

word in the phrase, is actually the first word in the phrase when read in the Greek: Πολὺ ἰσχύει δέησις δικαίου ἐνεργουμένη. This would be woodenly translated as: “Much, *the* power of petition of *the* righteous person is accomplishing.” That the word Πολὺ (*polu*), “Much,” is placed first in the clause gives it special emphasis. James’ point is clear: we are constantly to be reminded that nothing is impossible for God. What may seem impossible, out of the question, beyond possibility in our own finite minds, is not impossible for God. Remember the words of our Lord and Savior:

And looking at them Yeshua said to them, “With people this is impossible, but with God all things are possible.” (Matt 19:26)

And if we are praying as we are led by the Spirit, then we will always be praying that God would perform His will in any given situation. It is always right to unburden our hearts before the Lord in prayer, and to pray for that which is needed and for that which we desire to accomplish. But ultimately, in all of our prayers, we must have the perspective of Yeshua as He faced the cross and prayed, for this is a model for us to follow in all our prayers:

Father, if You are willing, remove this cup from Me; yet not My will, but Yours be done” (Lk 22:42)

Let us therefore be encouraged by this teaching of James, and with strengthened faith in the power of God to do more than we could ask or think, to be regularly in prayer, that our lives and the lives of those we are privileged to touch, would give Him the glory and honor He deserves, and that we might be lights to others, pointing them to Yeshua.

17–18 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 earth for three years and six months. Then he prayed again, and the sky poured rain and the earth produced its fruit.

To emphasize the central place that prayer holds in the life of all who are believers in Yeshua, James points to Elijah as a prime example of a person of faith who lived before the coming of Yeshua. Along with Abraham, Issac, and Rahab, Elijah is the fourth biblical character from the Tanach to be used by James to illustrate a life of faith in God. Indeed,

...no biblical figure so exercised the religious thinking of post-Biblical Judaism as did that of the prophet Elijah.¹

Indeed, the Scriptures themselves indicate the very high regard that post-exilic Judaisms held for Elijah, including biblical prophets like Malachi.

Behold, I am going to send you Elijah the prophet before the coming of the great and terrible day of the LORD. He will restore the hearts of the fathers to their children and the hearts of the children to their fathers, so that I will not come and smite the land with a curse. (Mal 4:5–6)

We see Elijah mentioned in all four of the Gospels.² Likewise, in the apocryphal and later rabbinic literature, Elijah is elevated as a hero of the faith and spoken of as a prophet with great power.³

As a result, many in James' day, as well as in our own, might consider Elijah to be someone who is far above the average believer, meaning that he was endowed with spiritual power and abilities that very few others would have. But this is precisely why James uses Elijah as an impetus for all to pray.

Elijah was a man with a nature like ours... – The Greek translated by the NASB as “man” is *ἄνθρωπος* (*anthropos*), which is not gender specific but means “person” or “human being,” thus encompassing both male and female. He stresses that Elijah had “a nature like ours,” where the Greek word translated “nature” is *ὁμοιοπαθῆς* (*homioopathēs*), making this very clear. Elijah was, in his essential being, one of us—human and not “super-human.” The same word is used in Acts 14 when at the command of Paul and Barnabas, the lame man was healed, leaped up and began to walk. The people proclaimed that Paul and Barnabas were “gods” and began calling Barnabas “Zeus” and Paul “Hermes” and prepared to offer sacrifices to them! But Paul and Barnabas tore their garments and cried out:

Men, why are you doing these things? We are also men of the same nature (*homioopathēs*) as you, and preach the gospel to you that you should turn from these vain things to a living God, WHO MADE THE HEAVEN AND THE EARTH AND THE SEA AND ALL THAT IS IN THEM. (Acts 14:15).

1 TDNT, “Ἡλ(ε)ίας,” 2:928.

2 Matt, 9x; Mk, 9x; Lk, 8x; Jn, 2x.

3 Cf. Sir 48:1–11; 2 Esd 7:109; m. Taan. 2:4; b. Sanh. 113a

...and he prayed earnestly that it would not rain – The Greek here translated “prayed earnestly” (προσευχῆ προσήύξατο, *proseuxē prosēuksato*) is literally “he prayed prayer” and mimics the Hebrew or Aramaic construction of an infinitive followed by a cognate verb, e.g., “praying he prayed” which is one way that the Hebrew or Aramaic indicates emphasis. Such emphasis might indicate repeated prayer as well.

