THE QUESTION

What does Elijah's prayer for no rain teach us about prayer (James 5:17–18)?

Asked by a THF member on August 2, 2026 · published November 9, 2026 · 7 numbered quotations · the 8 early Christian passages and 122 Bible verses we kept are listed at the back, each with a link.

Read it online: thehistoricfaith.com/early-church-questions/what-does-elijahs-prayer-for-no-rain-teach-us-about-prayer-james-5-17-18

The short answer *Interpretation: our reading of the passages, not their words*

James points to Elijah to show that the earnest prayer of a righteous person truly works, even for someone with an ordinary human nature. Early writers agreed. Tertullian says prayer once held back the rain and can still obtain it, though Christ now gives prayer its power only for good.

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POINT 1 OF 6

Prayer once held back the rain

Our note · compiled by machine learning · From the text: says what the passages say

Tertullian lists what prayer did in Old Testament times. Among these, he says it held back the showers. This matches what James says about Elijah praying that it would not rain.

1 “But in former days, prayer also used to call down plagues, scatter the armies of enemies, and withhold the wholesome influence of the showers.”

EARLY CHRISTIAN WRITER **Tertullian,** *On Prayer* 29 **Source 4, page 5** Read it in the library ›
(c. 196–220 AD)
THF's updated English

POINT 2 OF 6

Righteous prayer can still obtain the rain

Our note · compiled by machine learning · From the text: says what the passages say

Tertullian says the prayer of righteousness is still strong today. He thinks it is no surprise that it can bring down rain from heaven, since it once brought down fire. This echoes James, who says Elijah prayed again and the heaven gave rain.

2 “Now, however, the prayer of righteousness turns away all God's anger, keeps camp on behalf of personal enemies, and makes supplication on behalf of persecutors. Is it any wonder if it knows how to obtain the rains of heaven, when it was once able to obtain its fires?”

EARLY CHRISTIAN WRITER **Tertullian,** *On Prayer* 29 **Source 4, page 5** Read it in the library ›
(c. 196–220 AD)
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POINT 3 OF 6

Christ gives prayer its power for good

Our note · compiled by machine learning · From the text: says what the passages say

Tertullian adds a Christian turn. Prayer is strong with God, but Christ wants it used for good, not to harm. So believers today pray for enemies and the sick rather than calling down plagues.

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3 “Prayer alone is what conquers God. But Christ has willed that it should be effective for no evil. He has given it all its power for the cause of good.”

EARLY CHRISTIAN WRITER **Tertullian,** *On Prayer* 29 (c. 196–220 AD) **Source 4, page 5** **Read it in the library ›**
THF's updated English

POINT 4 OF 6

The drought lasted three and a half years

Our note · compiled by machine learning · From the text: says what the passages say

Tatian's harmony of the Gospels gives the words of Jesus about Elijah's time. Jesus gives the same length as James: three years and six months, with a great famine in the land.

4 “Truly I say to you, in the days of Elijah the prophet, there were many widows among the children of Israel when heaven was shut up for three years and six months, and there was a great famine in all the land.”

EARLY CHRISTIAN WRITER **Tatian,** *Diatessaron* 17 (c. 150–180 AD) **Source 1, page 5** **Read it in the library ›**
THF's updated English

POINT 5 OF 6

Elijah's prayer went with fasting and devotion

Our note · compiled by machine learning · Interpretation: our reading of the passages, not their words

Tertullian links the famine Elijah called for with a life of fasting. He quotes Elijah's oath that there would be no dew or rain. For Tertullian, calling for the famine was itself part of a life given over to God.

5 “For Elijah too had, by this fact primarily, that he had imprecated a famine, already sufficiently devoted himself to fasts.”

later in the same passage

“The Lord lives," he said, "before whom I am standing in His sight, if there shall be dew in these years, and rain-shower."”

EARLY CHRISTIAN WRITER **Tertullian,** *On Fasting* 6 (c. 196–220 AD) **Source 5, page 5** **Read it in the library ›**
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POINT 6 OF 6

Elijah called on the one true God

Our note · compiled by machine learning · From the text: says what the passages say

Irenaeus says that at Mount Carmel Elijah called on the Lord, not on idols, to show which God is real. Origen also recalls Elijah's call to the people to follow the Lord. Elijah's prayers pointed people back to the true God.

