

Overcoming Obstacles Through Prayer

James 5:16b-18

Good morning! We're on the third part of our series on "Becoming a Champion". We kicked off this series two weeks ago by looking at Jesus Christ being the source of true power for his followers. Then, last week we looked at how we can defend truth and freedom. Today, I'd like us to look at how we can overcome obstacles through prayer.

Martin Luther, the great Protestant reformist, said, "I have so much business I cannot get on without spending three hours daily in prayer." How many of you spent even just three hours of prayer this week? If we're honest, we cannot even spend 15 minutes a day in prayer. Even if we do, that's still less than three hours a week. Imagine, three hours a day! I'm sure we can Facebook three hours a day. Just saying. With a smiley.

But come to think of it. Martin Luther faced enormous obstacles as he spearheaded the Reformation movement in Germany which eventually spread throughout Europe. He was hunted and persecuted by the reigning religious leaders at the time. While he was in hiding, he translated the Bible to German. He really had so much to do. He knew he could not accomplish all these things by himself. And so he turned to God in prayer. The work was so much he put so much energy in prayer. And we know the result.

What obstacles are you facing today? What difficulties are you going through? What problems are you encountering? I'm sure you're not starting a reformation, right? But whatever it is, you may feel like it's too much to handle.

When we face obstacles, normally, these are the things we do.

First, we worry. And the magnitude of our worries depends on the magnitude of our problems. Little problem, little worry. Big worry, big problem. However, sometimes we overworry.

Our worries are out of proportion to our problems. In any case, worrying is not healthy. When you worry, you can become sick. And when you become sick, that's really something to get worried about. And you make others worry about you, too.

Second, we complain. Because you have money problems, you complain about your boss who doesn't give you a raise. Because you're usually late, you complain about the traffic or your spouse or children who moves ever so slowly.

Third, we play the blame-game. We put the blame on others when things go wrong. We even blame God for the troubles we're in.

One thing we often neglect which should be our first recourse is prayer. If we pray first, then we won't worry, we won't complain, and we won't blame others. God will give us his peace and wisdom.

So, this morning, I'd like to share with you how to overcome your obstacle or obstacles through prayer. You see, any spiritual champion cannot be one without engaging in this most important part of your training. This is first and foremost in your training. Prayer is the most important part of your training if you want to become a champion. Unfortunately, we give up too easily. Or we take it too lightly. We're not serious about it. Some may not even believe in it.

So, get your pens and paper and track with me as we look at a person in the Old Testament who overcame obstacles through prayer. In these two verses we read, I'll share with you how to get your prayers answered. I'll share with you some principles about prayer that can help you have a powerful and effective prayer life. Applying these principles will help you to overcome the obstacles you're dealing with.

First of all,

I. I must live a righteous life

Our verse says, “The prayer of a righteous person is powerful and effective.”
(v. 16a)

That’s the first requirement. Now, what does it mean to live a righteous life? Should I live blamelessly? Should I live like I’m holy? Should I live like I’m faultless? That is well and good. But that is not what this verse is talking about.

By the way, you may wonder why I’m starting with the second part of verse 16. The reason is that I believe this second part is actually part of verse 17. In fact, I think it is an introduction to Elijah. But why is it separated? You see, the Bible was not originally divided into chapters and verses. In 1227 AD, the archbishop of Canterbury inserted the chapters and verses in the New Testament and a Jewish Rabbi inserted the chapters and verses in the Old Testament in AD 1448. And that makes sense, right? Because it’s easier to refer to a verse saying “Open your Bibles to John 3:16” instead of “Open your Bibles to where it says ‘For God so loved the world.’” Anyway, as observed by some folks, a few of these divisions are kind of out of place. Just like James 5:16.

So, going back to the verse, “The prayer of a righteous person...”, the word righteous here refers to someone who is obedient to God’s commands. The original Greek connotes the idea of someone who keeps God’s commands, who obey divine laws. This is someone who wants to please God as Hebrews abides in God so much so that his character reflects that of God.

