

# Pray for rain?

The prayer of a righteous person has great power as it is working. Elijah was a man with a nature like ours, and he prayed fervently that it might not rain, and for three years and six months it did not rain on the earth. Then he prayed again, and heaven gave rain, and the earth bore its fruit.

James 5:16-18



So we should all, literally and without any irony, pray for rain over the next six to eight weeks.<sup>1</sup>

In April this year, John Howard requested Australians to pray for rain. He has been criticised for this for several reasons. One criticism is that it is superstitious nonsense. How much rain we get has got to do with science. Asking God for help is the same as expecting the government to fix the problem. God may be just like John Howard or Malcolm Turnbull, he may have the desire to help but not the ability to carry it out.<sup>2</sup> The belief that God is in charge of the rain is from a pre-scientific age which now only gives people false hope.

This criticism assumes that even if God exists at all, he may have made the world but from that point on it's out of his hands and the laws of nature determine what will happen. But the concept of God from the Ancient Israelites is quite different to this.

Consider this line from a song they would sing:

**Whatever Yahweh pleases, he does, in heaven and on earth, in the seas and all deeps. He it is who makes the clouds rise at the end of the earth, who makes lightnings for the rain and brings forth the wind from his storehouses.**

Psalm 135:6-7

God never took a step back from what he had made and let it run by itself. He has always been intimately involved in what he has made. He does as he pleases with the things of this universe. It's his pleasure to create clouds. He does how he pleases as he creates lightning. The laws of nature that we get from science are simply ways of describing God's normal ways of working, what he is normally pleased to do. These observed laws are so successful because God works in an orderly way.

The poetic style of this ancient song may sound like pre-scientific nonsense in the way it talks about 'storehouses of wind' and 'the end of the earth'. But the Israelite wisdom of the time is equally capable of talking about water as a cycle, as is obvious here:

**All streams flow into the sea, yet the sea is never full.  
To the place the streams come from,  
there they return again.  
Ecclesiastes 1:7**

The Bible sees the process of nature as observable and understandable and, at the same time, happening according to God's pleasure and will. That's not only an encouragement to do science, to discover God's pleasure as he sustains this world, it's also an encouragement to ask him for help in time of drought. Both Elijah and Australian farmers are right to pray for rain.



<sup>1</sup> The Age, "Pray for rain, urges Howard", April 22, 2007

<sup>2</sup> Our current Minister for water is a distant relative of one of our storytellers no prizes for guessing which one.