6 “You will call upon the name of your gods, and I will call on the name of the Lord my God; and the one who answers by fire, He is God." By this, the prophet shows that these gods, which were thought to be so among those men, are no gods at all.”

EARLY CHRISTIAN WRITER **Irenaeus,** *Against Heresies: Book III* (c. 175–202 AD) **Source 2, page 5** **Read it in the library ›**
THF's updated English

7 “Elijah also says to the people in the third Book of Kings, “How long will you limp on both knees? If the Lord is God, go behind Him; but if Baal is lord, go behind him,” in”

EARLY CHRISTIAN WRITER **Origen,** *Commentary on Matthew* 12 (c. 215–254 AD) **Source 6, page 5** **Read it in the library ›**
THF's updated English

THE LIMITS

What these passages don’t tell us

- None of these passages comments directly on James 5:17–18 itself.
- They do not explain how Elijah's prayer affected the weather, or how the 'third year' in 1 Kings fits with three and a half years.
- A word-for-word match shows that a quotation really is in our text. It does not show that our reading of it is right, or who wrote each work.

WHERE EVERY QUOTE CAME FROM

The Sources

The 8 early Christian passages and 122 Bible verses we kept for this question (repeats and weak or off-topic search hits were left out): early Christian passages first (sources 1–8, grouped by writer, earliest first), then Bible verses in The Faith Once Delivered Bible (sources 9–115, in Bible order), then 15 more verses THF links to these passages, by reference. **Quote 1, page 2** beside a source shows where the study quotes it. Passages are in

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THF's updated English unless marked "1885 English" (the Roberts–Donaldson translation, public domain). "… [continues online]" marks a passage the library gave only in part. **On paper?** At **thehistoricfaith.com**, Bible verses are in the **Audio Bible** and early Christian writings in the **Library** (search for the title).

EARLY CHRISTIAN WRITERS *8 passages from 5 writers*

Tatian, *c. 150–180 AD · source 1*

1 *Diatessaron* 17 (1885 English) **Quote 4, page 3** "4:25 Verily I say unto you, In the days of Elijah the prophet, there were many widows among the children of Israel, when the heaven held back 46 three… [continues online] **read ›**

Irenaeus, *c. 175–202 AD · sources 2–3*

2 *Against Heresies: Book III* **Quote 6, page 4** "also says the same: "The gods that have not made the heavens and earth, let them perish from the earth which is under the… [continues online] **read ›**

3 *Against Heresies: Book III* (on point 6) "Son, who would prepare His way, that is, to testify about the Light in the spirit and power of Elias. But, again, from which God was Elias, the servant and… [continues online] **read ›**

Tertullian, *c. 196–220 AD · sources 4–5*

4 *On Prayer* 29 **Quotes 1, 2, 3, pages 2, 3** "creature prays. Cattle and wild beasts pray and bend their knees… [continues online] **read ›**

5 *On Fasting* 6 (1885 English) **Quote 5, page 3** "Elijah withal had, by this fact primarily, that he had imprecated a famine, already sufficiently devoted himself to fasts: The Lord lives, he said, before whom I am standing in… [continues online] **read ›**

Origen, *c. 215–254 AD · source 6*

6 *Commentary on Matthew* 12 (1885 English) **Quote 7, page 4** "18:30 And Elijah also, in the third Book of Kings, says to the people, How long halt ye on both your knees… [continues online] **read ›**

Cyprian, *c. 248–258 AD · sources 7–8*

7 *Epistles* (1885 English; on point 6) "Elias, when the Jews gave way and departed from the divine religion, stood and nobly contended… [continues online] **read ›**

8 *Treatises* (1885 English) "this the faith of the sacred Scripture assures us, and in telling us how such as these prayed, gives an example which we ought to follow in our prayers, in… [continues online] **read ›**

THE BIBLE *107 verses, The Faith Once Delivered Bible (Old Testament from the Septuagint), in Bible order*

