

Simple Prayer

Read [1 Kings 18:16-40](#)

DIGGING DEEPER....

Let's dig a little deeper now and see what some other Bible passages have to say about changing things through prayer. We'll look at what the Scriptures say, then consider how it applies to our personal lives.

Albert Einstein said, "When the solution is simple, God is answering."

We have seen in our previous studies that prayer is really very simple. What it is at heart—what makes it work—is an invitation to God to come to the earth (the realm he has given to us) and work on our behalf. It's really very simple once you see it.

However, people have a way of complicating prayer. This is evident in one of the most exciting stories in the Old Testament: the confrontation between the prophets of Baal and the prophet Elijah. Baal was an idol from the neighboring nations that the people of Israel were enticed into worshipping. He was purported to be the god who brought rain, good harvests, and fertility—which made him attractive to an agricultural people. Because of his association with the reproductive forces of nature, much immorality was involved in his worship.

And he was popular—especially in the days of Elijah (**about 875 B.C.**), the prophet of the Lord who confronted the worshipers of Baal. Baal worship had become so fashionable that Elijah declared, ***"I alone am left a prophet of the LORD, but Baal's prophets are 450 men"*** ([1 Kings 18:22](#)).

Elijah wanted the people to return to the one true God, so he called for a contest on Mount Carmel. He had King Ahab summon the people of Israel and the prophets of Baal to the mountain, and he declared to them, ***"How long will you hesitate between two opinions? If the LORD is God, follow Him; but if Baal, follow him"*** ([1 Kings 18:21](#)).

Here is the contest he had in mind: The prophets of Baal were to get a bull, sacrifice it, and put it on some wood. He would do the same with another bull. ***"Then you call on the name of your god, and I will call on the name of the LORD, and the God who answers by fire, He is God"*** ([1 Kings 18:24a](#)).

It was a bold challenge, to say the least. The prophets of Baal may have wanted to hem and haw, find a way out. But the people said to Elijah, ***"That is a good idea,"*** ([1 Kings 18:24b](#)), and the prophets of Baal had no choice but to accept the challenge.

So they took to praying to Baal. In their efforts to get their prayers answered, they demonstrated a number of faulty prayer practices people still engage in today, practices that needlessly complicate prayer.

First, they complicated prayer by praying to a false image of God:

²⁶ *“Then they took the ox which was given them and they prepared it and called on the name of Baal from morning until noon saying, ‘O Baal, answer us.’ But there was no voice and no one answered. And they leaped about the altar which they made.”*

[1 KINGS 18:26](#)

The most basic way to needlessly complicate prayer is to pray to a false image of God, a misconception of him. The prophets of Baal made this mistake. Baal was a figment of their imagination, their idea of what God should be. Archaeologists have found rock carvings of him: a god holding a club in one hand and lightning in the other (because he was the god who brought thunder and storm). This is a false image of God. They were praying to a god who wasn't there.

People today still have a tendency to worship a false image of God—one of their own making. Like the story of the white guy and the black guy who were arguing over what color God is. The white guy insisted, “God is white!” The black guy said, “No, he's black!” They both died about the same time, stood outside heaven's gate, and were still carrying on their argument.

“I'm glad you're here,” the white guy said. “Now you'll see I'm right. God is white!”

“Now you'll see *I'm* right,” the black guy said. “God is black!”

They asked the angel to open the gate. When he did, they heard a big voice say to them, “Buenas noches!”

People still have a tendency to worship a false image of God. When we pray to a God who suits our prejudices or fears or questionable lifestyles, we are not really praying to God as he is. God will be slow to answer such prayers—if he will at all—because it would reinforce a misconception about him.

Are you praying to God as he truly is? That is why he gave us the Bible, so we could know the truth about him. The two characteristics of his nature that we must keep in mind in order to have a healthy prayer life were addressed by Jesus in the opening line of the Model Prayer: *“Our Father who is in heaven, Hallowed be Your name”* ([Matthew 6:9](#)). First, we must keep in mind that he is our *“Father,”* who loves and cares for us, and who wants to hear and answer our prayers. Second, we must keep in mind that he is our *“hallowed,”* or holy, Father, who leads us along an upright path in life. If we will keep both these truths in mind, we will have an accurate image of him when we approach him in prayer.

Which of these two basic characteristics of God's nature do you need to be more aware of?

The second way the prophets of Baal complicated prayer was with religious ceremony. In order to get an answer to their prayer, *“And they leaped about the altar which they made”* ([1 Kings 18:26](#)). They weren't dancing for fun. It was their religious ritual, aimed at getting their prayer answered.