This verse points to the example of Elijah. It says that he is righteous. Now it doesn't mean Elijah didn't sin because later on it tells us that Elijah was a man just like we are. He had those same concerns we have; he had those same weaknesses that we have. But it does mean when Elijah prayed this particular prayer he was up-to-date on his relationship with God. He had removed every barrier, every sin that could have possible stood between him and the Lord.

So the character of effective prayer is the character of a person who comes to God on the basis of the blood of Jesus Christ. And he allows the blood of Jesus Christ to cleanse every sin, to open the way between himself and God so there is nothing between him and heaven. There is nothing there that causes interference.

Last week, I told you about the men's outing to this firing range two hours from here. Before we reached the actual range, we passed by this forested area where the road is so rugged and bumpy. Kuya July was watching the World Cup on his phone until suddenly the signal went out. There was interference. The signal couldn't go through those tall trees. Our sins are like those tall trees that interfere between us and God. God couldn't communicate with us clearly because of those sins.

Now, the Bible says, if there is any unconfessed sin our life, any attitude in our heart that shouldn't be there, if there is any grudge we hold toward someone, if we have feelings that we are clinging to that are ungodly and unrighteous that don't honor Christ, that it becomes a barrier between God and us. Notice what Proverbs 15:29 says, "The LORD is far from the wicked but he hears the prayer of the righteous."

In Psalm 66:18 David said, "If I had cherished sin in my heart, the Lord would not have listened." Now David knew what it was to pray but David also knew what it was to confess the sin of adultery and the sin of murder to God. And even those were great sins God forgave him his sin. And God opened the window of heaven and listened to his prayer and answered his prayer.

Listen to what Isaiah said about the nation of Israel. He said, "surely the arm of the Lord is not too short to save nor his ear too dull to hear, but your inequities have separated you from your God and your sins have hidden His face from you so that He will not hear." (Isaiah 59:1)

So today the first thing we need to do to make sure that there is integrity in our prayer is to make sure that our sins have been confessed. And when we have done so, we can expect a mighty move of God so much so that he will remove the obstacles in our lives.

But we may experience that the obstacles are still there even though we have confessed all known sins in our lives. Which brings us to the next point. To overcome obstacles,

2. I must pray in earnest.

Verse 17 says, “Elijah was a human being, even as we are. He prayed earnestly that it would not rain, and it did not rain on the land for three and a half years.”

Let me give you a little background. At this point in Israel’s history, Ahab became king. Ahab married Jezebel, a gentile worshipper of Baal, the false God of the Canaanites and he himself became a worshipper of Baal and even built a temple for this false god. He encouraged this practice in Israel and many were misled. He was so evil that the Bible says “Ahab son of Omri did more evil in the eyes of the Lord than any of those before him.” (1 Kings 16:30) Elijah was so angry and distraught about this that he prayed for a drought so that Ahab and the Israelites would know that God has withdrawn his blessings from Israel. Thus, it did not rain in Israel for three and a half years.

Now, note the word earnestly. Other versions of the Bible say, “intensely” (AMP), “fervently” (ESV), “hard” (MSG). You get the idea, right? Praying earnestly then means to be serious about your prayer. Putting your whole heart and soul into it. It’s not just the nursery-rhyme kind of prayer like “I lay me down to sleep, I pray the Lord my soul to keep”.

There was this father who noticed that Mary, his 6-year old daughter, prays too hastily during dinner. So, he said to her, “Mary, that’s not how you pray.

When you pray, pray with sincerity, with all your heart.” The next day, during dinner, Mary prayed again. She said, “Dear God, please bless our food. Please really bless our food.”

A prayer that is said in earnest then means not just a little light prayer, not just a hastily said and easily forgotten prayer, but a prayer that is intense. It is praying as if your life depended on it.

This kind of prayer is effective and powerful as the preceding verse says. So, it talks about the explosive power of prayer. It is powerful because it is prayed from the heart, it is prayer that is prayed from a great concern and a great burden. It is the picture of an athlete as he is stretching toward the tape. He is almost there and he is giving it everything he's got and putting everything he has in to it. That is the kind of prayer that is powerful and effective.

