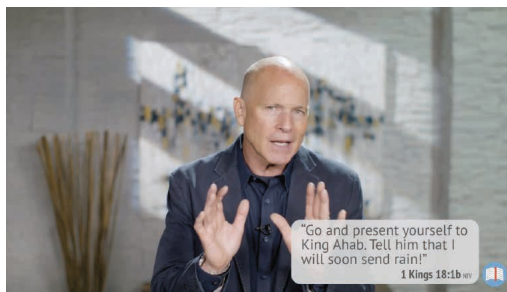


Persevering in Prayer

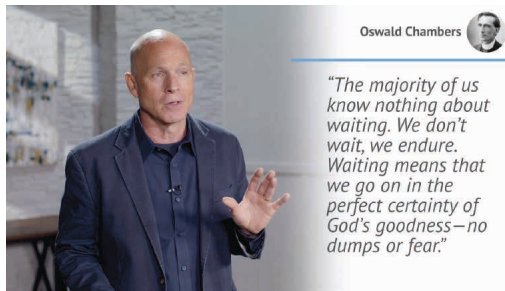


There's a fascinating story about prayer from the life of Elijah in the eighteenth chapter of 1 Kings, starting in verse 41. Let's go there:

And Elijah said to Ahab, "Go, eat and drink, for there is the sound of a heavy rain." So Ahab went off to eat and drink, but Elijah climbed to the top of Carmel, bent down to the ground and put his face between his knees. "Go and look toward the sea," he told his servant. And he went up and looked. "There is nothing there," he said. Seven times Elijah said, "Go back." The seventh time the servant reported, "A cloud as small as a man's hand is rising from the sea." So Elijah said, "Go and tell Ahab, 'Hitch up your chariot and go down before the rain stops you.'" Meanwhile, the sky grew black with clouds, the wind rose, a heavy rain started falling and Ahab rode off to Jezreel.

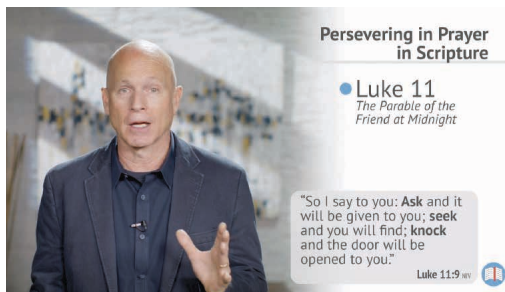
I love that story because if you take a close look at it, you'll see that some things will only happen if we persevere in prayer. God had already promised to send rain on the land. You see that in the very first verse of the same chapter in 1 Kings. But Elijah understood that he had to pray for the rain to come. Now, this is the very same prophet who is so powerful that he prays one time and fire falls from heaven—again, in this very chapter. But this time it's different. He put his face between his knees—his head is bowed, it's a position of prayer—and he sends his servant to check, and nothing. So he sends him back. Nothing again. So he sends him back again. Still nothing. Seven times he sends him back, checking eight times in all. And on that last time, the servant sees a cloud way out at sea. And Elijah tells him, "Here it comes." Now here's the amazing thing about that. What if Elijah had stopped praying after the third time? Or the fifth time? Or even the seventh? Even though God had promised rain, Elijah knew that he had to keep praying for the rain to come. He understood that God wanted him to persevere in prayer; so his praying was an important part of the fulfillment of the promise.

That story makes me want to go the distance in prayer. It makes me want to roll up my sleeves and get down on my knees and down to business in prayer. And we need that encouragement,



don't we? How often do we get discouraged after praying just a few times? And the reason why we get discouraged is we take the fact that nothing is happening in the moment to mean that God is saying "no," when he isn't saying "no" at all. Oswald Chambers observed, "The majority of us know nothing about waiting. We don't wait, we endure. Waiting means that we go on in the perfect certainty of God's goodness—no dumps or fear." Elijah was able to go on praying because He knew what God had promised. But he didn't take it for granted, he pursued it. And because God has made beautiful promises to us, we can persevere in prayer as well and anticipate good things from Him.