Religious ritual is still one of the most common ways people complicate prayer. The ritual might be a certain location or posture in which they must pray, the recitation of particular words—perhaps with the aid of candles or incense—the wearing of certain clothes. Such rituals are not necessarily bad, and sometimes they may aid prayer by setting the mood or building faith in the participants. But they are not really necessary. All that is necessary is an invitation to God to come and work in the world he has given to us.

The prophets of Baal also complicated prayer by trying to earn an answer. When their prayers continued unheeded, they resorted to drastic measures:

²⁸ ***“So they cried with a loud voice and cut themselves according to their custom with swords and lances until the blood gushed out on them.”***

[1 KINGS 18:28](#)

They thought they would earn spiritual favor by making themselves suffer. This misconception is common. People throughout the ages have flogged themselves with whips, locked themselves away in monasteries, starved themselves, walked long dangerous miles to holy sites, abstained from marriage, given away all their worldly goods, and even blown themselves to bits—all in the hope of winning God’s favor.

And all of it is unnecessary. Jesus said, ***“If you then, being evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father who is in heaven give what is good to those who ask Him!”*** (**[Matthew 7:11](#)**). The only necessity is to understand that God is our loving Heavenly Father who simply desires an invitation to come and work in our life.

Finally, the prophets of Baal complicated prayer by adding more and more words, thinking that the length of their prayer might bring an answer:

²⁹ ***“When midday was past, they raved until the time of the offering of the evening sacrifice; but there was no voice, no one answered, and no one paid attention.”***

[1 KINGS 18:29](#)

They had already prayed ***“from morning till noon”*** (**[1 Kings 18:26](#)**). Now they continued praying past midday ***“until the time of the offering of the evening sacrifice”*** (**[1 Kings 18:29](#)**), which was about 3:00 in the afternoon. Three more hours of begging for an answer. Talk about a long church service! ***“But there was no voice, no one answered, and no one paid attention”*** (**[1 Kings 18:29](#)**)

A multitude of words isn’t necessary for answered prayer. Remember Jesus’ words in his introduction to the Model Prayer: ***“And when you are praying, do not use meaningless repetition as the Gentiles do, for they suppose that they will be heard for their many words. So do not be like them; for your Father knows what you need before you ask Him”*** (**[Matthew 6:7–8](#)**). Jesus said we aren’t heard because of our ***“many words.”*** God already knows what we need. He just needs an invitation to come and work.

The four ways the prophets of Baal complicated prayer are still ways people complicate prayer today: praying to a false image of God, thinking religious ceremony must accompany prayer, trying to earn an answer to prayer by suffering or good works, and by adding unnecessary length to prayer. Which, if any, of these complications do you need to watch out for?

The prophets of Baal were unsuccessful in their complicated prayer attempts. No fire came from heaven to consume their sacrificed bull.

Now it was Elijah's turn—and he upped the ante! He didn't just go ahead and ask God to send fire to burn up his sacrificed bull, which would seem like a tall enough order. Instead—so the crowd would have no question about the authenticity of what they were about to see—he added stones to the wooden altar his bull lay on, dug a trench around it, and said, ***“Then he arranged the wood and cut the ox in pieces and laid it on the wood. And he said, “Fill four pitchers with water and pour it on the burnt offering and on the wood.” And he said, “Do it a second time,” and they did it a second time. And he said, “Do it a third time,” and they did it a third time”*** ([1 Kings 18:33-34](#)).

Then he told them to pour the water again, and then again—a third time. ***“The water flowed around the altar and he also filled the trench with water”*** ([1 Kings 18:35](#)). It was drenched. Elijah has added stones and water to his offering. He seems to be stacking the deck against an answered prayer. But watch what happens:

³⁶ ***“At the time of the offering of the evening sacrifice, Elijah the prophet came near and said, “O LORD, the God of Abraham, Isaac and Israel, today let it be known that You are God in Israel and that I am Your servant and I have done all these things at Your word.***

³⁷ ***Answer me, O LORD, answer me, that this people may know that You, O LORD, are God, and that You have turned their heart back again.***

³⁸ ***Then the fire of the LORD fell and consumed the burnt offering and the wood and the stones and the dust, and licked up the water that was in the trench.***

³⁹ ***When all the people saw it, they fell on their faces; and they said, “The LORD, He is God; the LORD, He is God.”***

[1 KINGS 18:36–39](#)

The prophets of Baal called on a god of their imagination, danced around their altar, cut themselves, and prayed for hours. There was no answer. Elijah prayed a simple prayer to the one true God, and a miracle occurred: fire fell from heaven, consumed the sacrifice and wood, and even the stones, dirt, and water!

And the people declared, ***“The LORD—He is God!”*** ([v.39](#)).

True prayer, at its heart, is very simple. It is an invitation to God to come and work in the world he has given to us. The results can be amazing.

“When the solution is simple, God is answering.”