

EFFECTIVE PRAYER: FOR THE STATE

James 5:16b-18

"The urgent request of a righteous person is very powerful in its effect. ¹⁷ Elijah was a man with a nature like ours; yet he prayed earnestly that it would not rain, and for three years and six months it did not rain on the land. ¹⁸ Then he prayed again, and the sky gave rain and the land produced its fruit."

INTRODUCTION

A small American town had historically been "dry" (no alcoholic beverages were sold). Then a local businessman decided to build a tavern. A group of Christians from a local church were concerned and planned an all-night prayer meeting to ask God to intervene. Soon after the tavern was built, lightning struck it and it burned to the ground. The tavern owner sued the church claiming the congregation's prayers were responsible for this "act of God." The church hired a lawyer to argue in court they could not be held responsible for this "freak event." After his initial review of the case, the presiding judge stated, "No matter how this case comes out, one thing is clear: the tavern owner believes in prayer and the Christians do not."

When was the last time we took a bold stand for **Jesus** against the forces of ungodliness that put our job, reputation, or finances at risk? Watchman Nee (1903-72) is often called "the Billy Graham of China." His book, *Sit, Walk, Stand*, describes a preaching mission to an island in the South China Sea. Seven were in the ministry group, including a 16-year-old new convert, Brother Wu. This fairly large island contained about 6,000 homes. Nee's contact there, an old schoolmate who was now headmaster of the village school, refused to house them when he learned they'd come to preach the Gospel. They finally found lodging with a Chinese herbalist, who became their first convert. Their preaching proved quite fruitless, however. Nee discovered this was due to the islanders' devotion to an idol called Ta-wang. They were convinced of his power because each year the day of his parade and festival was chosen by divination of his priests. Ta-wang always gave them nearly perfect weather. "When is the procession this year?" Brother Wu asked a group gathered to hear them preach. "It is fixed for January 11th at 8 in the morning," they replied. "Then," said the new convert, "I promise you that it will certainly rain on the 11th." The crowd responded, "That is enough! We don't want to hear any more preaching. If there is rain on the 11th, then your God is God!"

Watchman Nee, who'd been elsewhere when this confrontation took place, knew this young man's zeal had placed their missions' team in a precarious position. They could have been beaten or driven from this island, or at least publicly disgraced, if Ta-Wang's festival proceeded as usual. Nee called them to earnest prayer. The morning of the 11th dawned in a cloudless sky. But sprinkles began to fall as they gave thanks for breakfast, followed by a heavy rain. Ta-wang's priests were so upset they placed their idol in a sedan chair and carried it outdoors in hopes this would stop the rain. The rain intensified. The carriers soon stumbled and fell, dropping their idol and fracturing its jaw and left arm. Some young people turned to Christ when they witnessed this rain in answer to prayers of His followers. But village elders said they had merely chosen the wrong day. New divination revealed the proper time of the procession should have been the evening of the 14th. Nee and his friends again went to prayer, asking for rain on the 14th and for clear days for preaching till then. That afternoon the sky cleared. In the good days that followed thirty natives became followers of **Jesus**! The morning of the 14th broke as another perfect day. Nee's team held several successful meetings during the day. As the evening approached, they met again before the appointed hour of Ta-wang's procession. They quietly brought the matter to the Lord's remembrance. His answer came with torrential rain and floods, as before. This broke Ta-wang's power over the islanders. Satan was defeated. Many islanders embraced **Jesus** as Lord and Savior. God's servants who witnessed His power in this dramatic fashion were strengthened in their bold service to Christ from that time onward!

We are continuing our tour of the last 8 verses of the blunt and practical letter written by James, our Lord's half-brother and a key leader in the earliest years of the Christian Church. James refers 7 times to

prayer in **vss. 13-20** to underscore prayer's effectiveness, including prayer for the *suffering*, prayer for the *sick*, prayer for the *state* (our nation), and prayer for those who *stray* from the Lord's fold. Prayer's vital role in a believer's life matches 7 references in **James 5:7-12** to the patience, waiting, and steadfastness in the face of difficult circumstances that is worthy of the Christ to whom we have entrusted our everlasting lives. **Vss. 10-11** states, "Brothers, take the prophets who spoke in the Lord's name as an example of suffering and patience."¹¹ See, we count as blessed those who have endured. You have heard of Job's endurance and have seen the outcome from the Lord. The Lord is very compassionate and merciful." Today we want to look at two points: Why We Pray for the State and How to Pray for the State.