I'm sure we have all prayed this kind of prayer before. Ever prayed for a truly sick loved one or even a dying one? Ever prayed for a new job when you were suddenly laid off and there were so many bills to pay? Ever prayed that your spouse would forgive you because you did not prepare enough for your anniversary? That is the kind of prayer I'm talking about.

And that happened to me. It was a few years ago. It was our anniversary. I treated Anabel for dinner, then gave her my gift. After dinner, we got inside the car, and she was quiet. So, I asked, “What's the problem?” “Where are we going?” she asked. I said, “Home.” And that's when the trouble started. She expected us to check in a hotel. To make a long story short, while she was talking and talking and making me feel guilty and all, I was hurriedly looking for a hotel nearby on my phone and silently praying earnestly, “Oh Lord, please help me get out of this predicament. Please remove this obstacle.” I'm not talking about my wife, OK? I'm talking about the situation which at the time was an obstacle in our relationship. It was about 11pm and I was getting desperate.

After a few minutes though, I got something. It was the Hilton Garden Inn in Ashburn. I heaved a sigh of relief. When we reached the place and we got inside the room, I knew that God really loved me. Because Anabel was so happy about the room. It was actually a suite and so neat and clean and fresh and sweet-smelling. And very cheap like me. The Lord saved me that night.

So, you see, if only we would treat every concern we have, even the little ones, with the same kind of concern we have for big ones, it would make a big difference in our prayer lives. And I think we would see a lot of obstacles being removed before us.

Now, praying earnestly doesn't mean praying a long drawn-out prayer. You can pray a long prayer, but if there's no intensity or sincerity, it is not effective and powerful. Praying earnestly is neither shouting or crying although intensity does affect our emotions. So, if you shout or cry that's all right. My point is, praying earnestly comes from the heart.

In the end, this is between you and God. Only God knows what's in your heart. What's important to remember is that, the more you get close to God, the more intense your prayers will be. Why? Because as you get to know God better, the more you trust him and believe that he will do what he says he will do.

So, it all boils down to having faith in God. The Bible says, "And without faith it is impossible to please God, because anyone who comes to him must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who earnestly seek him." (Hebrews 11:6). That's what made Elijah's prayer powerful and effective. He had such faith in God that God answered his earnest prayer to stop the rain for three years. In fact, the beginning of this verse says that Elijah was a human being, even as we are. You see, we might think that powerful prayers come only from powerful people. People who have been anointed, people who have a special calling in their lives.

And James is saying, “No, no, no. Come to God as you are. Elijah is just as ordinary as you are. Just have faith that God will answer.”

To remove obstacles through prayer, first live a righteous life. Second, pray earnestly, and third.

3. I must pray to glorify God.

All prayers must point to the glory of God. All prayers must be God-seeking, not self-seeking. All prayers must be to honor God and not to honor oneself. In short, prayers to promote yourself will not get answered.

Psalms 115:1 says, “Not to us, Lord, not to us but to your name be the glory.” You see, God is a jealous God. In fact, the Bible says in Isaiah 42:8, “I am the LORD; that is my name! I will not yield my glory to another.” God wants to be glorified in all creation. The Bible contains many verses about this fact. But let me just give a couple.

For example, Isaiah 43:6-7 says that God created us for his glory, “Bring my sons from afar and my daughters from the end of the earth, every one who is called by my name, whom I created for my glory.” In Romans 9:17, it says God raised Pharaoh for his glory. “For the Scripture says to Pharaoh, “For this very purpose I have raised you up, that I might show my power in you, and that my name may be proclaimed in all the earth.”

Does it make us wonder then if Jesus says he answers our prayers for the glory of his father? “Whatever you ask in my name, this I will do, that the Father may be glorified in the Son.” (John 14:13)

If that is the case, then anything we pray for in which we want the glory for ourselves flies in the face of what God wants and we may even find ourselves in opposition to him. Sometimes this can be subtle. Like we pray for a certain kind of car, maybe a flashy one, so that people will see how wealthy we are.

