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Sermon

Travailing Prayer

1 Kings 18:41-45; Romans 8:22-28; John 11:32-45

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I entitled the first of this series on Elijah, *The Prayer of Faith*. Elijah prayed and there was no rain for three and a half years. We are not told how he prayed. When it came to the provision of food for the widow he stated what would happen and it did – we are not told how he may have prayed then. Whatever form his prayer took, it certainly required faith!

Last week, we heard the wonderful account of the contest with the prophets of Baal. Their god could not ignite the sacrifice but Elijah's prayer was answered with fire from heaven which consumed the bull, the wood, the stones and the water! Remember this was a proof of which god the Israelites should worship. The fertility god, Baal, supposedly lord of storm, rain, lightning, and giver of life, had not been able to provide rain or crops for three years. He had not been able to send fire. Yahweh had control of the rain and the fire. With that point amply made, with the people having rejected the prophets of Baal, it is time for the drought to be lifted.

I want to talk today about labouring in prayer. If we look for a moment at the passage from Romans, we find Paul referring directly to hard work in prayer.

He starts by describing the struggles and suffering of the created order as birth pangs – the sufferings to be endured before new life comes forth. But he develops this idea further into intercession. In the same way the Spirit of God helps us in our weakness. What weakness? We don't know what we ought to pray for. How often have you felt that? There are so many needs which seem too complicated, intractable, just confusing and we don't know what to ask for. Well Paul says the Spirit helps us.

There is a significant word in this passage we need to unpack - 'help.' Paul used a complicated Greek word, (*syn-anti-lambanomai*) strictly 'grasp hold of with someone.' That is what the Holy Spirit does when we struggle in our weakness trying to pray. He takes hold of the issue alongside us. Not instead of us, but alongside us. He helps us and intercedes for us with groans which cannot be expressed.

The Spirit helps us in the same way - that is like the labour pains of bringing forth some new life or work. This intercession of the Spirit is hard work straining towards a goal. The work and pain of childbirth is called travail.

We too are those who groan and suffer together. Paul explains that the Spirit of God intercedes for us with groans and sighs that are so strong and deep that words cannot express them. Yet there is

perfect communication between God the Father and the Spirit, so the Father knows what is in our hearts, what is in the mind of the Spirit. And the Spirit intercedes for us according to the Father's will.

Here and in Galatians when he writes to them of his prayer for them, Paul uses the idea of travelling in prayer. What does it look like?

In 1989, my mother had been a Christian for 16 years and I for 13. For that time my father had not had a relationship with the Lord. He had started going regularly to church but he had no desire to read the Bible or pray with others. He was embarrassed if anyone talked about spiritual matters. We had prayed for him but there was no change.

That year, Helen and I went on a trip to Europe. As our parents saw us off at the airport, my father said that if anything happened to any of them, we should not break our trip but carry on and enjoy it.

Our first flight was to Singapore. As we settled down to sleep, we prayed for our parents. Thinking of my father's comment, I prayed for their physical wellbeing and then my prayer focussed in on him. It moved from his physical health to his spiritual well-being and then grew deeper and deeper and stronger until I was weeping as I pleaded for his salvation. I had never prayed like that before. I had not intended to pray like that either! In the midst of my prayer, I heard a clear thought, "I have granted your request." At that, my tears became tears of joy. Nine months later, my father asked Jesus to be his Saviour and was wonderfully saved and joyful in knowing the Lord - before dying a fortnight later.

I didn't recognise what it was until I was reading Dutch Sheets' book on Intercessory Prayer where he describes travelling prayer. I realised that prayer so deep and all-consuming, so passionate was this travelling prayer.

Let's turn back to Elijah. God had already said to Elijah that he would send rain, we heard it last week in verse 1: "Go and present yourself to Ahab, and I will send rain on the land."

When we first encountered him, Elijah had already said that rain would not come except by his word (17:1): "As the LORD, the God of Israel, lives, whom I serve, there will be neither dew nor rain in the next few years except at my word."

Now it is time for God's stated intention be called into being by Elijah. We might think he did not need to pray. God had already said the rain would come. As I said a fortnight ago, God honours us by appointing us as his co-workers. He normally seems to require us to ask him to do things in this realm.

The rain is going to come. God has said it. Elijah hears heavy rain in the spirit and reports it to the king. While the king goes off to eat and drink, Elijah adopts a posture of prayer. James says "Elijah prayed fervently."¹

I said, he adopted a posture of prayer but what was it? He was bowed down towards the ground with his head between his knees. Why are we told this detail? It must be important.

His position is the traditional, squatting position of a woman in labour. We are being told that Elijah was travelling – labouring to bring forth.

He sends his servant to look towards the sea, but there is just blue sky. Still Elijah prays, labouring in the spirit. Again he sends the servant, again comes the report of no change. On and on, he travails sending the servant to look again and again.

Isn't childbirth like that? Apart from the occasional case of a quick and easy delivery, for most there is hard work, pain and apparently no progress for a long time. Time and again they check for progress and still nothing seems to be happening.