I. WHY WE PRAY FOR THE STATE

Paul's instructions in **I Timothy 2:1-6** (NCV) reveal we are derelict in our Christian duties if we do not pray for our civil and community leaders: "First, I tell you to pray for all people, asking God for what they need and being thankful to Him."² Pray for rulers and for all who have authority so that we can have quiet and peaceful lives full of worship and respect for God.³ This is good, and it pleases God our Savior,⁴ who wants all people to be saved and to know the truth.⁵ There is one God and one mediator so that human beings can reach God. That way is through Christ Jesus, who is himself human.⁶ He gave himself as a payment to free all people." Thus, a "first" (top) priority of all Christ's followers is to pray for our elected and appointed leaders, for anyone who can impact the extent to which Christian principles are supported or opposed in our society, that we might have the most freedom to raise our children and to reach people to be followers of **Jesus**. This does not mean it is government's role to limit civil rights to people of Christian beliefs. It does mean it is government's role to protect the full civil rights of people of Christian beliefs.

In the 1940s, Federal courts ignored that the American Revolution has no basis in atheism and began an assault upon Biblical values that instilled the virtues inspiring America's political liberties. The Declaration of Independence is listed first in the Congressionally authorized *Public Statutes at Large of the United States of America*, 1 Stat. 1-3 (1845). It insists we fought our Revolution to defend moral laws and God-given rights violated by Great Britain: "We hold these truths to be self-evident [God's natural laws that are the basis of all truth], that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights, that among these are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. That to secure these rights, governments are instituted among men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed. That whenever any form of government becomes destructive to these ends, it is the right of the people to alter or to abolish it." In 1952, the U. S. Supreme Court still recognized our society and its political system are rooted in firm belief in God, so public authorities should encourage such belief: "We are a religious people whose institutions presuppose a Supreme Being. . . . When the state encourages religious instruction or cooperates with religious authorities by adjusting the schedule of public events to sectarian needs, it follows the best of our traditions. For it then respects the religious nature of our people and accommodates the public service to their spiritual needs. To hold that it may not would be to find in the Constitution a requirement that the government show a callous indifference to religious groups. That would be preferring those who believe in no religion over those who do believe" (*Zorach v. Clauson*, 343 U. S., at 313-14).

As Christians, we are to pray for our country's leaders to foster conditions that allow us to promote the Gospel of salvation through **Jesus Christ** alone without interference of public authorities and to hold our leaders accountable to God when they foster conditions that undermine the moral principles of our Creator.

II. HOW TO PRAY FOR THE STATE

James provides his own illustration of Effective Prayer for the State: Elijah. About 870 years before **Jesus'** birth, Ahab became King of Israel's northern Kingdom. Ahab credited false gods with Israel's prosperity, exploited his political office to enrich himself, used his authority as Israel's ruler to promote moral and religious practices God abhors, made those faithful to the LORD God second-class citizens, and unjustly sought to ruin all who dared to oppose him. **I Kings 16:30 & 33** summarizes his reign by stating,

"Ahab . . . did what was evil in the LORD's sight more than all who were before him. ³³Ahab did more to provoke the LORD God of Israel than all the kings of Israel who were before him."

How are we to respond as the Lord's faithful when our leaders or nation abandon God? By praying for God to restrain and judge our leaders and nation and to publicly proclaim our opposition to their ungodly practices [reread text]. Elijah is first mentioned in **I Kings 17:1** (NASB): "Now Elijah the Tishbite, who was of the settlers of Gilead, said to Ahab, 'As the LORD, the God of Israel lives, before whom I stand, surely there shall be neither dew nor rain these years, except by my word.'" The resulting drought of God's judgment devastated Israel's crops and livestock until a massive revival and a return to worship of the true God ignited by Elijah resulted in a return of the blessings of God's rains, as **I Kings 18** records. Until then, Elijah voluntarily suffered living in hiding under God's protection as a social outcast, while Ahab sought to hunt him down as "the troubler of Israel," blaming him for the nation's woes. When Elijah confronted Ahab again after three-and-a-half years, he declared to Ahab's face, "I have not troubled Israel, but you and your father's house *have*, because you have forsaken the commandments of the LORD" (**I Kings 18:17-18**).

