



PERSEVERANCE

Extract from 'Awakening Cry' by Pete Greig

1. In the day of small things...

For most of us there is an enormous gulf between our aspirations in prayer and our present reality. But faith lives in the tension between these two extremes.

We live in a day of small things, yet dare to dream of revival. It is encouraging to note therefore that throughout scripture, faith-filled men and women have looked at acorns and perceived oak trees:

Abraham looked at barren Sarah and trusted God for Isaac. He then looked at Isaac and perceived an entire nation.

Joshua and Caleb returned from their spying mission, and while others described a land of giants, they placed their faith in God's insignificant nomadic people.

David saw tiny stones and a simple sling and trusted God for the greatest victory in his nation's history.

Simeon, standing in enemy-occupied Israel, after 400 years of silence from heaven, saw a new-born baby and perceived the Messiah. The baby could not walk, talk or feed himself, yet by faith Simeon saw and knew.

God himself took a few loaves and a fish... He picked a dozen rough-necked men... He limited himself to a few hundred square miles of earth, to a short span of years and to a human body before the age of the combustion engine, surgery or international communication. Ultimately, he limited his body to a couple of planks of wood on a dusty hill in the Middle East, and there the Creator died. Insignificance. Small things: a nameless cripple healed, a long forgotten widow comforted, friends who were marginalised, faceless witnesses. Mundane stories of farmers and children and savings. These things veiled the most profound truths of the universe. Such a Saviour inspires faith in the day of small things.

God has made it clear that he prefers using the small and the insignificant to achieve his ends. He even considered Gideon's army too large for victory! I cannot think of a single example in scripture of a character called and used by God who was an obvious or a "strategic" choice. We should take great comfort, therefore, from the fact that the church today is such an eccentric and motley crew of social misfits. Jesus has always chosen friends like that.

Conspiracy of the insignificant

Gerald Coates calls the church "God's overwhelming minority" and Tom Sine describes the Kingdom as "a conspiracy of the insignificant". We must learn to discern God's hand in the small and inconsequential. It is not that we settle for tiny churches and unanswered prayer but rather that we are faith-full in the small, perceiving the greater works of God despite our



frustrations and discouragements. This is the measure of true faith; after all it doesn't take much faith to perceive revival once you're actually in it! But to stand by the tiniest trickle of hope and hear the roar of a great Niagara: that takes faith. In fact for any visionary the only alternative to terminal frustration is going to be faith that things can change.

Elijah was a man of great faith in an age of terrible discouragement. God's prophets had been persecuted into near oblivion and immorality ruled the land under Jezebel and her spineless husband Ahab. But after Elijah's victorious showdown with the prophets of Baal on Mount Carmel we read that, "Ahab went off to eat and drink, while Ellijah climbed to the top of Carmel, bent down to the ground and put his face between his knees." (I Kings 18:42-44) He knew that the fire of judgement, which had consumed his sacrifice, was only the first baptism. Now he prayed that God would lift the curse and send the baptism of rain that would terminate years of drought. The skies were blue and cloudless, yet Elijah's spirit could hear "the sound of heavy rain." ((I Kings 18:41) As he listened he prayed, sending his servant again and again to scan the horizon for even the smallest sign. At last the servant reported one insignificant cloud "the size of a man's fist " and Elijah knew for certain that his prayers had been answered.

This small, unimpressive cloud was enough to convince him that rain was coming, and it was coming fast. Note two things in this story: first that Elijah sent his servant to look. Why did he not just open his eyes? I can only assume that it was because he needed to focus on a higher reality, he was listening with his spiritual ears to "the sound of a heavy rain" and could not afford to be distracted by the disconcerting fact of a cloudless sky. Secondly, note that Elijah's faith pre-dated the evidence: the formation of a tiny rain-cloud. He was not exercising faith for the remotely possible, having noticed the hint of rain materialising on the horizon. Elijah was trusting God for the entirely impossible, praying for rain when the sky was still clear. By the time that the cloud had actually appeared, once there was the slightest evidence, his job was already done! Although the sun was still shining Elijah rose from his knees immediately and began sprinting ahead of the immanent downpour.