Or we pray that our children would get admitted to a prestigious school so that we get the accolades of people. Now, don't get me wrong. There's nothing wrong with praying for your comfort and the best for your children. What is wrong is when we ask with wrong motives. James says that's the formula for not receiving an answer to prayer. "And even when you ask, you don't get it because your motives are all wrong—you want only what will give you pleasure." (James 4:3 NLT)

Years ago, I heard about a young lawyer who had just opened his office and was ready to go to work. Of course, he didn't have any clients. The day went on and nobody came by. Then he heard the door open and footsteps coming down the hall. So he thought, "I have to look successful or whoever that is, is not going to be very impressed with me and hire me."

So he picked up the telephone and began to have a conversation. He said, "Oh yes, I could handle that case. I have handled many important cases. I have represented AT&T, IBM, Phillips, and all these other big companies. Yes, I can get to you next week. He hung up the phone and this man was sitting there in the chair listening to him. And he said, "Sir what can I do for you?" The man said, "I am from the telephone company and I have come to hook up your telephone!"

Folks, that kind of business doesn't impress God. Here is a man Elijah, he is not praying to impress men, he is praying to impress God.

I want you now to turn with me to 1 Kings 18:16. If you're using the Bible that we distribute here, you'll find it on page I want you to follow along as I read this passage. This is one of the most remarkable passages here in the Bible. We see here clearly the battle between good and evil. But that's not what I want to impress on you.

(Read 1 King 18:16. In verse 36, say, "This is the verse I want to impress on you.")

Notice the earnest prayer of Elijah. And his prayer to glorify God. Folks, that's the kind of prayer that God answers. That's the kind of prayer that God will surely respond to. That's the kind of prayer that attracts the Almighty God of the universe.

When Hannah couldn't have a child, notice how her prayer was. "O Lord of Heaven's Armies, if you will look upon my sorrow and answer my prayer and give me a son, then I will give him back to you. He will be yours for his entire lifetime, and as a sign that he has been dedicated to the Lord, his hair will never be cut." (1 Samuel 1:11 NLT) In essence, she wants a son because she wants to glorify God through her son. This son is Samuel who became God's prophet.

Another example is Nehemiah who prayed to God after he was given the task of rebuilding the temple in God in Jerusalem. He knew it would be hard to convince King Cyrus, their new conqueror. But he had faith and he prayed earnestly. Part of his prayer goes like this, "Lord, the God of heaven, the great and awesome God, who keeps his covenant of love with those who love him and keep his commandments, ...Lord, let your ear be attentive to the prayer of this your servant and to the prayer of your servants who delight in revering your name. Give your servant success today by granting him favor in the presence of this man." (Nehemiah 1:5-11).

Folks, the take-away is that when we pray, let us always keep in mind how the answer to prayer will glorify God. If we're praying for a new house, let us think of how it can be used by God for his glory. Maybe open your house for a Bible study? Or displaying Bible verses around the house or invite your pastor for dinner? If we're praying for a new job, let us think of how we can glorify God in the new job. Maybe try to witness to your officemates? But during breaktime, ok? Or by simply inviting them to church.

If you're praying for a relationship, and this is only for singles, think of a way to honor God in that relationship. Maybe being careful on dates. You know what I mean.

Folks, to be a champion you need training. And training starts with prayer. With prayer, you overcome obstacles. But first, make sure you're living a righteous life – confessing any hidden sins. Second, pray earnestly – being fervent and having faith that God answers prayers. And third, pray to glorify God – honoring him as you pray.

Finally, let me tell you that God wants to give the desires of your heart. God is a loving father who wants the best for his children. He just wants you to communicate more with him and taste him because he is good. Psalm 34:8 says, “Taste and see that the LORD is good; blessed is the one who takes refuge in him.”

Are you burdened this morning? Are you facing obstacles? Do you have problems that seem to be insurmountable? Friend, God is in control and he wants to come through for you. Why don't you turn your worries, problems, heartaches to God this morning? And if you haven't done it yet, why don't you turn over your life to Jesus?