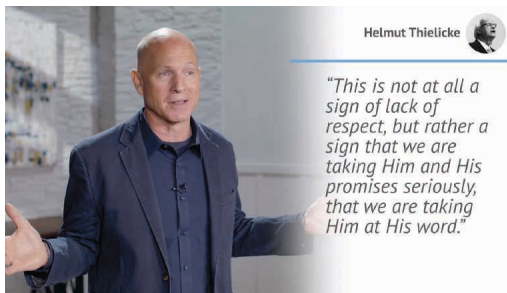
You see this lesson of persevering in prayer several places in Scripture, especially in the teaching and in the life of Jesus. In Luke 11, the same chapter where He teaches us the Lord's Prayer, Jesus tells a parable about a man who goes to his friend's house after midnight asking to borrow some bread. And at first his friend says to him, "Don't bother me." So the man keeps knocking, and finally his friend gets up and gives him what he wants—not because of friendship, Jesus says, but because of perseverance. Jesus rounds out the story with these familiar words: "So I say to you: Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you" (Luke 11:9). Now, the grammatical tense of those commands in the original language indicates perpetual action—in other words, "Keep on asking, keep on seeking, keep on knocking." Then you will receive, then you will find, then the door will be opened.



The eighteenth chapter of the gospel of Luke begins with another parable from Jesus about persevering in prayer. It's about a widow who goes to an unjust judge that "neither feared God nor cared what people thought" (Luke 18:2). She pleads with him, "Give me justice against my adversary." He refused for some time, but because she persists, she gets what she's asking. And Jesus says in response that if an unjust judge will do this, "will not God bring about justice for his chosen ones, who cry out to him day and night? Will he keep putting them off?"



And there's more. Look at the way Jesus handles this personally. In the fifteenth chapter of Matthew, a non-Jewish woman comes to Jesus and says, "My daughter is demon-possessed and suffering terribly." Apparently, she's making a lot of noise because the disciples say, "Send her away, for she keeps crying out after us." And at first it looks like Jesus is refusing her. But as she persists, she gets what she's asking for. Matthew 15:28 tells us, "Then Jesus



said to her, 'Woman, you have great faith! Your request is granted.' And her daughter was healed at that moment."

We see from all of this that persevering in prayer matters deeply to Jesus. Not only does God allow us to do it—He *wants* us to. And we don't usually see it that way. But I love what the German theologian Helmut Thielicke wrote in response to Jesus' parable about the unjust judge regarding our persisting in prayer with God. "This is not at all a sign of lack of respect," Thielicke says, "but rather a sign that we are taking Him and His promises seriously, that we are taking Him at His word." That makes sense to me. Why else would Jesus teach so clearly about the importance of going the distance in prayer if He didn't want us to do it?

For the remainder of this lesson, we'll look at some practical suggestions to help us pray and not give up. For that, let's start with this question: "How do we know *when* God wants us to persevere in prayer?"

The simple answer to that question is that faithful, persistent prayer is to be the norm for the Christian life. When Luke told Jesus' story about the persistent widow, he introduced it with these words: "Then Jesus told his disciples a parable to show them that they should always pray and not give up" (Luke 18:1). Still, most of us have had the experience of praying for a while about something and later realizing, "I'm glad that didn't happen." So the question is, how can I know that whatever it is I'm persisting in prayer for is a good thing, something God wants me to go after?

Sometimes we know because it's a kind or loving thing that we're asking, straight from His Word, such as praying for someone's salvation. Other times we discover God's will more gradually when we pray. But in order to have a better idea, we have to get as close to Him as we possibly can, obeying Him faithfully and staying in His Word, keeping company with Him moment by moment. I like what C.S. Lewis wrote in a letter to a friend about praying with faith and asking with certainty. He said that this:

occurs only when the one who prays does so as God's fellow worker, demanding what is needed for joint work. It is the prophet's, the apostle's, the missionary's, the healer's prayer that is made with this confidence and finds the confidence justified by the event. The difference, we are told, between a servant and a friend is that a servant is not in on his master's secrets. But the fellow

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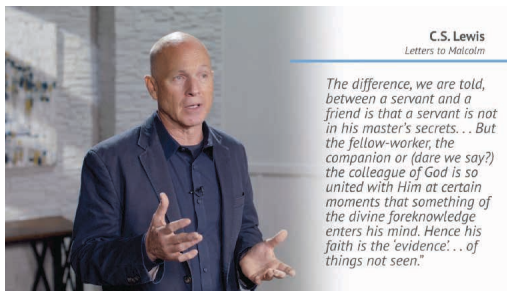
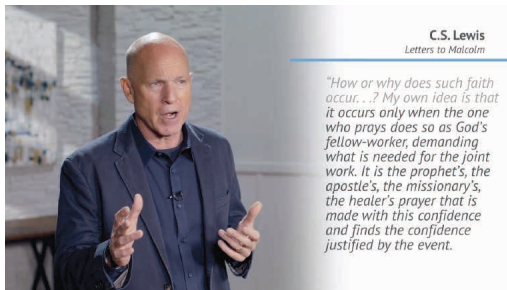
Practical Suggestions for Persevering in Prayer

