

Perfume And Bombs

- **PRAYER SKIT (SADDLEBACK):** Many people have false (even funny) ideas about what prayer is supposed to be like. Today, we want to find out what the Bible has to say about how prayer “feels” – in other words, how do you know when you are doing it right?
- **2 Peter 3:8-9** But, beloved, be not ignorant of this one thing, that one day is with the Lord as a thousand years, and a thousand years as one day. The Lord is not slack concerning his promise, as some men count slackness; but is longsuffering to us-ward, not willing that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance.
- **Exodus 33:18** And he said, I beseech thee, shew me thy glory.
- Think of someone you know who is in the middle of a terrible trial (maybe yourself!). They have waited a long time for deliverance. They wait and they pray. The waiting is long, dreary, heavy. At times, their faith is militant, defying and commanding. Other times they pray with faltering hopes, pleading words and a begging spirit.
- They pray, not in faith, but out of faithfulness, out of loyalty to a God they haven't seen or heard from in a long, lonely time.
- There is only one reason why such a person should keep praying – because prayer and waiting are inseparably linked, joined at the hip. Prayer makes absolutely no sense apart from waiting, because it is about being made in the likeness of Christ – and that takes time.
- If prayer was only about getting things – getting even, getting rich, getting well, getting justice – then we would call it something else! (like revenge, luck, medicine, magic, etc.) But prayer is not about bartering and bargaining with God, haggling for the best deal; it is about becoming like Jesus. Slow, painful, difficult work at best.
- Think of the famous Bible characters that we love; they were without exception people of action. But still, they had to wait – sometimes for people who were stubborn, lazy, rebellious and cowardly, but most of the time for God Himself.
 - God, who could wait for one Pharaoh to die and another to succeed him.
 - God, who promised a land flowing with milk and honey but could hold up the journey for forty years in a desert in order to work out a few character issues in the people.
 - God, who could depose King Saul and anoint David, but could then watch for the next dozen years as Saul clung to his throne and hunted David until he became a vagabond.

- Frustrating, isn't it? Few things in the Christian life puzzle and aggravate us more than prayer. Much of our doubt, disappointment and discouragement can be traced back to times when we ached and begged for God to speak or act ... and nothing happened! Our indifference toward prayer is really just a scab that has formed to protect ourselves from having our hopes dashed once again.
- Because this is the case, it is absolutely vital that we grasp the concept of DIVINE DELAY. Peter says not to be ignorant of ONE THING – what is it that is so essential to understand?
- **2 Peter 3:8-9** But, beloved, be not ignorant of this one thing, that one day is with the Lord as a thousand years, and a thousand years as one day. **The Lord is not slack concerning his promise, as some men count slackness;** but is longsuffering to us-ward, not willing that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance.
- **John 9:1-3** And as Jesus passed by, he saw a man which was blind from his birth. And his disciples asked him, saying, Master, who did sin, this man, or his parents, that he was born blind? Jesus answered, Neither hath this man sinned, nor his parents: but that the works of God should be made manifest in him.
- We never learn this man's age, other than that “he is of age.” Let's say he was twenty. His blindness happened so that the work of God might be displayed in his life. **That's a long time to wait for the purpose of God to be displayed!** All those years of feeling for walls and railings, all those years of wandering in darkness and stumbling over obstacles. And for what? So that the work of God might be displayed in his life! Frustrating, isn't it? God doesn't mind waiting.

THERE ARE TWO IMAGES THAT JOHN USES IN THE BOOK OF REVELATION TO DESCRIBE PRAYER:

PERFUME

- **Revelation 5:8** And when he had taken the book, the four beasts and four and twenty elders fell down before the Lamb, having every one of them harps, and golden vials full of odours, which are the prayers of saints.
- The prayers of the saints of all the ages are gathered as incense before God, a beautiful fragrance that swirls through Heaven's throne room, mingling with the intensity of never-ending worship. Gathered from all corners of the globe, this incense represents the afflicted, the comforted, the lonely, the reunited, the dying, the rejoicing – they are all here before God through their prayers. It is a powerful and beautiful image ... and God basks in it.