Sometimes, we scan the horizon for an indication of revival, and there is none. The slightest cloud would give us hope but burnished skies just mock our prayers for rain. Revival seems as distant and unlikely as snow on a summers day. But these are the occasions that demand faith and perseverance. At such times we will not find faith by searching the skies, or the newspapers for signs of hope. We will find faith by bowing with our heads between our knees as Elijah did, seeking God's face and claiming his promises. It is in that place of prayer, and only there, that we will find faith for the impossible. I suspect that this is one of the reasons why Jesus so often rose early and sought out isolation to pray. Like Elijah he needed time to listen to the mighty rain of God's promises. He knew that the day ahead would confront him with impossible situations, insoluble to the human mind. He needed first to tune in to the sights



and sounds of heaven, to find the hope that rises beyond the horizon of human possibility. In these important moments before dawn, Jesus would seek his Father's face knowing that "With man this is impossible, but with God all things are possible." (Matthew 19:26)

We saw in the last chapter that effective prayer flows from humility and is fueled by faith and we have learned from Elijah that such faith thrives on apparent trivia and insignificance. But to humility and faith we must now add perseverance, learning to pray without respite until the rain comes and breakthrough finally appears. This is what it means to prevail in prayer.

2. Prevailing in prayer

Duncan Campbell sat in the pulpit at a large Christian conference in Bangor, Ireland where he was the main speaker. Something began to stir in his spirit and he sensed an almost irresistible compulsion to leave the convention and fly to the tiny Hebridean island of Bernera. The inhabitants of Bernera numbered only about 500, less than the number attending the conference, and had been untouched by the recent revival on the larger islands nearby. But the compulsion in Duncan was too strong to ignore. He turned to the conference chairman and asked if he might be released to leave. The chairman refused, saying that he could not possibly excuse Duncan from delivering the final address. But Duncan pointed out that God was unlikely to anoint the sermon if he was calling him elsewhere, and the chairman reluctantly agreed.

Duncan flew from Ireland to Glasgow and then from Glasgow to Stornaway (capital of the Hebrides). From there he drove many miles north, finally crossing the waters to Bernera on the small ferry. At no point on the journey did he discuss his mission or reveal his identity to a single soul. Stepping ashore at Bernera he approached a boy and asked where the nearest minister lived. The boy replied that both of the island's churches were without ministers at that time. "Where then does the nearest church elder live?" Duncan inquired. "In the house on the top of the hill", indicated the lad. Duncan asked him to go and inform the elder that 'Mr. Campbell' has come to the island "and if he asks 'which Campbell' tell him, 'the Campbell who was on Lewis.'" The boy soon returned, out of breath, and even Duncan was startled by his reply, "Mr. Mackinnen has been expecting you. He has arranged for you to stay with his brother, and you are preaching in the church tonight."

A few days earlier, as Duncan sat in that pulpit in Bangor, Hector MacKinnen, the island postman had taken time off work to pray. He had become so disturbed by the spiritual ambivalence of his community that he committed the day to prayer in his barn. His wife recalled overhearing him pray for Duncan Campbell "Oh God, I do not know where he is, but you know and I ask you to send him."



Breakthrough

At 10 p.m. that evening, Hector 'broke through', that is, he received a sudden and certain conviction that his prayers had been answered. So sure was he that Duncan was coming upon the day in question that he arranged accommodation and notified the community that Mr. Campbell would be preaching the following Thursday at 9 p.m! Eighty people came to hear the visiting preacher that night, but nothing unusual happened. So ordinary was the meeting that Duncan even wondered whether he had mistaken God's call and should really have been preaching to the large numbers back in Bangor. But God was not responding to the faith of the renowned revival leader, but to that of a humble village postman who had received certainty from him in prayer.

The congregation left the building to make their way home, down the hill to the village below. Hector approached Duncan and sitting beside him said, "Mr. Campbell, I hope you are not disappointed that revival has not come to the church tonight, but God is hovering over us and he will break through at any minute." Suddenly Hector stopped short, stood up and slowly removed his hat. Gazing intently into the night he whispered, "Stand Mr. Campbell, for God has come. See what is happening." There below them on the hillside people were kneeling in the heather as loud cries of repentance began to fill the night air. The meeting, which had begun at 11 p.m. in the church continued until 4 in the morning on the hillside. The whole community was gripped by a "mighty visitation that shook the island from centre to circumference" and every single household was impacted that very night.

3. Praying until breakthrough

Therefore I tell you, whatever you ask for in prayer, believe that you have received it, and it will be yours (Mark 11:24)

Hector MacKinnen was not someone who just "said prayers", nor was he simply a person with a disciplined prayer life; Hector knew how to pray. Much of our praying today is ineffective because we have not learned how to pray. One day the disciples approached Jesus and asked to be taught to pray. In response he gave them 'The Lord's Prayer' saying "This then is how you should pray: "Our Father..."(Matthew 6:9) Please note that Jesus doesn't say "this is what you should pray."