But regardless of how we understand “prayed earnestly,” the emphasis James intends us to grasp is therefore clear: even as the prayer of Elijah accomplished great things in accordance with God’s will and purposes, so as we bring our praise and requests to God in prayer, we affirm that the same divine power that stopped the rain and brought it back again at Elijah’s request, will bring about God’s will in our lives and circumstances.

But in fact, the historical record given to us in 1Ki 18:42 does not specifically state that Elijah prayed that the rain would stop and a drought would come, but it uses language that surely pictures prayer, for to “stand before the Lord” undoubtedly means to come into His presence in prayer.

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.” (1Ki 17:1)

And though different wording is used in 1Ki 18:42-44 when the drought ended and rain was restored, it once again is clear that the text pictures Elijah in prayer.

So Ahab went up to eat and drink. But Elijah went up to the top of Carmel; and he crouched down on the earth and put his face between his knees. He said to his servant, “Go up now, look toward the sea.” So he went up and looked and said, “There is nothing.” And he said, “Go back” seven times. It came about at the seventh time, that he said, “Behold, a cloud as small as a man’s hand is coming up from the sea.” (1Ki 18:42–44)

... and it did not rain on the earth for three years and six months. – Once again, in the historical telling of the events in the Tanach, the time period of three and a half years is not found. What is stated is that the drought ceased “in the third year” (1Ki 18:1). Yet we know, by the very words of Yeshua, that the drought lasted three and a half years.

But I say to you in truth, there were many widows in Israel in the days of Elijah, when the sky was shut up for three years and six months, when a great famine came over all the land...; (Lk 4:25)

Various explanations have been given as to how the “third year” of 1Ki 18:1 is to be understood.

- Some see “three years” simply as a round number, meaning “about three years.”
- Others see “three and a half years” as being a common reference to a time of national calamity, foreshadowing the time of trouble that is prophesied for the end-times. In Dan 7:25; 12:7; Rev 11:2–3, “time, times, and a half-of times” (עֵדֶיךָ וְעֵדֶיךָ וְעֵדֶיךָ וְחֵמֶשׁ יָמִים) may well indicate “one year, two years, and half-of-a-year.” This may likewise parallel the 42 months found in Rev 11:2–3, which would calculate to three and a half years.
- Others take the three and a half years to be three years plus the time it would take between the April and October rains, as well as noting that a famine is not removed immediately with the return of the rain.¹

The final view seems most likely to be the best explanation, but the second view also may shed light on the use of “three and a half years” as a known metaphor for a time of severe trouble.

Then he prayed again, and the sky poured rain and the earth produced its fruit. Regardless of how the exact timing of “three years and six months” is resolved, the primary point is this: a common man, Elijah, was used of the Lord to bring about His will by showing that the God he served was indeed the One Who controls all things, including astronomical events which are entirely impossible for mankind to control. And for James, this demonstrates the power of prayer as God’s people submit to Him and give themselves to further His will and purposes, waiting upon Him with enduring faith to see His ordained will established for His people.

The application of these words of James for each of us is clear. Elijah existed as a human being, called of God to serve Him, having the same human finiteness that we too experience. Unfortunately, the Roman Catholic Church, along with some of the various Christian denomi-

1 See Darrell Bock, *Luke in Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament* (Baker Books, 1994), 1:421.

nations that have historically divided away from the Catholic Church, have established the position of “Saints” to describe those who have been given special (and in some cases enduring) divine power to do what common mortals cannot do. It is very unfortunate that the word “saint” in our English language has been used this way, since in the Scriptures themselves it simply translates קְדוֹשִׁים (*qedōshim*) in Hebrew or ἅγιος (*hagios*) in Greek, both of which mean “holy ones,” and is used throughout the Scriptures to describe those who are children of God through faith in the Messiah, Yeshua.

Clearly James desires to do away with such thinking, teaching us that the same power by which Elijah made known the Divine will is the very power by which our prayers are used of God to show His divine work among His people. As Calvin notes:

Lest any one should object and say, that we are far distant from the dignity of Elias, he places him in our own rank, by saying, that he was a mortal man and subject to the same passions with ourselves. For we profit less by the examples of saints, because we imagine them to have been half gods or heroes, who had peculiar intercourse with God; so that because they were heard, we receive no confidence. In order to shake off this heathen and profane superstition, James reminds us that the saints ought to be considered as having the infirmity of the flesh; so that we may learn to ascribe what they obtained from the Lord, not to their merits, but to the efficacy of prayer.

