

Study 11 THE SECRET OF EFFECTIVE PRAYER

(Scripture Portion: James 5:16-18)

The Bible is filled with promises, encouragements and illustrations which emphasise the secret of effective prayer. It is said that James had knees that were worn down by his constant habit of kneeling. If so, we have the testimony of a man who had proved the secret of effective prayer in his life and practised what he preached. But notice the statement he makes in verse 16: "The prayer of a righteous man is powerful and effective" – in other words, it gets results.

There is a kind of prayer which is not always, or very rarely, effective.

The reason this prayer is ineffective and useless is because God does not hear it – look up and compare Job 27:8-9; Job 35:13; Isaiah 1:15-16; Isaiah 59:2; Micah 3:4; Zechariah 7:11-13; Luke 18:11-12. How solemn! But notice:

Prayer with a wrong motive cannot be effective. We learn this from James 4:3, and how often we pray selfishly! Only prayer which is offered for the glory of God secures His ear and His answer.

If we know of sin in our lives, prayer cannot be effective. We learn this from Psalm 66:18. How easy it is to harbour sin! We need to pray the prayers that David prayed – Psalm 139:23-24; Psalm 51:3-4, and act on 1 John 1:9.

An unforgiving spirit will hinder prayer. We learn this from Mark 11:25-26. Is this a possible reason why our prayers for the conversion of our loved ones are not being answered?

An unwillingness to be reconciled to someone prevents prayer from being effective. We learn this from Matthew 5:23-24. It is of little use to pray, worship, go to meetings, or engage in God's service and to expect His blessing, if we are unwilling first to be reconciled to another believer.

A wrong relationship is a barrier in prayer. We learn this from 1 Peter 3:7. Perhaps our relationship with members of our own family is not all that it should be. According to this verse, that can be a hindrance to our prayers.

There is, however, a kind of prayer which is always effective.

James tells us that it is possible to pray and to succeed in gaining God's gracious answer to our prayers. This is prayer that is "powerful and effective", and James goes on to give us an illustration of what prayer can do (verses 17-18). If we want to discover the secret of effective prayer and of all that God is willing to do in answer to the prayers of His people, we need to look at Elijah, a man just like us, who proved the great power of prayer in an amazing way. As we look at Elijah, we should ask the question, 'What can prayer do?'

Through prayer God's servants are empowered to speak His word. We learn this from 1 Kings 17:1. Surely it was because Elijah knew what it was to stand before the Lord that he was able to go and stand before the wicked Ahab. It was prayer in private which made him powerful in public! When we turn to the New Testament we find the same truth clearly taught – Acts 4:29, 31-32. Effective prayer releases the power of the Holy Spirit, and by the power of the Holy Spirit God's servants are made bold and courageous to speak for the Lord.

Through prayer God's servants gain ample provision for all their needs. We see in 1 Kings 17 two great illustrations of this. First, God provided free accommodation for Elijah by the brook Kerith and fed him every day by means of ravens (1 Kings 17:2-6). Then, when the brook dried up (verse 7), God provided free accommodation at Zarephath, and he had all that he needed (1 Kings 17:8-16); compare Psalm 34:10 and Philippians 4:19.

Through prayer God's servants experience His miracle-working power. We learn this from 1 Kings 17:17-24. When we act in accordance with His will, God does truly great and mighty things in answer to the prayers of His people – look up Jeremiah 33:3, and compare Mark 11:22-24.

Through prayer God's servants can know victory over the Lord's enemies. The whole of 1 Kings chapter 18 is worth very careful reading. How amazing! – the false prophets were put to shame and afterwards put to death, and the Lord's name was vindicated. Prayer today can drive back the powers of darkness and overcome God's enemies – the forces of materialism, the flood of obscenity, the spread of false religions – look up Isaiah 59:19.

Through prayer God's servants are kept during times of testing and failure. 1 Kings 19 is also a great chapter. It tells us how tenderly the Lord dealt with His weary and failing servant and how graciously He restored and re-commissioned him. All this came about through prayer.

In conclusion, notice the secret of effective prayer (James 5:16).

Prayer that is effective must be fervent and earnest – it must really come from the heart! Look up Genesis 32:26; Isaiah 66:8; Hosea 12:4; Luke 11:8.

Prayer that is effective is that which is worked in by the Holy Spirit – look up and compare Romans 8:26; Philippians 2:13; Jude 20.

Prayer that is effective must be offered by a righteous man – that is, by a man who is made righteous through faith in the Lord Jesus Christ – look up Romans 4:5-8; and by a man who is righteous in all his ways before the Lord – look up Philippians 1:11.