Seven more times Elijah sends his servant to look until, at last, the report comes back that a small cloud has formed over the sea. This is what Elijah had been waiting for! Immediately, he sends the servant to warn the King to travel before the road becomes impassable.

¹ James 5:17

The small cloud grows; the sky darkens; winds gust and then blow; the first drops of rain - and then the downpour!

And James wrote,

“Elijah was a man just like us. He prayed earnestly that it would not rain, and it did not rain on the land for three and a half years. Again he prayed, and the heavens gave rain, and the earth produced its crops.”²

Not all prayer is the same. Different circumstances call for different approaches. Often we will not know how we should pray, but – what did we hear before? – the Spirit helps us in our weakness. The Spirit grasps hold of the problem with us and intercedes for us. We can expect the Spirit of God to help us in our praying – to tell us how to pray if we will only listen to him.

Dutch Sheets suggests that when Jesus raised Lazarus he prayed the prayer of travail. When Jesus saw Mary and the people with her weeping, we read, “he was deeply moved in spirit and troubled.”

We have probably all thought of this as compassion. But I wonder if that is it. Remember, he had been told his friend was seriously ill and he was asked to come but he had deliberately waited three days before coming. When he did start to travel toward Bethany he told his disciples that Lazarus was already dead. He makes it clear from his prayer that Father God has told him what is happening and what he is to.

His reaction when he sees them lamenting is translated as “deeply moved in spirit.” The Greek word is *embrimaomai* which means “warn sternly, rebuke harshly, groan, be deeply troubled.” It was used in secular literature used of horses snorting – that perhaps gives a feel for it. The word is used five times in the New Testament, in the other places it is translated with the sense of warn or rebuke. Here because of the setting, they chose “deeply troubled.” However, the King James version rendered this: “he groaned in spirit.”

The second reaction is “he was troubled.” Here the Greek word (*tarasso*) means to shake or stir oneself. It is an active verb and it is followed by the pronoun himself which has got lost from our translation. It appears that a more accurate translation might be: he stirred himself.

His third reaction was to weep; their weeping was (*klaio*) loud lamenting. But when he weeps, it is a different Greek word (*dakruo*) which means to shed tears.

What we are seeing is the same work of the Holy Spirit being enacted by Jesus. Remember what Paul said, “The Spirit helps us in our weakness. We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groans that words cannot express.”

Jesus knows it is the Father purpose to raise Lazarus from the dead. He hears the unbelief in the hopeless lament of the family and friends. He knows their weakness and he knows the mind of God. He takes of the problem alongside them. He groans deeply. He stirs himself into this intercession. He weeps tears not, I suggest, of sympathy but of passion as he labours for the spiritual breakthrough of restoring Lazarus to life.

For me, this makes far more sense of the account than an expression of compassion. I don't doubt Jesus does have compassion for us, but I think John had more significant things in mind when he described what he had seen.

I suggest this event is an example of fervent, passionate, traving prayer as Jesus brings forth creating life again.

Once the breakthrough had been achieved, he simply moved to have the tomb opened. He thanked the Father for hearing him and commanded Lazarus to come out.

There are questions.

- Is it about changing God's mind? Not in these two examples from the Bible. God told Elijah what he was going to do when he sent him to speak to the King. Jesus made it clear that he

² James 5:17-18

was following the Father's plan all through the Lazarus account let alone throughout his ministry.

- Why is it needed? I don't know for sure. I could guess that there may be a spiritual warfare or battling aspect. It occurs to me that if the Holy Spirit himself groans in intercession, there must be levels of work or effort that we know little about.
- Is this form of prayer just something that God does in you which was my experience when praying for my father or can we initiate it? My experience so far, suggests it is God-initiated but John says that Jesus stirred himself, so maybe that points to an ability to choose to move into travailing prayer.

There, of course, other types of prayer. A story will illustrate two of them. That flight to Singapore was part of a world trip. When we booked it, the travel agent had difficulty getting us a seat on the last leg of the journey home from Singapore to Auckland. She said we shouldn't worry we had about 4 months to go before and seats were bound to come available in that time. We waited for some weeks, and then one day, I got impatient and prayed that my ticket should be release right now. As I spoke the telephone rang and the travel agent announced that my seat had come available. I was startled to say the least. However, she continued it was only mine and not Helen's. She reassured me that a second seat was bound to come free. Weeks went by until we were about to leave and still it had not come. We were advised to check with the airline at each stage of the journey – but it would come. And so we kept checking and it did not resolve. Finally, we got to the morning of the day were leaving Europe for Singapore with no seat on the continuing flight out of Singapore for another 2 months. Then the airline rang and told Helen her seat was available and would she like a wheelchair! That was a close run thing.

However, there are two types of prayer there. There is commanding prayer with immediate results and there is the prayer of perseverance which took about four months to bring fruit.

Which type of prayer is right for a given situation is something we need the guidance of the Holy Spirit to determine. But the real question is are we prepared to pray as he leads? Will you do the work of intercession whether it is commanding, persevering or travailing?