

PERSISTENCE – PRAYER POWER

By John Gagliardi



Important as they are, two of the words I like least to talk about are “patience” and “persistence” (which of course is a compelling reason why I should write about them – I need to preach to myself more than anyone else!) Most of us, I surmise, would be immediately critical of anyone who announces: “I want it now, and I want it my way!”

But I suspect that is exactly what many of us really want deep down, even though, of course, we would probably put a much more spiritual “spin” on it! We would pray a Scripture like “...Delight yourself in the Lord, and He will give you the desires of your heart” (Psalm 37:4). Again I suspect many of us tend to gloss over the “delight yourself in the Lord” bit, and concentrate on the “He will give you the desires of your heart” bit!

I have, on occasion, certainly had prayers answered quickly – but most of my prayers I have been praying for many years, and am still waiting “patiently and persistently” for an answer. Having read the Bible from Genesis to Revelation at least 90 times in the past three decades, I am well aware of the qualifications on answered prayer – “praying to the Father in Jesus’ Name”, “praying according to God’s will”, “humbling” ourselves, praying “in faith” and without a “double mind” praying in “agreement”, etc. And not for one moment am I in any way denigrating these great and inspiring Scriptures on prayer and receiving from God.

However I strongly suspect from my own experience - and many readings of Scripture - that there is one overwhelming element that underlies all prayer – the need to pray with both persistence and with patience.

This whole train of thought began when a good friend, and a very mature Christian in senior leadership in a major local church, referred me to a very strange story in the Bible; he didn’t say much, just that he felt I should read it.

It was the almost bizarre story in Judges 19-21 that starts with the Levite allowing his concubine to be raped and murdered, and then cutting up her body into 12 parts and sending one part to each of the 12 tribes of Israel – a story I have to say I have never really enjoyed nor understood

in all my readings of the Bible, and one that I tend to skip over pretty quickly (like most of the book of Leviticus). But probably for the first time I read the story more carefully and attentively.

What I came to realize is that it doesn't show anyone involved in the story in a particularly positive light – the story ranges from the lowest depths of cruelty and depravity to brutal revenge and opportunistic kidnapping. But as I read it again, and then a third time, something finally popped out at me – the significance of the persistence of the Israelites in their desire to punish the tribe of Benjamin for their support and defence of the men of Gibeah who perpetrated the unspeakable atrocity on the Levite's concubine. I will not go into the story in any detail – take a deep breath and read it for yourself in chapters 19 to 21 in the Book of Judges.

What stands out to me as I read it, is that the 11 avenging tribes of Israel go about the whole affair seemingly the right way – whatever their motives, they go to God first: "...The men of Israel numbered 400,000 men who drew the sword ...then the children of Israel arose and went up to the house of God to inquire of God..."

The result? Twenty-two thousand Israelites were "cut down to the ground". Undeterred they went back to God, and "wept before the Lord until evening and asked counsel of the Lord." And the Lord said: "Go up against him". The result? Eighteen thousand Israelites were slaughtered by the rampaging Benjamites.

With 40,000 casualties, the Israelites could have been forgiven for thinking twice about going out again against the all-conquering Benjamites. But – here comes persistence with the capital "P"! Instead of giving up, the Israelites went yet again to the Lord, this time in the person of Phineas the son of Eleazar, the son of Aaron: "Shall I yet again go out to battle against the children of my brother Benjamin, or shall I cease?"

And the Lord said: "Go up, for tomorrow I will deliver them into your hand". Then Israel set men in ambush all around Gibeah, and "the children of Israel went up against the children of Benjamin on the third day, and put themselves in battle array against Gibeah as at the other times.

The result? After two days of failure and defeat, the Israelites ultimately all but annihilated the Benjamites: "They surrounded the Benjamites, chased them, and easily trampled them down ... so all who fell that day were twenty-five thousand men ... but six hundred men turned and fled toward the wilderness to the rock of Rimmon, and they stayed at the rock of Rimmon for four months."