9 **Genesis 45:6** For this is the second year of famine in the land, and there are still five years to come in which there will be neither plowing nor harvest. **read ›**

10 **Exodus 23:10** Six years you shall sow your land and gather in its produce. **read ›**

11 **Leviticus 25:3** Six years you shall sow your field, and six years you shall prune your vineyard and gather in its fruit; **read ›**

12 **Leviticus 25:21** then I will send my blessing on you in the sixth year, and the land shall bring forth its produce for the three years. **read ›**

13 **Leviticus 27:6** From a month old to five years old, the valuation of a male shall be five didrachms, and of a female three didrachms of silver. **read ›**

14 **Numbers 1:46** six hundred and three thousand five hundred and fifty. **read ›**

15 **Numbers 21:7** Then the people came to Moses and said, "We have sinned, for we have spoken against the Lord and against you. Pray, then, to the Lord, and let him take the serpent away from us." **read ›**

16 **1 Samuel 1:10** She was in deep distress of soul, and she prayed to the Lord and wept greatly. **read ›**

17 **1 Samuel 1:12** As she went on praying before the Lord, Eli the priest watched her mouth. **read ›**

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18 **1 Samuel 4:8** Woe to us! Deliver us, O Lord, today, for such a thing has not happened before. Woe to us! Who will deliver us from the hand of these mighty gods? These are the gods who struck Egypt with every plague, and in the wilderness. **read ›**

19 **1 Samuel 12:17** Is it not wheat harvest today? I will call upon the Lord, and he will send thunder and rain; and know and see that your wickedness which you have done in the sight of the Lord is great, in asking for yourselves a king." **read ›**

20 **1 Samuel 12:18** So Samuel called upon the Lord, and the Lord sent thunder and rain that day; and all the people greatly feared the Lord and Samuel. **read ›**

21 **2 Samuel 2:11** And the days that David reigned in Hebron over the house of Judah were seven years and six months. **read ›**

22 **2 Samuel 5:5** In Hebron he reigned over Judah seven years and six months, and in Jerusalem he reigned thirty-three years over all Israel and Judah. **read ›**

23 **1 Kings 8:54** When Solomon had finished praying all this prayer and plea to the Lord, he rose up from before the altar of the Lord, from kneeling on his knees, with his hands spread out toward heaven. **read ›**

24 **1 Kings 15:2** He reigned three years over Jerusalem, and his mother's name was Maacah, the daughter of Absalom. **read ›**

25 **1 Kings 17:1** And Elijah the prophet, the Tishbite, from Thesbon of Gilead, said to Ahab, "As the Lord God of hosts, the God of Israel, lives, before whom I stand, there shall be no dew or rain these years, except by the word of my mouth." **read ›**

26 **1 Kings 17:5** And Elijah did according to the word of the Lord, and he stayed by the brook Cherith, facing the Jordan. **read ›**

27 **1 Kings 17:7** After some days the brook dried up, because there had been no rain on the land. **read ›**

28 **1 Kings 17:20** And Elijah cried out and said, "Alas, O Lord, the witness of the widow with whom I am staying! You have done harm in putting her son to death." **read ›**

29 **1 Kings 18:1** After many days the word of the Lord came to Elijah in the third year, saying, "Go, show yourself to Ahab, and I will send rain on the face of the earth." **read ›**

30 **1 Kings 18:2** So Elijah went to show himself to Ahab. And the famine was severe in Samaria. **read ›**

31 **1 Kings 18:21** And Elijah came near to them all, and Elijah said to them, "How long will you limp on both legs? If the Lord is God, follow him; but if Baal, follow him." And the people did not answer a word. **read ›**

32 **1 Kings 18:36** And Elijah cried out to heaven and said, "O Lord God of Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, answer me, O Lord, answer me today by fire, and let all this people know that you are the Lord God of Israel, and that I am your slave, and that for your sake I have done these works. **read ›**

33 **1 Kings 18:41** And Elijah said to Ahab, "Go up, eat and drink, for there is the sound of the feet of the rain." **read ›**