- But it is also a troubling image, because this is our greatest fear about prayer! We are rightly concerned that all of our spiritual efforts may end up as just so much smoke and scent, an aromatic vapor devoid of substance. If that's all prayer is, it can do no more to heal a broken world than a splash of aftershave can do to revive a corpse!
- I pray to move God's hand! I want to watch those hands bend and break, make and shape, bless and curse, heal and restore, to do ... something! I certainly DON'T pray to provide God with cologne!
- Mothers are dying down here, Jesus! Children are starving, Destruction stalks us and evil gloats over us; there is trouble everywhere. We are praying fervently, feverishly for you to do something about it.
- Sorry Lord, but don't just smell our prayers – ANSWER THEM!
- I want prayer to work like a HOUSE being built; I want it to work quickly, tangibly, noticeably. I want it to transform, from bedrock to skyline, the appearance of things and raise up something new and unmistakable that everyone will see.
- But too often, I experience prayer like the WEATHER. It follows its own mysterious patterns, maybe changes the quality of the air temporarily, fluctuates the temperature, or alters the wetness of the ground. But otherwise it leaves things virtually unchanged.
- **Bottom line? Prayer sometimes just seems to make a nice fragrance when what's needed is to move the earth!**
- WHY PRAY? This business of "perfume" is the question behind all our struggles to pray. If prayer worked more tangibly (if it was like house building!), we might find it to be difficult work but we wouldn't doubt its usefulness. We would see the difference it made by simply charting its progress day after day.
- We often declare "LET'S PRAY" with just barely enough volume to drown out the devil's incessant voice screaming "WHY BOTHER?" (What good will it do? We all know that this depends on the ability of machines and medicine, doctors and diagnoses, luck and chance.)
- **Mark 9:21-24** And he asked his father, How long is it ago since this came unto him? And he said, Of a child. And oftentimes it hath cast him into the fire, and into the waters, to destroy him: but if thou canst do any thing, have compassion on us, and help us. Jesus said unto him, If thou canst believe, all things are possible to him that believeth. And straightway the father of the child cried out, and said with tears, Lord, I believe; help thou mine unbelief.
- Before you criticize this father for his weakness, remember that his boy has been like this since childhood. For many years, he has watched his son try to fight a power that he is no match for.
- No father would stand by and simply watch a big bully thrash his little boy, but this father has been forced to do that. Day after day, he has been forced to witness a merciless, gloating demon pummel his child, bent on destruction. It would wither a man's insides!
- By now, he has tried everything ... every doctor, every potion, every quack cure, every miracle worker, every holy man, every prayer meeting, every incantation, every claim. Each new attempt tortures his heart with bright hope and black despair. And when Jesus' own disciples can do nothing, it is just one more failure in a long miserable string of failures. No wonder he says, "Lord, if You can do anything, take pity on us and help us! I do believe, but help me to overcome my unbelief!"
- Before you criticize this dad and offer him a few well-worn clichés, remember that he has prayed every kind of prayer imaginable. Sometimes he's bold in his praying, the five-star general commanding the troops. Sometimes he's afraid, the ragged beggar pleading for a handout. Sometimes he's empty, and he just weeps. And sometimes he can't even do that. He has read all the recommended books, ransacked the Internet for advice, sought counsel from pastors and prophecies from evangelists, cried at the altar and believed until his faith is raw. It's all added up to NOTHING.
- If right now you said to this man, "Take courage! Your prayers are gathering before God's Throne as a sweet perfume!" he might have spit at you, hit you, or even cursed you. That's the very last thing that he wants to hear!
- And yet, that's exactly the truth at this point. All those years of praying, trying and crying have made a beautiful fragrance, but not much else. Frustrating, isn't it? UNTIL ...
- Suddenly, after all these years of despair and defeat, his prayers are answered! Jesus CAN help! He commands the demon to flee, and the little boy is healed. "Why couldn't we cast him out?" the disciples ask. Listen to the annoying, exasperating, maddening answer! "This kind can come forth by nothing but prayer and fasting." JESUS, WHAT DO YOU THINK WE HAVE BEEN DOING?!?
- Jesus didn't give them an answer, He gave them more mystery, more frustration! That is, until you understand John's second image of prayer from the book of Revelation ...