Persistence! Many of us after two successive defeats would have given up – but persistence says no matter how many times you fall or fail, get up and go again. Proverbs 24:16 – "For a righteous man may fall seven times, and rise again."

Throughout the Bible, especially in the Old Testament, there are many stories of great bible heroes who were given promises from God, yet had to wait faithfully and persistently to see them come to pass. Abraham had to wait a quarter of a century for the birth of Isaac; Moses

waited 120 years to glimpse the Promised Land, David waited 16 years from anointing to coronation, Joseph waited 13 years and Paul in the New testament also waited 13 years. Jesus Himself waited more than 30 years, and we His followers have so far waited some 2000 years and still have absolute faith and expectancy that He will return again in triumph to declare His Kingdom on earth.

Jesus gave a good example of persistence and how it eventually pays off in Luke 18:1-8. The story is about a persistent widow who kept “troubling” an unjust judge for a hearing. Although he really couldn’t care less about the widow and the rights or wrongs of her case, he eventually heard her, saying: “...Because this widow troubles me, I will avenge her, lest by her continual coming she weary me”.

Jesus begins the parable by saying this is an example of why people “always ought to pray and not lose heart” (Luke 18:1). In other words, to be persistent and patient, just like the widow in the following story.

Still in the Book of Luke, there is a similar theme in a story in Chapter 11, verses 5-9. Having just spent time teaching His disciples how to pray (Luke 11:1-4), Jesus goes on to stress the importance of persistence in prayer. Again, the story is homely and “non-religious”, with a friend coming at midnight to ask for a favour: “Friend, lend me three loaves, because a friend of mine has come to me on his journey and I have nothing to set before him”.

The friend’s first response is to say “take a hike” – but as Jesus goes on we hear once again the results of persistence: “Though he will not rise and give to him because he is his friend, yet *because of his persistence* he will rise and give him as many as he needs” (Luke 11:8).

Jesus then uses this story to introduce and underpin one of His most memorable and inspiring promises: “Ask and *keep on asking*, and it shall be given you; seek and *keep on seeking*, and you shall find; knock and *keep on knocking*, and the door shall be opened to you” (Luke 11:9 Amp).

Referring to these two parables, Wayne Savaya in a *God’s Work Ministry* article says: “The Lord Jesus is conveying through these two stories that we should be constant and continuous in our requests unto the Lord. We shouldn’t expect our answer just because we pray for that need one time, but rather we are to pray fervently until the answer comes.

“The Bible says we are to ask in faith without wavering. We can’t expect God to answer when we pray one minute and complain the next minute. Our faith and expectancy must be sure and positive that God hears and will answer. Never allow pessimism to keep you from receiving your answer from the Lord. Stay faithful and continuous and surely your prayer will be answered. (James 1:6-8).

“I encourage you to be persistent when you make your petition before the Lord. We have a promise that if we ask anything according to God’s will, He hears us and will be faithful to answer as the scriptures declare in 1 John 5:14-15, ‘And this is the confidence that we have in

Him that, if we ask any thing according to His will, He heareth us: And if we know that He hears us, whatsoever we ask, we know that we have the petitions that we desired of Him'."

The persistence message, I am sure, hardly needs any further reinforcement, but the following examples from the letters of Paul are illuminating:

- Continuing steadfastly in prayer (Romans 12:12)
- Praying always with all prayer and supplication ... with all perseverance ... (Ephesians 6:18)
- Continuing earnestly in prayer ... (Colossians 4:2)
- Pray without ceasing (1 Thessalonians 5:17)

Of all the qualities possessed by the British during the dark days of World War II., when defeat at the hands of a formidable and seemingly unstoppable enemy seemed inevitable, the ones that most shone through were their tenacity and determination – their persistence in the face of overwhelming odds.

It has never been more eloquently stated than by Britain's wartime Prime Minister Sir Winston Churchill, who, at Harrow School on October 29, 1941 so famously said:

Never give in. Never give in. Never, never, never, never -- in nothing, great or small, large or petty -- never give in, except to convictions of honour and good sense. Never yield to force. Never yield to the apparently overwhelming might of the enemy.