34 **1 Kings 18:42** So Ahab went up to eat and to drink. And Elijah went up to Carmel and bowed down to the ground and put his face between his knees, **read ›**

35 **1 Kings 18:44** And the young man went back seven times; and at the seventh time, behold, there was a little cloud like a man's footprint, bringing up water. And Elijah said, "Go up and say to Ahab, 'Harness your chariot and go down, so that the rain does not overtake you.'" **read ›**

36 **1 Kings 18:45** In a little while the sky grew black with clouds and wind, and there was a great rain. And Ahab went on weeping, and came to Jezreel. **read ›**

37 **1 Kings 18:46** And the hand of the Lord was on Elijah; and he bound his waist tightly and ran before Ahab to Jezreel. **read ›**

38 **1 Kings 19:6** And Elijah looked, and behold, at his head there was a cake of spelt and a jug of water; and he arose and ate and drank, and turned and lay down again. **read ›**

39 **1 Kings 19:10** And Elijah said, "I have been zealous with zeal for the Lord Almighty, because the children of Israel have forsaken you; they have torn down your altars and killed your prophets with the sword, and I alone am left, and they seek my life, to take it." **read ›**

40 **1 Kings 19:14** And Elijah said, "I have been zealous with zeal for the Lord Almighty, because the children of Israel have forsaken your covenant; they have pulled down your altars and killed your prophets with the sword, and I alone am left, and they seek my life, to take it." **read ›**

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41 **2 Kings 1:12** And Elijah answered and spoke to him and said, “If I am a man of God, fire shall come down from heaven and consume you and your fifty.” And fire came down from heaven and consumed him and his fifty. **read ›**

42 **2 Kings 2:8** And Elijah took his sheepskin cloak and rolled it up and struck the water, and the water was divided this way and that, and the two of them crossed over on dry ground. **read ›**

43 **2 Kings 4:33** And Elisha went into the house and shut the door upon the two of them, and he prayed to the Lord. **read ›**

44 **2 Kings 11:3** And he was with her, hidden in the house of the Lord, six years, while Athaliah reigned over the land. **read ›**

45 **2 Kings 18:10** and he captured it at the end of three years; in the sixth year of Hezekiah, which was the ninth year of Hoshea king of Israel, Samaria was taken. **read ›**

46 **1 Chronicles 3:4** Six were born to him in Hebron, and he reigned there seven years and six months; and he reigned thirty-three years in Jerusalem. **read ›**

47 **1 Chronicles 29:27** forty years: in Hebron seven years, and in Jerusalem thirty-three years. **read ›**

48 **2 Chronicles 22:12** And he was with him, hidden in the house of God six years, while Athaliah reigned over the land. **read ›**

49 **2 Chronicles 31:7** In the third month the heaps began to be laid, and in the seventh month they were finished. **read ›**

50 **Ezra 8:23** So we fasted and asked our God about this, and he heard us. **read ›**

51 **Job 4:9** By the command of the Lord they shall perish, and by the breath of his wrath they shall vanish. **read ›**

52 **Job 4:15** and a spirit came upon my face, and my hair and flesh bristled. **read ›**

53 **Job 8:4** If your sons sinned before him, he sent them away in the hand of their lawlessness. **read ›**

54 **Ecclesiastes 1:6** Rising there, the sun goes toward the south and circles toward the north. Round and round goes the wind, and on its circuits the wind returns. **read ›**

55 **Ecclesiastes 1:8** All words are wearisome; a man will not be able to speak them. The eye will not be satisfied with seeing, nor will the ear be filled with hearing. **read ›**

56 **Ecclesiastes 3:20** All go to one place; all came from the dust, and all will return to the dust. **read ›**

57 **Song of Solomon 2:1** I am a flower of the plain, a lily of the valleys. **read ›**

58 **Song of Solomon 5:7** The watchmen who go around the city found me; they struck me, they wounded me; the keepers of the walls took my veil from me. **read ›**

59 **Song of Solomon 5:9** What is your kinsman more than another kinsman, O beautiful one among women? What is your kinsman more than another kinsman, that you have so charged us? **read ›**