BOMBS

- **Revelation 8:3-5** And another angel came and stood at the altar, having a golden censer; and there was given unto him much incense, that he should offer it with the prayers of all saints upon the golden altar which was before the throne. And the smoke of the incense, which came with the prayers of the saints, ascended up before God out of the angel's hand. And the angel took the censer, and filled it with fire of the altar, and cast it into the earth: and there were voices, and thunderings, and lightnings, and an earthquake.
- SUDDENLY, THE PERFUME IS MIXED WITH THE FIRE OF GOD AND IT BECOMES BOMBS WHICH ARE CAST INTO THE EARTH. The long wait is finally interrupted and everything is forever altered. The status quo is shaken up, split open and reordered. The demons flee, the blind see, the lame walk, the dead arise.
- When we pray, the answer does come. But it comes at a point and in a way beyond our choosing, beyond our ability to predict or control or delay or hasten. That's frustrating. But when our prayers finally hurtle back to earth, ignited with the fire of God, THAT'S POWERFUL!
- Annie Dillard: "Does anyone have the foggiest idea what sort of power we so blithely invoke? Or, as I suspect, does no one believe a word of it? The churches are [like] children playing on the floor with their chemistry sets, mixing up a batch of TNT to [explode on] a Sunday morning. It is madness to wear [delicate ladies'] hats to church; we should all be wearing crash helmets. Ushers should issue life preservers and signal flares; they should lash us to our pews."
- It's frustrating isn't it, that with all this power stockpiled in Heaven, the primary discipline of prayer for us is ... WAITING! We live with the conviction that the Lord is not slow in keeping His promise, as some understand slowness.
 - What we expect may take forever – a thousand years – can happen in a day.
 - But more often, what we wish would happen in a day seems to take forever.
 - The key to your attitude toward prayer is realizing that with the Lord one is exactly like the other.
- After Jesus tells his disciples of His coming kingdom, they are left with one nagging question: "WHERE, LORD?" (Luke 17:37) Where is the evidence of all these things that You have promised?
- **Luke 18:1** And he spake a parable unto them to this end, that men ought always to pray, and not to faint;
 - The disciples are waiting for God's fire to ignite the incense, for the perfume of their prayers to be made into bombs. So, to help them cope with the seemingly endless delays and diversions along the way to the answer, Jesus tells them a parable about a widow who literally nagged an unjust judge into granting her plea.
 - **Luke 18:6-8** And the Lord said, Hear what the unjust judge saith. And shall not God avenge his own elect, which cry day and night unto him, though he bear long with them? I tell you that he will avenge them speedily. Nevertheless when the Son of man cometh, shall he find faith on the earth?
 - Prayer is just that – crying out day and night without seeing justice, AND CONTINUING ANYHOW. "Teach us to pray." Okay, pray this: "Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven." Great, now there's a prayer that's not going to be answered in a day – maybe not even in a thousand years, certainly not in my lifetime. And yet, it could be answered in its fullness TODAY.
 - The key to successful prayer is to CONTINUE praying in spite of seeing poor results – or no results!
 - **Isaiah 40:31** But they that wait upon the Lord shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings as eagles; they shall run, and not be weary; and they shall walk, and not faint.
 - Humanly speaking, there are two things drastically wrong with this verse. The first is that waiting is not the pathway to weariness, but to renewal. That's how God's upside-down, backwards, paradoxical economy works. What God wants MOST is not for us to get our answer, but to become like Him!
 - Look at 2 Corinthians – it reads like a diary of unanswered prayer, a mileage log of unresolved traumas, dilemmas, fiascoes and disasters. Paul has prayed to become like Christ, and all he has received thus far is overwhelming sorrow, persecution, hardships, torture, hunger and rejection. Then, just when it would seem that enough is enough, he is given "a thorn in the flesh, the messenger of Satan to buffet me." And when he pleads for relief and deliverance – not just one time, but three – instead of the answer he wants, he gets the only answer God is willing to give: GRACE.
 - **It is in this place of apparent "unanswered prayer" that Paul's greatest answer to prayer is found. WHEN I AM WEAK, THEN I AM STRONG.** Waiting is one of God's most effective means to make us into the image of Christ.
 - The second problem with Isaiah 40:31 is the sequence of Isaiah's threefold promise to those who wait. Quite frankly, it's backwards!