The Lord's prayer is first and foremost a model of how to pray and not a script for repetition. In fact, Jesus teaches that our words aren't actually that important, because God listens to the heart - not our "babbling... many words." (Matthew 6:7), and he responds to our faith, not our phraseology.

Hector MacKinnen had learned to pray in faith, which is why he persevered all day until breakthrough came. As he knelt in that barn and asked God to send Duncan Campbell, Hector reached a moment of assurance, in which he knew that he had been heard (Mark 11:24). That



is why he could confidently book the church and arrange accommodation. Faith perseveres and does not relent until the answer comes. I wonder how much of our praying simply stops short of breakthrough? We must learn the lesson Hudson Taylor scribbled in his diary one night on Brighton beach; "To move man, through God, by prayer alone."

4. Persevering in prayer

Most revival accounts make reference to this experience of 'prevailing' in prayer, continuing until "One becomes actually aware of receiving, by firmest anticipation, and in advance of the event, the thing for which one asks." Having received a sense of breakthrough it then seems pointless to pray any more because the intercessor knows with certainty that God has heard and acted.

Charles Finney gives a remarkable example of such prevailing prayer: "The first ray of light that broke in upon the midnight which rested on the churches in Oneida County, in the fall of 1825, was from a woman in feeble health who, I believe, had never been in a powerful revival. Her soul was exercised about sinners. She was in agony for the land. She did not know what ailed her, but she kept praying more and more, till it seemed as if her agony would destroy her body. At length she became full of joy, and exclaimed 'God has come! God has come! There is no mistake about it, the work is begun and is going on all over the region.' And sure enough, the work began and her family were almost all converted, and the work spread over that part of the country. Now do you think that woman was deceived? I tell you, no. She knew she had prevailed with God in prayer. She had travailed in birth for souls, and she knew it"

On one occasion during the Hebridean awakening, Duncan Campbell was praying in a part of the island as yet untouched by the movement, locked away in the local minister's study. The minister was out in the field when he was startled by a shout. Turning, he saw Campbell running towards him calling out, "It's coming! It's coming! We've got through at last! We are over the top!" And sure enough, the revival broke through in that community that very night. Although such experiences of prevailing in prayer mark out most revivals, they should not be seen as essential to the answering of prayer. After all, when an angel released Peter from prison in answer to the church's prayers he found them still interceding for him when he presented himself at the house! In this instance the intercessors were oblivious to the fact that their prayers had 'broken through' so dramatically.

Waiting for the answer

The disciples 'joined together constantly in prayer' (Acts 1:14) right up to the moment when the Spirit came at Pentecost. They remembered that Jesus had told them to remain in Jerusalem until the promised 'baptism with the Holy Spirit' and because they loved and trusted him they obeyed. They didn't see themselves as super-heroes, they had no clue that they were about to become Bible characters or that they were on the verge of an explosion that would shake the



earth. There was no heavenly wall-planner hanging in the upper room with angels pointing to the day of Pentecost. They were not able to count off the hours, "Bring your sandwiches on Thursday ladies because that's the big day!" They simply knew that Christ had spoken and that his word could be trusted no matter how long it took. So they just waited and prayed, without any other plans for the future, while their businesses suffered and worried family members expressed concern. What a challenge this is to our instant culture and the speed with which we lose heart.

Jesus told the parable of the persistent widow (Luke 18:1-8) to emphasise this very principle "that they should always pray and not give up." The disciples probably remembered and re-told it as they passed the long hours in the upper room, reeling from the trauma and the wonder of recent events and anticipating his promise of "another helper".

Daniel, we are told, would get down on his knees and pray three times a day. One day, as he read the book of Jeremiah, God showed him that the exile would come to an end after 70 years. Taking God at his word he "turned to the Lord God and pleaded with him in prayer and petition, in fasting and in sackcloth and ashes." (Daniel 9:3). Daniel humbled himself and took it upon himself to confess the sins of his nation, interceding for mercy and forgiveness. He prayed passionately and with perseverance because he believed the firm promise of God. Three weeks later we find Daniel still persevering in prayer, fasting meat, wine and even 'body lotion'! (Daniel 9:3). Eventually an angel appears and tells him

Since the first day that you set your mind to gain understanding and to humble yourself before your God, your words were heard, and I have come in response to them. But the prince of the Persian Kingdom resisted me 21 days. (Daniel 10:12-13)