60 **Song of Solomon 6:1** Where has your kinsman gone, O beautiful one among women? Where has your kinsman turned his gaze? And we will seek him with you. **read ›**

61 **Isaiah 7:5** And as for the son of Aram and the son of Remaliah, because they have counseled an evil counsel, **read ›**

62 **Isaiah 26:16** O Lord, in trouble I remembered you; in a little trouble was your discipline for us. **read ›**

63 **Jeremiah 42:2** to Jeremiah the prophet, and said to him, “Let our plea for mercy fall before you, and pray to the Lord your God for this remnant; for we are left few out of many, as your eyes see. (Septuagint Jeremiah 49:2 (Jeremiah 42:2 in most Bibles)) **read ›**

64 **Micah 4:7** And I will make her who was crushed a remnant, and her who was thrust away a mighty nation; and the Lord will reign over them on Mount Zion from now and forever. **read ›**

65 **Zechariah 10:1** Ask the Lord for rain in its season, the early and the late. The Lord has made bright displays, and he will give them winter rain, grass in the field for each one. **read ›**

66 **Tobit 3:16** And the prayer of them both was heard before the glory of the Great One, **read ›**

67 **Judith 4:9** And every man of Israel cried out to God with great earnestness, and they humbled their souls with great earnestness, **read ›**

68 **Judith 4:15** and there were ashes on their turbans, and they cried out to the Lord with all their might to look upon all the house of Israel for good. **read ›**

69 **Judith 8:4** And Judith remained a widow in her house three years and four months. **read ›**

70 **Judith 8:31** And now pray for us, for you are a godly woman, and the Lord will send rain to fill our cisterns, and we shall faint no more.” **read ›**

71 **Wisdom of Sirach 48:1** Then Elijah the prophet arose like fire, and his word burned like a torch; **read ›**

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72 **Wisdom of Sirach 48:3** By the word of the Lord he shut up the heaven; so also three times he brought down fire. **read ›**

73 **Wisdom of Sirach 48:4** How you were glorified, Elijah, in your marvels! And who is like you to boast? **read ›**

74 **Wisdom of Sirach 48:12** Elijah was covered in a whirlwind, and Elisha was filled with his spirit; and in his days Elisha was not shaken by any ruler, and no one brought him under his power. **read ›**

75 **Wisdom of Sirach 50:19** And the people pleaded with the Lord Most High in prayer before the Merciful One, until the order of the Lord's worship was completed, and they finished his service. **read ›**

76 **Baruch 1:13** And pray for us to the Lord our God, for we have sinned against the Lord our God, and the wrath of the Lord and his anger have not turned away from us to this day. **read ›**

77 **1 Maccabees 2:58** Elijah, for being zealous with zeal for the law, was taken up into heaven. **read ›**

78 **2 Maccabees 1:6** And now we are here praying for you. **read ›**

79 **2 Maccabees 1:8** and burned the gateway and shed innocent blood. Then we prayed to the Lord and were heard; and we offered sacrifice and fine flour, and we lit the lamps and set out the loaves. **read ›**

80 **2 Maccabees 1:24** The prayer was like this: "O Lord, Lord God, Creator of all things, you who are awesome and strong and righteous and merciful, who alone are King and gracious, **read ›**

81 **2 Maccabees 3:20** And all of them, stretching out their hands toward heaven, made their plea. **read ›**

82 **2 Maccabees 15:22** And calling upon him, he spoke in this way: "You, O Master, sent your angel in the time of Hezekiah king of Judea, and you killed in the camp of Sennacherib as many as a hundred and eighty-five thousand. **read ›**