- According to the rules of Hebrew poetry, the sequence of ideas should progress from the lesser to the greater. So we would expect the promises here to be reversed: walk and not faint, run and not be weary, mount up with wings as eagles. That sequence is far more dramatic and inspiring. Any of us can walk – that’s commonplace!
- But God sees it otherwise. We may want wings, but what we really need is to walk without falling down ... to live for God consistently and faithfully ... to simply not faint.
- Really, what is more miraculous?
 - Elijah calling down fire from Heaven ... or his willingness to continue preaching in spite of death threats from wicked King Ahab and Queen Jezebel?
 - David receiving the honor of an anointing from the prophet Samuel ... or keeping a right attitude toward jealous King Saul as he tried to kill him?
 - Healing the lame, the blind and the sick through the gifts of the Spirit ... or caring for them with diligence and genuine love, day after day?
 - The crippled man taking up his bed and walking ... or living faithfully and thankfully in his painfully immobile body year after endless year?
 - The handsome Christian artist worshipping God onstage among thousands of his adoring fans ... or the senior saint with Parkinson’s disease praising God in his lonely apartment?
 - The anointed preacher who receives accolades from huge crowds for his dynamic sermons ... or the unknown prayer warrior who has never been in a pulpit but has spent untold hours in Heaven’s throne room?
- Does soaring on eagle’s wings ever rank in its miraculousness with walking and not fainting? More than soaring, more than running – we need to know how to WALK with God!
- A friend of William Willimon went to Russia in the late 1970’s at the height of the Cold War, as part of a delegation to report on the state of the Christian Church under an atheistic regime. “The church in Russia is just a bunch of little old ladies praying,” he said dismissively. Willimon didn’t tell the story until the early 1990’s, but by then the statues of Stalin and Lenin lay toppled, ready to be crated for storage. Beware of little old ladies praying! They may look like perfume makers, but they’re really a bomb-making factory.
- For now it’s just incense, but one day the fire of God will fall!
- **Exodus 33:18** And he said, I beseech thee, shew me thy glory.
- Moses didn’t receive the answer he wanted to the prayer he prayed on Mount Horeb. God said, “Thou canst not see my face: for there shall no man see me, and live.” Moses lived and died with that prayer on his lips ... unanswered.
- Then, after a long time (much more than a thousand years!), his prayer was answered suddenly in a way he could never have expected. God actually appeared to him face to face in the person of Jesus Christ!
- **Matthew 17:1-3** And after six days Jesus taketh Peter, James, and John his brother, and bringeth them up into an high mountain apart, And was transfigured before them: and his face did shine as the sun, and his raiment was white as the light. And, behold, there appeared unto them Moses and Elias talking with him.
- Moses waited 1500 years for his prayer to be answered, but then he was praying a “kingdom prayer!” Are you willing to bury your life in the work of prayer, even when all you see is incense? Can you hold on until God ignites your answer in His own time? That’s PRAYER!