

Persistent Prayer -

A Global Christian Response to the Challenges of Our Times

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As we look around our world at the array of disasters, disorders, and disintegration, it is easy to become discouraged. At the time of this writing, conflict in the Holy Land has murderously escalated and much of the Middle East and North Africa region has become a theatre of proxy wars. Russia is accused of over 50,000 war crimes in their invasion of Ukraine. Myanmar keeps bombing its own citizens. A series of coups has rocked the Sahel—a region already traumatized by poverty and Islamist violence. Mexican cartels attempt to outdo one another in horrifying violence. Tens of millions around the world have fled their homes because it was no longer safe to stay there. Hundreds of millions more are likely to have to flee in the decades to come due to severe climate and environment issues. Corruption and systemic dysfunction grotesquely enrich the few while many struggle to endure economic crisis after crisis. Scandals continue to rip apart what we thought were strong and effective Christian ministries, even as droves of people—especially the younger generation—disassociate themselves from the Church. There is no need to add to this sad litany, although it would be painfully easy to do so.

In response to all of the above, we pray and pray and then pray some more. But so often, it feels like our prayers are in vain. Times such as we are experiencing require us to repeat as often as necessary three important reminders.

First, is that we must remember that news organizations are mighty engines and that their fuel is conflict and disaster. Reading the news, it is easy to lose sight of the fact that human lifespans are longer than ever in recorded history. Other historic markers? Global health outcomes are better, poverty is less ubiquitous, literacy is higher, and rates of violent crime are lower. All of the woes reported can be 100% true, even while the positive progress that humanity is experiencing goes largely unreported. Bad news sells. Good news? Not so much.

Next is the fact that the best of the good news—the properly Good News—continues to make inroads around the world. Perhaps it is not happening at the rate we would wish, but spread it does. In every country in the world, even those closed to the gospel, there are groups of Jesus followers gathering together to worship Him. In a surprising number of cases, the places that are most hostile are the very places where those who follow Jesus are multiplying most rapidly.

Third, and perhaps most importantly, the global Church is gaining the understanding that the second factor occurs in response to prayer. And, as a result, Christians are praying at a scale previously unheard

of. Some may dispute the claims that prayer is the cause of these missional breakthroughs. But as the widely-quoted and succinct saying of Archbishop William Temple goes, “When I pray, coincidences happen, and when I don’t, they don’t.” Places where Christians are poor and powerless have long known this. Places where the Church is seeing its wealth and influence decline are learning it quickly. Prayer—not military hardware, economic imperialism, nor diplomatic policy, but prevailing, persistent prayer that aligns with the Lord’s revealed purposes—is our best answer to every crisis. The secret to understanding how our prayers and God’s answers link up is all in the timing.

Occasionally, a servant of the Lord turns up somewhere and immediately ministers in the power of the Spirit such that thousands turn to the Lord, or spiritual strongholds are broken. Every so often, a prayer gathering is held and by morning, the reason for the praying is gloriously resolved. But such wonderful occasions are not the norm. It seems that the economy of God’s kingdom works, at least in part, on accrual. The slow, steady accumulation of interest, earned through faithful intercession, acts of Christlikeness, and gospel witness, builds up. It is imperceptible to us—until the breakthrough comes.

Sometimes people live to see the fruit of their own investments in prayer and good works, perhaps after years or even decades. This may be the return of their own prodigal child to their upbringing in the community of faith. It may be the revival in their own community for which they prayed for decades. It may be a missional breakthrough among an unreached people group or the end of an oppressive totalitarian regime.

Yet, often the outcome for which we pray doesn’t happen until later we have passed on. And although we don’t like to admit it, the hard reality is that sometimes the longed-for breakthrough never comes at all. We do not have a complete explanation of why this is, but it is. God’s power and will are seemingly thwarted by those opposed to Jesus’ reign. The distraction and disobedience of the saints delays the accomplishment of God’s purposes. Why? We still don’t fully understand the dynamics of the interactions between our prayers, God’s sovereignty, and the free will of both human beings and the powers. We never will fully understand, at least not in this lifetime. But we have assurances from the Maker of the universe that our prayers and our choices do make a difference. They aren’t merely shoehorned into the Lord’s plan. The plan is in fact dynamically impacted by them.

God is at work, all according to His cosmic intentions. He is not a step ahead of the rest of us. He stands outside of time and space and all the billions of years of the universe are like a speck. But the schedule for this master plan appears to be a flexible one. We read from Scripture, "The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. Instead he is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance" (2 Pet 3:9 NIV). God's flexibility with the timetable is based, not on a lack of resolve, nor a lack of resources, but on the truth that he has chosen to partner with humanity to accomplish these plans and purposes. Peter makes this clear two verses later when he writes, "Since all these things are thus to be dissolved, what sort of people ought you to be in lives of holiness and godliness, waiting for and hastening the coming of the day of God" (2 Pet 3:11-12a ESV, emphasis mine). The very notion is staggering—how we as disciples live our lives has an actual impact on when God's plans are fulfilled!

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Once we accept that this principle is true, we see that it applies even more broadly. Across the sweep of Scripture, from Genesis to Revelation, we see God waiting for things to reach their fullness before acting.

Anyone involved with global mission will hopefully be familiar with Matthew 24:14: "And this gospel of the kingdom will be proclaimed throughout the whole world as a testimony to all nations, and then the end will come." It stands to reason that Part B of this arrangement (the end) will only happen after Part A (world evangelization) is done. God seems almost scandalously willing both to partner with those humans who serve him and also to wait patiently for those who do not to repent.