83 **3 Maccabees 1:21** Open the verse to read it. **read ›**

84 **3 Maccabees 1:24** Open the verse to read it. **read ›**

85 **3 Maccabees 2:1** Open the verse to read it. **read ›**

86 **3 Maccabees 5:7** Open the verse to read it. **read ›**

87 **3 Maccabees 5:9** Open the verse to read it. **read ›**

88 **3 Maccabees 5:51** Open the verse to read it. **read ›**

89 **3 Maccabees 6:1** Open the verse to read it. **read ›**

90 **4 Maccabees 7:5** Open the verse to read it. **read ›**

91 **1 Enoch 13:6** Open the verse to read it. **read ›**

92 **1 Enoch 72:16** Open the verse to read it. **read ›**

93 **1 Enoch 74:10** Open the verse to read it. **read ›**

94 **1 Enoch 74:11** Open the verse to read it. **read ›**

95 **1 Enoch 74:30** Open the verse to read it. **read ›**

96 **1 Enoch 74:62** Open the verse to read it. **read ›**

97 **Matthew 6:9** Therefore pray like this: 'Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name. **read ›**

98 **Matthew 17:12** but I tell you that Elijah has come already, and they did not recognize him, but did to him whatever they wanted to. Even so the Son of Man will also suffer by them." **read ›**

99 **Matthew 27:47** Some of them who stood there, when they heard it, said, "This man is calling Elijah." **read ›**

100 **Mark 9:13** But I tell you that Elijah has come, and they have also done to him whatever they wanted to, even as it is written about him." **read ›**

101 **Mark 15:35** Some of those who stood by, when they heard it, said, "Behold, he is calling Elijah." **read ›**

102 **Luke 1:10** The whole multitude of the people were praying outside at the hour of incense. **read ›**

103 **Luke 1:56** Mary stayed with her about three months, and then returned to her house. **read ›**

104 **Luke 4:25** But truly I tell you, there were many widows in Israel in the days of Elijah, when the sky was shut up three years and six months, when a great famine came over all the land. **read ›**

105 **Luke 6:12** In these days, he went out to the mountain to pray, and he continued all night in prayer to God. **read ›**

106 **Luke 9:8** and by some that Elijah had appeared, and by others that one of the old prophets had risen again. **read ›**

107 **Luke 9:54** When his disciples, James and John, saw this, they said, "Lord, do you want us to command fire to come down from the sky and destroy them, just as Elijah did?" **read ›**

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108 **Luke 11:2** He said to them, “When you pray, say, ‘Our Father in heaven, may your name be kept holy. May your kingdom come. May your will be done on earth as it is in heaven. **read ›**

109 **Acts 4:24** When they heard this, they raised their voice to God with one accord and said, “O Master, you are God, who made heaven and earth and the sea and all that is in them, **read ›**

110 **Acts 18:11** He lived there a year and six months, teaching the word of God among them. **read ›**

111 **1 Corinthians 1:13** Has Christ been divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Or were you baptized into the name of Paul? **read ›**

112 **Galatians 1:18** Then after three years I went up to Jerusalem to visit Peter, and stayed with him fifteen days. **read ›**

113 **Hebrews 5:7** He, in the days of his flesh, having offered up prayers and petitions with strong crying and tears to him who was able to save him from death, and having been heard for his godly fear, **read ›**

114 **James 5:17** Elijah was a man with a nature like ours, and he prayed earnestly that it might not rain, and it did not rain on the earth for three years and six months. **read ›**

115 **James 5:18** He prayed again, and the sky gave rain, and the earth produced its fruit. **read ›**

ALSO LINKED BY THF TO THESE PASSAGES *15 verses, by reference*

Partly machine-linked: related to the passages, not always quoted in them. Each reference links to the verse in our audio Bible.

Lamentations 3:41

Matthew 4:9 · 4:19 · 10:38 · 11:12 · 16:23 · 17:1 · 17:4

Mark 9:1 · 9:5

Luke 9:28 · 9:33

John 1:38

1 Corinthians 15:52

1 Thessalonians 4:16

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Searched: Ante-Nicene Fathers volumes 1–9 and the Bible, including the Septuagint.

ABOUT THIS STUDY

A THF member asked “What does Elijah's prayer for no rain teach us about prayer (James 5:17–18)?” on August 2, 2026. The Historic Faith answered it as a public study on November 9, 2026.

Library only. This study was written only from The Historic Faith’s library of early-Christian writings and the Bible, never from the web. Every passage we kept from what the library gave is listed above, with a link to read it.

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THE END OF THIS STUDY