It hence appears how childish the Papists are, who teach men to flee to the protection of saints, because they had been heard by the Lord. For thus they reason, “Because he obtained what he asked as long as he lived in the world, he will be now after death our best patron.” This sort of subtle refinement was altogether unknown to the Holy Spirit. For James on the contrary argues, that as their prayers availed so much, so we ought in like manner to pray at this day according to their example, and that we shall not do so in vain.¹

1 Calvin, *James*, pp. 360–361.

19 My brethren, if any among you strays from the truth and one turns him back,

My brethren – Even as James began his epistle by addressing the “brethren” (ἀδελφοί, *adelphoi*),¹ so he ends it with this same title, emphasizing the unity that exists in the body of Messiah and should therefore be lived out to a watching world. The fact that all true believers are adopted sons and daughters in the family of God ought to energize us to help one another as well as to treat each other as family. Clearly James considers those he addresses as his close brothers and sisters in the Lord, for he refers to them as “my brethren.”²

... *if any among you strays from the truth and one turns him back* – Here it is clear that James is speaking to the local assembly of believers, and it is therefore also clear that even a true believer in Yeshua may, for a time, “stray from the truth.” The phrase “stray from the truth” (πλανηθῆ ἀπὸ τῆς ἀληθείας) uses the verb *πλανᾶω* (*planaō*), which can have the sense of “to wander or go astray from a specific way, to mislead or deceive, or simply to proceed without a sense of direction.”³ Surely every believing community experiences this to one measure or another. But the point that James desires for us to grasp is that we ought to be ready to help such a person who strays, and of course, to do so with wisdom and love. For the Lord Himself may use us to rescue the wanderer and to bring him or her back to a genuine life of faith and obedience to the Lord.

Note that in the phrase “strays from the truth,” James uses the articular “the truth” (πλανηθῆ ἀπὸ τῆς ἀληθείας) which means that there is a divinely ordained standard for “truth” in this regard, and that standard is the word of God, the Bible. Indeed, in the opening verses of this epistle, James teaches us the very means by which we came to Yeshua as our Savior:

In the exercise of His will He brought us forth by the word of truth, so that we would be a kind of first fruits among His creatures. (James 1:18)

Thus, to wander from the truth is to neglect or transgress what the Scriptures teach. This can be the result of accepting false teaching, and

1 The address “brethren” (ἀδελφοί) is found 15 times in James: 1:2, 16, 19; 2:1, 5, 14; 3:1, 10, 12; 4:11; 5:7, 9-10, 12, 19.

2 That *adelphoi* includes both male and female is clear, since James address the community as a whole. Cf. *BDAG*, “ἀδελφός,” p. 18.

3 *BDAG*, “πλανᾶω,” p. 821.

in fact James uses the same verb, *planaō*, in 1:16 to describe being deceived.

Do not be deceived, my beloved brethren. Every good thing given and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shifting shadow. (James 1:16–17)

Such deception can be thrust upon people who unwittingly follow those who twist the Scriptures for their own designs and to gather a following for their own gain.

How is it, then, that one is able to turn back someone who has been deceived and wandered from the truth? It can only be by prayer and by clear and direct application of the Scriptures. In praying for the one who has strayed from the truth, their heart may be opened to listen and consider the truth when it is given to them. Further, through prayer the one who seeks to turn the wanderer back may be given wisdom in the proper approach and use of the Scriptures. And we may have full confidence that the word of God is alive and active, and that by the work of the Spirit, will bring repentance and a turning back to God in truth for the child of God who has been led astray.