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- To get a better idea of God's will, we must get as close to Him as we possibly can.



worker, the companion or (dare we say) the colleague of God is so united with Him at certain moments that something of the divine foreknowledge enters his mind. Hence his faith is the evidence ... of things not seen. (*Letters to Malcolm*)

I love that quote because it resonates with Scripture. Jesus told us in John 15:15, "I no longer call you servants, because a servant does not know his master's business. Instead, I have called you friends." Hebrews 11:1 also tells us that "faith is the confidence in what we hope for and assurance about what we do not see." Have you ever prayed about something and been assured that you would have what you asked before it ever happened? I had that happen to me when it came time for the church I was planting to build their first building. Somehow I knew in my spirit that God would make a way, even though it often didn't seem like it would happen because of the challenges we faced. But God *did* make a way. And it wasn't because I had worked myself up to believe that. It wasn't self-persuasion. It was a simple and calm assurance from Him that came as I drew near to Him and persevered in prayer.

And that brings us to something very important about persevering in prayer. When we are praying about something for an extended period of time, instead of waiting *for* God, we need to wait *with* God. If we wait *for* God, we wait at a distance. But if we wait *with* Him, clinging to our Savior, doing our best to stay in His presence, He will always help us through, come what may.

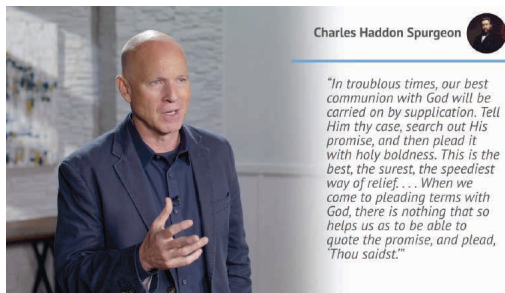
We can pray with confidence when we pray God's promises. Think again about Elijah. He knew that God had promised rain, so he kept asking for it. And when you and I pray God's promises, we can pray with assurance. Charles Spurgeon, in a sermon about Jacob wrestling with the angel of the Lord in Genesis 32, said:

In troublous times, our best communion with God will be carried on by supplication. Tell Him thy case, search out His promise, and then plead it with holy boldness. This is the best, the surest, the speediest way of relief. ... When we come to pleading terms with God, there is nothing that so helps us as to be able to quote the promise, and plead, "Thou saidst."

Remember how Jacob prayed, "I will not let you go unless you bless me" (Genesis 32:26). That's an incredible thing to say to God. But earlier in that chapter Jacob had reminded God of His

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promise, "But you have said, 'I will surely make you prosper and will make your descendants like the sand of the sea, which cannot be counted' (Genesis 32:12). So it was like saying, "You promised, Lord!" Think of the impact that has on a parent when a child says it. Scripture shows us it also has an impact with God.

Richard C. Trench said, "We must not conceive of prayer as an overcoming of God's reluctance, but a laying hold of His highest willingness." This is a privilege we need to take seriously, and sometimes it may feel like a wrestling match. But it helps to remember that we are coming to a loving heavenly Father because of what Jesus has done for us.

One true story about persevering in prayer as we close. George Mueller was a man of unique faith and prayer. He wrote in his journal that in November of 1844 he began to pray every day, wherever he was, for five men to be converted. He recalls:

Eighteen months elapsed before the first of the five was converted. I thanked God and prayed on for the others. Five years elapsed, and then the second was converted. I thanked God for the second, and prayed on for the other three. Day by day, I continued to pray for them, and six years passed before the third was converted. I thanked God for the three, and went on praying for the other two.

Now, Mueller died on March 10 of 1898. And he didn't see the other two converted, at least not during his life on earth. But one came to Christ shortly before Mueller's funeral, and the other, not long afterwards. Mueller prayed for over fifty years, and in the end all five were saved.

Keep praying. Pray humbly but boldly, and don't give up. Maybe you've been praying a long time, but just remember Elijah. It could be the very next time that you pray that God says, "Done."