James makes an important point about Elijah: Miraculous answers to prayer or confronting ungodliness in our nation is a job for everyday believers, not just for super-saints. "Elijah was a man with a nature like ours." He could rise to great moments of faith and commitment, but the Bible honestly records he could also plunge into depths of despair (**I Kings 18:36-38; 19:4**). He could be uncommonly brave but he could also flee for his life at a whiff of danger (**I Kings 18:17-19; 19:3**). A man unknowingly gave his taxi driver a whiff of danger. Twenty minutes into his ride, he reached from the back seat and tapped the driver on the shoulder to ask him a question. The driver jolted, screamed "Ahhh!" and swerved across three lanes of traffic before coming to an abrupt halt against the opposite curb. "What was that all about?" demanded the rider. "I'm sorry," said the taxi driver, wiping his brow. "This is my first day on this job. I've been driving a hearse for the last fifty years! I'm not used to being tapped by my riders." Elijah was an ordinary person like us; genuinely committed to follow God's will despite his personal failings, which defines a "righteous person." "In many ways, the prayer of a righteous person is strong, when it is exercised" may be the best translation of the Greek text of **James 5:16b**. "Strong" is from a Greek word meaning "potent" or "power waiting to be released." James sought to impress upon us that the Lord **Jesus** has placed virtually limitless power at our disposal through prayer for our nation that we might foolishly ignore as an untapped resource, like farmers living in poverty with vast oil reserves beneath seemingly barren fields.

Our nation has repeatedly been on the brink of societal collapse and moral ruin, as we are today. When God's people became serious enough to gather and pray determinedly, desperately, and persistently for revival, the Holy Spirit has descended powerfully, swept millions into Christ's kingdom in a matter of months, and unleashed spiritual energy sufficient to reform our social ills. Evan Roberts confronted the faithful of Wales with four points in late 1904, as conditions of a national repentance. This helped to spark the Welsh Revival, with 100,000 fresh converts committing themselves to follow Christ within six months and more than 2,000,000 nominal church members embracing **Jesus** as Lord. These same conditions, when embraced by the faithful of the United States, led to similar astounding results in our nation in 1905:

(1) You must put away any unconfessed sin, (2) You must put away any doubtful habit, (3) You must obey the Spirit promptly, and (4) You must confess Christ publicly.

CONCLUSION

What will it take to shake us out of our comfort zones so that we commit ourselves to become God's prayer warriors and instruments of national repentance and revival? The following prayer (translated into English) was made by an Ethiopian Christian in the early 1950s: "Almighty God, from the depth of my heart I plead with Thee to send us trouble. When our King was exiled [April 9, 1936, when Ethiopia fell to an Italian invasion] we were in much trouble with the foreign rulers. We had to meet in secret and were in constant danger of our lives. That was the time when we worked in harmony with our fellow Christians.

"Many a night after I had locked my door and gone to bed, tired from a day's long journey of preaching and teaching, there came a persistent knocking. Lord, how I wanted to sleep, and I thought that surely they wouldn't want to be baptized at night and be hunted and chased and put in prison and beaten, but they said they had seen the Christian's joy and they too wanted that religion. Every night there were more and more.

"We read the Word and talked about it and prayed through the nights. We shared our joy in the Lord. We worked side-by-side with only one desire, to preach and teach the Gospel. Then, Lord, our King came back. The foreign rulers were forced to leave our Country [in 1941].

"We have peace in our land. We baptize in the daytime. We are not beaten. We meet and pray, yes, but we are beginning to grow careless in our zeal for Thee. Jealousies creep in and spoil the harmony. Petty troubles are taken up in our large meetings. We are selfish in our ambitions. Dear Lord, send us more trouble, I pray Thee, that we may forget ourselves and be so dependent on Thee that we have no time to become selfish and jealous of our fellow-Christians. For Jesus' sake. Amen."