For the word of God is living and active and sharper than any two-edged sword, and piercing as far as the division of soul and spirit, of both joints and marrow, and able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart. (Heb 4:12)

----- *Excursus – Sola Scriptura* -----

The Protestant Reformation of the 16th Century established a basic platform of core and essential doctrines of the faith, known as the “Five Solas,” originally stated in Latin. The Latin word “sola” means “only” or “solely,” indicating the unique and necessary aspect of each doctrinal statement. The “Five Solas” are:

1. *Sola Scriptura* – “Scripture Alone” – The Scriptures (the 66 books of the Bible) and the Scriptures alone are the final authority in all aspects of faith and practice (*halachah*). This means that the Scriptures are the true and final “measure” against which all teachings and doctrines are to be assessed. Only if they align with the Scriptures are they to be received.
2. *Sola Christus* – “Christ Alone” – This affirms the absolute and eternal uniqueness of Yeshua as the only Savior of sinners (Jn 14:6), the only

Mediator between God and man (1Tim 2:5), and the only human revelation of God, that is, the only person Who is God in the flesh. (Jn 1:1, 14)

3. *Sola Gratia* – “Grace Alone” – This means that we are saved from our sins and damnation by the unmerited grace of God alone without any of our works. God’s saving grace is unmerited, undeserved favor which He bestows upon us entirely of His own character and sovereign intention. (Eph 2:8–10)
4. *Sola Fide* – “Faith Alone” – This means that we are saved from the righteous judgment of God upon sinners, not by our own efforts or religious practices, but by coming to God with “empty hands” (admitting we could do nothing to merit His mercy) and receiving from Him the promise of salvation which then evidences itself in a changed life, becoming more and more conformed to the very likeness of Yeshua. (Rom 5:1; Tit 3:5)
5. *Soli Deo Gloria* – “The Glory of God Alone” – This means that God alone is the one Who is to receive all the glory, for it is entirely by His power, grace, and mercy that we are enabled to be forgiven of our sin and to have enduring and eternal fellowship with Him. For it is by His Messiah, Yeshua, that the debt of our sin has been paid, and it is by His Ruach HaKodesh (Holy Spirit) that we are enabled to grow in righteousness and to be set apart (sanctified) unto Him. (Is 43:6-7; Rom 11:36; 1Cor 1:31)

As I have noted, the current text of James that we are studying, emphasizes the fundamental truth of *sola scriptura*, for he teaches us that one who turns back a believer who as “strayed from the truth” does a very important thing. And what is it to “stray from the truth”? James makes this clear when he writes in 1:18 that God “brought us forth by the word of truth,” meaning the Scriptures. And Yeshua emphasizes this same truth in His prayer before going to the cross:

Sanctify them in the truth; Your word is truth. (Jn 17:17)

The compilation of the five *solas* by the Reformers was directed to the Roman Catholic Church and to the Pope who, according to Roman Catholic theology, had the same divine authority as did the Bible. They ascribed divine authority to their own writings, teachings upon which their own unique doctrines were founded, such as eternal salvation being only possible through the Church, and that one merits one’s salvation through participation in the Church and the “sacraments” the Church offers.

Another example is the Mormon Church (established in 1830) which

has the Book of Mormon as well as the office of “Prophet” who continued the authority of its founder, Joseph Smith. For the Mormon Church, the word of the Prophet is to be received as having divine authority equal to or even greater than the Bible.

It is interesting that in our own times, and in what is generally referred to as the “Messianic Movement,” there are those who likewise are teaching that “the Rabbinic Writings” have binding authority.¹ By Rabbinic Writings, they refer to the Mishnah, Talmuds, Targumim, Shulkan Aruk, etc. Mark Kinzer writes:

Is the written Torah sufficient for instructing the Jewish people in how to live as individuals, families, and local communities? While it is certainly foundational and indispensable, it is not sufficient. The Torah requires a living tradition of interpretation and application if it is to be practiced in daily life.²

This ought to be alarming to all who are seeking to live out a Torah, Yeshua-honoring life of faith! For if we allow extra-biblical writings to be given equal authority with the inspired Scriptures, we open ourselves up to all manner of errant teachings. What is more, to describe the Rabbinic literature (Mishnah, Talmuds, Midrashim, Targumim, etc.) as a unified body of literature is clearly uninformed. Even the Bavli and Yerushalmi Talmuds have divergent rulings, and the remainder of the extant Rabbinic materials are surely not a monolithic voice of unity!

So we must, once again, affirm that the Bible and the Bible alone is the final authority in all aspects of faith and practice (*halachah*), even as James emphasizes in our current text.