5. Spiritual warfare

Here we have a glimpse of the spiritual dimension that explains the need for persistence in prayer. It is not that God is slow to act, or that we are trying to persuade God (for prayer is laying hold of his highest willingness). Prayer requires persistence because it is also an act of warfare against "the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms" (Ephesians 6:12). Such prayer reverses the Fall in which Adam asserted his independence. In it we say "not my will, but yours be done." We fight with God to liberate enemy-occupied territory, knowing that whilst the victory is certain, the length of the battle is not. Finney once bellowed "Let hell boil over and spew out as many demons as there are stones in the pavement. If it causes Christians to draw close to God in prayer, the demons can't hinder a revival."

Prayer warriors

Because we are caught up in a battle between opposing Kingdoms, we have no choice but to fight. Ed Silvoso, an Argentinian church leader, now based in California did a workshop at



Lausanne II in Manila in 1989 about the importance of spiritual warfare in the Argentinian awakening. There he said, "If there is one dominant element that has emerged in the theology and methodology of evangelism in Argentina, I would say it is spiritual warfare. It is an awareness that the struggle is not against a political or a social system. Nor is it on behalf of those who are captives, but it is rather against the jail keepers, against the Rulers, those in authority in the spiritual realm."

At times such warfare will cost us everything. Jesus sweated blood as he entered the greatest battle ever fought. Paul was able to wish himself separated from Christ for the sake of others. James is said to have been called 'old camel knees' because of the calluses he grew from kneeling so much in prayer.

A couple of years ago I was asked to run the youth programme at a large Christian event. A meeting had just finished and young people were rushing around, skateboarding and chatting. Someone came to me very concerned about two girls who were sobbing uncontrollably and almost screaming in the corner. I asked a responsible woman to go and sort it out and watched as she talked to the girls. Soon, she too broke down in tears and began crying out! Slightly annoyed at such immaturity on the part of my team member I went over myself. However as I got close enough to discern their words, I stopped in my tracks. These girls were not hysterical, they were crying out to God for a friend who was lost. So great was their burden in prayer that their hearts were breaking before his throne. They continued to pray like this for at least an hour and God heard their prayers. Such compassion in prayer challenged me profoundly.

Charles Finney tells of a prayer warrior with an even greater burden for the lost. "He prayed as if he would wreak violence on heaven. Blessings came so plainly in answer to his prayers that no one could doubt it. Should I tell you how he died? He prayed more and more, putting a map of the world in front of him. He looked over the countries and prayed for them until he died praying in his room. Blessed man! He was a prevailing prince of prayer."

Birth Pains

During the revival on Lewis, many of the greatest intercessors were women. Their prayers were passionate and persistent so that they generally missed the meetings because they were elsewhere praying. One lady described these unusual prayer gatherings: "The breath of the Spirit would come and it was like women being in childbirth. We would fill up and fill up and fill up with the breath of God, and we would be in agony, and suddenly there would be relief as the new soul was born. Then the weight would come again and we would fill up again and again and others would be born into the Kingdom." Of course, Paul himself describes the groans of creation as 'the pains of childbirth' which echo the Spirit's heart rending intercession for us "with groans that words cannot express" (Romans 8.26)



Finney's account of the prayer warrior of Oneida County describes a similar experience: "She was in agony... but she kept praying more and more, till it seemed as if her agony would destroy her body. At length she became full of joy, and exclaimed, 'God has come!... She had travailed in birth for souls, and she knew it." The intercessory prayer associated with revival has been compared to childbirth surprisingly often.

Frank Bartleman, who was one of the intercessors of the Azusa Street outpouring picked up the familiar refrain in his diary. "At Smale's church one day, I was groaning at the altar. The spirit of intercession was upon me. A brother rebuked me severely. He did not understand it. The flesh naturally shrinks from such ordeals. The 'groans' are no more popular in most churches than is a woman in birth-pangs in the home. Soul travail does not make pleasant company for selfish worldlings. But we cannot have souls born without it. Childbearing is anything but a popular exercise, and so with a real revival of new born souls in the churches... Men run from the groans of a woman in travail of birth. And so the church desires no 'groans' today. She is too busy enjoying herself." Such intercessors have learned what it means to prevail in prayer, persevering through the day of small things to lay hold of God's promises unrelentingly. Like Elijah they have heard the sound of a heavy rain and have seen the dark clouds gathering, far beyond the horizon of human sight.