In Genesis 15:16, God promises that Abram's

descendants will emerge from slavery to Egypt and return to the land God was giving to him. But it would only be able to happen generations later, "for the sin of the Amorites has not yet reached its full measure" (NIV). In Galatians 4:4, we learn that "when the set time had fully come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, to redeem those under the law, that we might receive adoption to sonship" (NIV). Paul instructs the faithful in Rome that "Israel has experienced a hardening in part until the full number of the Gentiles has come in" (Rom 11:25 NIV). In Revelation 6:10-11, the martyrs cry out to God, asking "How long, Sovereign Lord, holy and true, until you judge the inhabitants of the earth and avenge our blood?" What is heaven's response? "Each of them was given a white robe, and they were told to wait a little longer, until the full number of their fellow servants, their brothers and sisters, were killed just as they had been" (NIV).

Again and again we see that God's plan is contingent on human choices. This, I believe, is one major reason why we can be assured that our prayers and our actions actually make a difference. We can accelerate the timeline by our obedience or delay it by our waywardness. We add to the accrual of prayers, even as others around the world add their own contributions. Though it is barely perceptible on a grand scale, our intercession accumulates. And in time, when the full deposit is made, answers come in a way that would seem very sudden if we didn't know any better. When we at Operation World share about the impact of intercession on global situations, as well as the need for persistent prayer in the face of implacable resistance, we often share a series of three water-based analogies. The first is that of an iceberg. While the largest icebergs loom over ships like mountains, most of the iceberg's mass is underwater and unseen.— So it is with spiritual realities — the invisible realm is far larger than we perceive. The West's secular materialist worldview blinds us to this, but it is evident in Scripture that there is much more going on than what our human eyes can see.

On occasion, God pulls back the curtain and allows His servants a clearer picture of the forces in play. Our prayers may often feel like mere words, but the reality is that they can have profound effects in the spiritual world. The second picture of is that of a river flowing through a rocky canyon. What possible effect can a meandering stream of water have against the durability of a stone? A few drops will make no mark. Neither will thousands or even millions of liters. But given enough time—as long as the water keeps flowing, even the hardest of rock gives way. We've all seen photos of the Grand Canyon or of Big Bend National Park. The persistence of a river's impact on stone is undeniable. Prayer, as with water, may take time, but with time, it has the power to reshape the world. The final analogy is drawn from personal experience. On the grounds of our mission base in the UK, there was a particularly magnificent specimen of oak tree.

It towered above other trees; it must have been well over 30 meters tall. It looked invincible. But on a rare January night when the temperatures dropped below freezing and a heavy snow fell, the woods resounded with an almighty crash. The morning light revealed that the mighty oak had shattered near the base and toppled, taking a couple of trees with it on the way down and obliterating an unfortunate section of fencing. A brief examination revealed that the core of the trunk was broken. The change in temperature rendered the dead heart of the tree brittle and weak. The cumulative weight of the snowflakes piling up on bough and branch eventually brought the giant down. How much does a snowflake weigh? Which one of them was it that felled the mighty oak? Our prayers may seem insubstantial, but cumulatively, they have the power to bring down giants.

The promises of Scripture give us the confidence to pray with authority for what seems impossible. And the principles spelled out above help us not to panic or lose heart when we speak to the mountain and nothing happens. It would seem to me that such notions apply not only to prayer, but to missionary work as well. Those who have been chipping away at the rock face of the Great Commission over the course of a lifetime can attest that this is often the case. Sometimes we labour for years—decades, even—with no evident fruit. Missions history is littered with testimonies of faithful Kingdom workers who felt that they had failed because they saw few or none come to faith in Christ during their long years of service. Whether they were aware or not, the tenet of accrual and the tenet of fullness eventually converge, and, under God’s sovereignty, the longed-for change comes.

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“Great things are not done by impulse, but by a series of small things brought together.”¹ Vincent van Gogh was a deeply philosophical, and at many points of his life, religious man. Troubled though he was, he understood this fundamental principle. In keeping with the spirit of the age, the tempo of our expectations seems to be aligned with the speed that it takes to microwave our food or perhaps order takeaway using whichever app is popular in

1. Vincent van Gogh. Vincent Van Gogh, The Letters, Letter 274. The Hague: Van Gogh Museum: Van Gogh Letters Project. <https://vangoghletters.org/vg/letters/let274/le:er.html>

our region. So it should come as no surprise that the greatest of all things, the fulfilment of the Great Commission, may require the Lord’s own patience. Over a century ago, John P. Jones, in part as a response to the enthusiastic urgency of the Student Volunteer Movement, shared this conviction in *The Modern Missionary Challenge*: “This enterprise is not only the greatest that the world has ever known; it is also the most difficult of achievement. Let us not fall into the error of thinking that Christianizing the nations and bringing the world to the feet of our Lord is the task of a day or of a generation.”²

The need for such patient persistence is why I have great admiration for those who have served long in the Lord’s harvest fields and prayer closets. Whether the breakthrough has come, or is still to come, through their faithfulness they have made tremendous deposits into accounts that one day will be wonderfully redeemed. Be it a missionary couple who remain on the field for a lifetime, an intercessor who prays without ceasing until they are promoted to glory, an Overseas Filipino Worker who never stops shining the light of Jesus in a dark and difficult situation, the local evangelist who outlasts disinterest and stone-faced rejection every single week, or anyone else who endures until the end, their persistence in taking no rest and giving heaven no rest will be rewarded in due course. Of that we have God’s own assurance.

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2. Jones, John P. *The Modern Missionary Challenge: A study of the present day world missionary enterprise: its problems and results*. (New York, Revell, 1911), 251.



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