Likewise, when Paul wrote to his disciple Timothy, he reminded him about the sufficiency of Scripture, the very Scriptures that had led him to faith in Yeshua:

... that from childhood you have known the sacred writings which are able to give you the wisdom that leads to salvation through faith which is in Messiah Yeshua. (2Tim 3:15)

For Paul, salvation consists in far more than having one’s sins for-

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- 1 For a critique of the idea that the Rabbinic Writings have binding authority, see my article, “The Battle for the Bible: Are the Inspired Scriptures Enough?” available at <https://torahresource.com/battle-for-the-bible-are-the-inspired-scriptures-enough/>
 - 2 Mark Kinzer, *Postmissionary Messianic Judaism* (Brazos, 2005), pp. 236ff.

given. Salvation also includes sanctification, becoming conformed to the person of Yeshua—walking as He walked. And Paul states that the “sacred writings,” are able to give wisdom that leads to this salvation. He then goes on to write:

All Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness; so that the man of God may be adequate, equipped for every good work. (2Tim 3:16–17)

When Paul speaks of the Scriptures, he’s talking about the written Torah, not the Oral. And he makes it clear that the Written Scriptures are “profitable” for reproof, correction, and training in righteousness. The Greek word translated “profitable” is ὠφέλιμος, (*ōphelimos*) which means “good,” “beneficial,” “useful.”

Then note what Paul writes in regard to the use of the Scriptures: “that the man of God may be adequate, equipped for every good work.” In English, the word “adequate” seems minimalist, that it is enough to get by. But that is not what the Greek word means that lies behind this translation. The word is ἄρτιος (*artios*) and means “to be well fitted for some function, complete, capable, proficient, i.e., able to meet all demands.”¹ The NIV has a better translation: “thoroughly equipped for every good work.” For Paul, the Scriptures are absolutely sufficient to train the follower of Yeshua in living out every *mitzvah* (good work).

Surely the rabbinic literature, as well as the Pseudepigraphal and Apocryphal writings, are valuable for historical data and backgrounds to early Judaism and Christianities, and they often contain valuable insights into the Scriptures themselves. But they are, like other commentaries, the thoughts and writings of men and women. They are not the inspired Scriptures, and they do not carry divine authority as do the Scriptures. Marking this distinction, between what is divinely authoritative and what is not, is paramount to maintaining a biblically based, Yeshua centered, Torah observant life of faith.

So when you start hearing teachers giving credence to the rabbinic writings or even to early Christian documents (e.g., Shepherd of Hermas, the Didache, the Apostolic Constitutions) as though they are authoritative or give us the definitive interpretation of the Scriptures, beware! If you are told that your obedience to God’s commandments is not complete unless your *halachah* conforms to this rabbinic dictum

1 BDAG, “ἄρτιος,” p. 136.

or that rabbinic tradition, watch out! You are being led down a slippery slope that ends in submission to the traditions of men as having equal authority with the Scriptures. Rather, like the Bereans of old, who “received the word with great eagerness, examining the Scriptures daily to see whether these things were so,”¹ we must put everything we hear against the infallible word of God. What conforms to the Scriptures, accept; what does not, reject. Let the word of God be your sole authority for knowing what pleases God. A person determines if a stick is crooked by putting it next to a straight stick. Let the Bible be your straight stick.

Yeshua Himself warned His disciples and us about how the traditions of the elders could set aside the very commandment of God.

And He answered and said to them, “Why do you yourselves transgress the commandment of God for the sake of your tradition? (Matt 15:3)

In doing so, He was not negating all of the traditions of the elders, for it is clear that He followed many of these traditions and taught His disciples to do so as well. But what He did teach was that the traditions of the elders must be subservient to the word of God—the traditions do not have divine authority in and of themselves. Therefore, the Scriptures and the Scriptures alone are to be the final authority in all matters of faith and *halachah*.

Martin Bucer’s words contain a sobering contemplation for us:

A man is rarely to be found, who pays an excessive attention to human inventions in religion, who does not put more trust in them than in the grace of God.”²

Let it not be so of us! Let us cling to God by faith in His Messiah, Yeshua, and prize the inspired Scriptures as worthy above all other literature to lead us in the paths of righteousness for His Name sake.

----- *End of Excursus* -----

1 Acts 17:11.

2 Quoted from J. C. Ryle, *Expository Thoughts on the Gospels* (Baker, 1977), 1.173.