

EXCERPT



Hear My Prayer
Learning from the Faith of Elijah
A 6-Week Bible Study Experience



May 14, 2024 | \$18, 176 pages, paperback | 978-1-5140-0623-8

Whether you consider yourself a prayer warrior, a prayer newbie, or even a prayer skeptic, Liz Ditty, an experienced spiritual director and retreat leader, invites you to engage with the story of Elijah and his encounters with God as she guides us toward a less awkward, more authentic prayer in this six-week Bible study experience.

My Prayers Became . . . Small.

As a little girl, I would stand in socked feet on top of my dad's shoes while he tried to teach me how to dance on the yellowed kitchen linoleum. "When it's your wedding, you dance with your dad first," he said sternly, "only when I let the groom cut in can he take you out of my arms."

He couldn't know then that he was the one who would be taken from my arms, not the other way around. While people earnestly prayed outside his hospital room for a miracle, I did not. Stage-four brain cancer was something I prayed to accept, not for God to heal.

My wedding was only four months away, and the doctors believed he had six to twelve months to live. He might be in a wheelchair, but his goofy grin could still light up the dance floor. *I'm not even asking to keep him, Lord, just one last dance in the window you've already given him to live.* For all the deals humans have made with God, I was shooting for an easy yes.

When my dad took his last breath, I glanced down at my left hand resting near his knee. My engagement ring shimmered against the rough hospital blanket. It was ten weeks before my wedding day.

No one told me about the scars that calcify around unanswered prayers, or how to grapple with disappointment in God that wheels uncontrollably toward anger. I was distracted enough navigating the countless losses that rippled outward from losing my dad, and at the same time propelled forward by the excitement of starting a brand-new life with my husband. And life kept going.

I didn't stop believing in God, I couldn't lose him too. We had been through too much together and I was sure he had his reasons. I kept reading my Bible, continued to lead in our church, and I still prayed. But my prayers became . . . *small*.

My imagination of God had slowly shifted to someone that I could trust for his vast knowledge and wisdom, but whose plan couldn't be changed by my prayers. A God who refused to answer the smallest, purest request from his loyal servant, for a reason too vast for me to know. When I was young, after I got shots at the doctor, I always got to drive through McDonald's and get an ice cream cone to take a little bit of the sting away. I figured God just wasn't that kind of Father.

I know my unanswered prayer is smaller than some of yours. Not being able to trust God to know and do good is the oldest lie in the Bible. It's the fundamental lie that Satan told humans in the Garden of Eden, and it took me over a decade of unspoken prayers to realize I had begun believing it. My image of God had shifted toward wise and powerful, away from caring and kind.

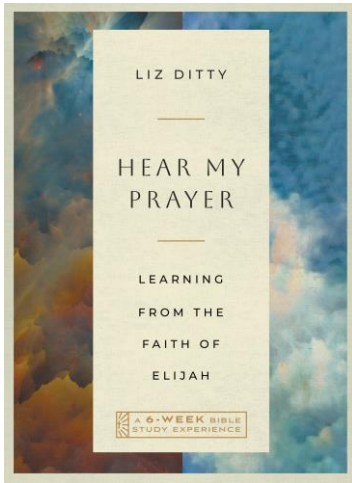


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Liz Ditty is a spiritual director, author, preacher, and teacher currently guiding transformative prayer retreats at Mount Hermon Conference Center, nestled in the coastal redwoods of California.

The way we talk to God—or don't—can reveal something hidden that we believe about who God is. *An inescapable part of prayer is getting comfortable in the presence of God.* For the next six weeks, we will move toward less awkward, more authentic conversations with God. We'll experiment with different ways to talk to God and practice holding—not hiding—our resistance to prayer that has settled in.

This Bible study will immerse us in the story of the prophet Elijah. You may have heard people talk about Elijah hearing God whisper to him in 1 Kings 19. James, the brother of Jesus, tells the story with a twist—Elijah didn't just listen to God, God listened to Elijah. When Elijah prayed, fire burst down from heaven, food appeared for the starving, and rain refused to fall. James doesn't put this forward as a mythic example or something only great prophets achieve; in James 5:17 he writes, "Elijah was a human being, even as we are. He prayed earnestly that it would not rain, and it did not rain on the land for three and a half years."

I couldn't imagine praying for rain or fire or resurrection like Elijah, even if he was human. When Jesus' disciples wondered how to pray, he taught them with his prayer.

This, then, is how you should pray:

"Our Father in heaven,
hallowed be your name,
your kingdom come,
your will be done,
on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us today our daily bread.
And forgive us our debts,
as we also have forgiven our debtors.
And lead us not into temptation,
but deliver us from the evil one." (Matthew 6:9-13)

It turns out the things Jesus taught his followers to pray for were just the kind of things that Elijah prayed for, that James reminded the early church they could pray for, and that humans like us have prayed for ever since. Let's spend some time in Jesus' prayer with the human Elijah and see if we can find the same courage, wonder, and new life that he found in his conversations with God.

In Sunday school I was taught that God answered every prayer with one of three answers: yes, no, or wait. God always seemed to answer mine with silence, which was supposed to be a no or wait, and that never felt like much of an answer at all. I now know that God answers my prayers in an infinite number of ways. Sometimes he answers a prayer about my job with a word from someone else about my identity. Sometimes when I pray for my kids' health, he answers with his own calming presence. There are more than three answers. They don't fit on a traffic light. *God has as many words and ways to meet us as a living, breathing, eternally wise, and boundlessly loving Father.* I wonder what prayers we will bring to God in the coming weeks, or if those prayers will change, or how they will change us. All I can promise is that God is listening.



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