supernatural things when God feels like it, when it serves God's purpose, when it comports with God's will. God chooses the place and the time. There is nothing you and I can do to cajole or to manipulate God into doing supernatural things.

Nothing. You and I can do nothing to force God to produce a supernatural miracle in this age. In fact, there has never been a time when people can, you know, well, you're the genie of the bottle.

You have to grant my wishes. It's never been that way. God always chooses the occasion, the time, and the degree.

God is God. We are God's people. It's not the other way around.

So that's first. And sub-point under first, that God chooses the place and time for supernatural miraculous happenings. These things have occurred throughout history and they do continue today.

God still does supernatural things. They are likely to be observed in places where the gospel light is weakest. In closed countries where Bibles are not available, where there are people who are interested in the things of God and there are very few Christians, where conditions are similar to other times in history when there was very little revelation or revelation is in the process of unfolding.

Isn't this the time when God has done miracles in the earliest days of the age of Israel, the earliest days of the age of the church, when God is about to produce a change among and within a group of people and there is insufficient existing revelation, God will reveal Himself and vindicate and authenticate His messengers with supernatural things. And there's no verse in the Bible that says God did it then but He's not doing it now. God can do this whenever and wherever He wants.

And I have seen sufficient accounts from trustworthy missionaries to far-off places to know that

God still does this today. These are clear-eyed, reserved, conservative, no-nonsense, I-am-not-a-hand-waving, holy-roller types who have seen miraculous things take place. And I know that God still does this but He doesn't do it because a bunch of people got together and said, Oh God, do something supernatural.

Everybody is surprised when God does this. It comes unexpectedly. It's in God's time and it's in God's way.

So don't think that because God is doing it in various places around the world that God will do it for me because I want Him to. God does it when He wants to. But He does do it and it persists to the present day.

Secondly, we have this passage in James that is clearly a New Testament passage as you find in some of Paul's letters. And we say, well, do we have to relegate this to the early days of the church and say that applied then but it doesn't apply now. Paul is careful in 1 Corinthians to tell us that there are supernatural gifts.

He also says these are going to cease and faith, hope, and love will remain. When that which is complete is come, that which is in part will be done away. And the gifts, the supernatural gifts of healing, of tongues, of prophecy and so on were to fill the gap until established revelation could be promulgated and be completed.

When that which is complete is come, that which is in part is done away. And by the way, our Bible is a superior gift from God. If I had the choice of having the gift of healing or having my Bible, I would take my Bible every single time without hesitation.

It wouldn't take me three seconds to answer that question. God says, Sam, I'll give you the supernatural gift of healing but you won't have your Bible anymore. No, Lord, please let me keep my scriptures.

It is superior. There are so many occasions where what I need is not to get over my cold. I need guidance.

I need communion with God. I need to be in the fellowship of His truth and His mind and His Spirit. And without the Word, God's Spirit is silent.

The Holy Spirit says nothing from Himself. He takes of the things of Jesus Christ that are recorded in His Word. And if you want to try gluing things together with only one half of your epoxy pack, good luck.

You can try it with the resin or you can try it with the hardener. But if you don't have both that you can mix together to make epoxy, all you're going to have is smelly goo. These temporary gifts are inferior.

They are partial, Paul says, and inadequate. They are inferior to the completed canon that we

have. This is the most precious thing God has ever imparted to humankind, the truth of His Word.

It has power that transcends the material. Those gifts were material. They were temporal and temporary.

Even in their effect, you can temporarily speak in another language. You can temporarily heal someone. Even the apostles couldn't heal at will.

Paul himself got sick. Paul left other people sick and behind. Paul tells Timothy, well, Timothy, that stomach complaint that you've got, call for the people in your church that have the gift of healing and let's get over that thing.

You can't be slowed down as a pastor. Isn't that what Paul says? Paul tells Timothy, grab a couple of healing gift people for your stomach's sake. No, what does he say? Take some medicine.

Take some medicine for your frequent illnesses. Lift individuals behind. So this is superior.

So that's sort of our second point, is that we have this passage and you cannot simply relegate it to early days and say, well, that was then, this is now. You are encouraged to do that with Paul's writings in Corinthians because Paul says, what I am talking about here in 1 Corinthians chapter 12 and chapter 13 and chapter 14 is temporary. He labels it as temporary.

He is very clear that this is partial and when that is which is complete has come. Does James do that anywhere in James chapter 5? Does he say, as long as you're in the early days of the church age, call the elders and do the olive oil, but don't think this is, there is no hint here that this isn't an ongoing policy for the church. There is nothing in the book of James that indicates in any way that this is temporary unlike Paul.

Is that clear? Do we all understand that Paul manifestly says, this stuff is not going to last forever and Paul himself is an example of it not lasting forever. I know you would pluck out your own eyes and give them to me because mine are bad. Look with what large letters I write with my own hand because I'm nearly blind and I haven't healed myself nor has anybody around me with the gift of healing including Dr. Luke done anything to fix my eyes.

Wouldn't it be handy as an apostle if I could see clearly and write to you with small letters and make a longer book, but no. Paul can't because even in his own personal example it was temporary. So we're left with this conundrum.

And what about this passage in James? Well, we are given the prophet Elijah and the prophet Elijah is part of the key to understanding what this passage means because the prophet Elijah is not given to us healing Ahab, healing any king's son or daughter. We've seen royal offspring dying at the word of the Lord and nobody healed them. That would be a logical thing to put here.

Some prophet healing the blind, healing... Why isn't it Elisha? Why isn't it Naaman the Syrian dipping himself seven times in the Jordan in a context of physical healing? That's a prominent prophetic instance of healing. Instead, we have Elijah and the rain. How does this follow? Well, we're going to pause here and take our break.

When we come back, within the limits of the next lesson, before we leave here tonight, we will cover this passage and I think we're going to find a great deal of illumination for it.