The patience of unanswered prayer

Temple Gairdner, a great servant of God called to Egypt, said shortly before his death, "**As I look back over my life in Egypt, I feel I have accomplished nothing.**" Another great worker in Egypt, Dr Harpur, said after a lifetime of medical work, "**I feel my work in Egypt has been nothing but a failure.**"

Many workers have been tempted to make the same sort of statements as they evaluate what they have done. So often success in our ministry can't be reckoned in terms of great statistics or sensational results that catch the eye. It can only be evaluated in terms of a life poured out, in terms of those intangible eternal things of the Spirit that so easily escape our notice.

Someone has commented on the ministry of Elijah in these terms: "**Distinguish between the real and the apparent. Elijah's apparent success was in the shouts at Mount Carmel. His real success was in the unostentatious, unsurmised obedience of the seven thousand who had taken his God for their God. Remember the power of indirect influences that distil from life, not from a sudden brilliant effort. The former never fail. The latter fail often!**

What is success? Crowded churches, full aisles, attentive congregations, the approval of your peers, great impressions produced? Elijah thought so. When he found out his mistake and discovered that the applause on Carmel subsided into hideous stillness, his heart almost broke with disappointment.

Success lies in altered lives and obedient humble hearts: unseen work recognized on the Judgment Day. Get below appearances, below the glitter and show. Plant your feet on reality. Not on the jubilee of the myriads on Carmel, but in the humble silence of the hearts of the seven thousand lay the proof that the Elijah had not lived in vain."

Samuel Zwemer wrote that there were two indispensable factors in 'neighbour' evangelism: "**A <u>love</u> that will not let men go and the <u>patience</u> of unanswered prayer**". We all know and endorse this conviction. Every day there is the challenge to love and the challenge to pray. Every day we experience things that kill our love and sympathy, rob us of our joy and drain our resources of spiritual power. Most of us don't have the encouragement of a rapidly growing church. There is no stimulus from many enquirers approaching us hungry for instruction in the truth about Jesus. In fact, we are surrounded by an environment that denies by life and word all those values the name of Christ stands for.

So it isn't surprising that over a period of time the lack of a positive response to the Gospel begins to sow seeds of doubt, frustration and despair in the minds of those working in these countries. They question their spirituality, their ability and God's calling. They wonder at the rightness or wisdom of hoping for large numbers of people to come to faith. The lapse of a new believer brings despair and the thought that not all those 'coming to faith' are really genuine.

This sense of pessimism can pervade not only the worker's life, but it can spread to his family and his team. Often this is the cause of the symptoms of disunity or divisive attitudes towards other groups. In time some workers give up and turn to other ministries and others return home in broken health. The spiritual gifts of patience, love, courage, faith and vision are needed in all ministry everywhere, but they are needed ten times more among workers in hard lands.

Coupled with a sense of urgency to be faithful in our witness, we also need to recover the assurance of the patient and untiring work of the Holy Spirit in the hearts of men. God is

working out His purposes. His purposes can never be thwarted! In this new century we can see significant changes in many countries:

- Countries previously inaccessible are now open.
- There is a rising global prayer movement.
- Many more workers from all over the world are going to unreached people groups.
- There is a deeper penetration of the media – satellite TV, radio, literature, DVDs etc.
- Increasing numbers of 'neighbours' are having dreams and visions leading them to put their faith in Jesus.
- There is a rising number of believers from a Muslim background.

Still no one can deny that the rate of progress is slow. More 'neighbours' are completely untouched by the Gospel now than when our company began reach out to them in 1961. Such is the population growth! There are still many obstacles and adversaries. Some of the obstacles preventing men and women coming to faith may be our fault. Perhaps they are caused by our lack of faith, love, patience and prayer. What about our faulty methods of approach born out of intellectual laziness or prejudice or lack of imagination?

The great temptation is for us to find a substitute for the main task of winning men and women to Jesus Christ. Substitutes may include putting our administrative efficiency before evangelism or becoming absorbed in school, business, community health projects and forgetting people. It is a great goal to strive for an uplift in the health, education and economic development of a community, but we must not neglect the spiritual. Another temptation is to turn aside to the needs of the minority Christian church or expatriate church and forget our original calling – the difficult and exacting task of reaching the majority population. All these other activities are very important, but like Paul we need to say, ***"This is one thing I do ……"***

The external obstacles to breakthroughs – often inherent in the nature of the task – have been analysed so often that there is no need to repeat them. But God has brought about very considerable changes in the last few decades. Many are changes we couldn't even have dreamed about when we started out in the 1960s. We need to be ready for an acceleration of the rate of change as the Spirit of God works in these countries.

Many of us have thought long and hard as to why the purposes of God are accomplished so slowly among these peoples. I believe the global church has not yet faced seriously and constructively the challenge of the thought and life of the theology (high and folk) of Muslim peoples. I think it is God's will that we first explore much more deeply the resources of our faith for a more radiant spirituality – an evident demonstration of the life and love of God in our lives. On one point there can be no doubt – the ultimate victory will be spiritual.

The longer a worker remains in these lands, the more he identifies with Temple Gairdner who wrote, "**For me the die has been cast. The only way to peace and that self-realisation which is indeed salvation, is for me the way of spirituality. God has shown me this and has closed every other path. Only sometimes, in the weakness of the spirit, the heart looks back wistfully at some of those closed avenues that one sees other men tread and whispers, 'You have aimed too high and may miss all! Aim lower and you will at least attain something.' "**

It is this spirit of a pursuit of holiness and godliness, the spirit of a passionate dislike of the use of any carnal weapons in the spiritual battle – a spirit of unmeasured sacrifice offered to God in humble faith and strengthened by prayer that persists even when the answer is not immediately given, that alone can triumph in work among Muslim peoples.

"**The love that will not let men go and the patience of unanswered prayer**" have their roots deep in an unconquerable faith in the inexhaustible love and sovereign purposes of God Himself.

A lonely worker in North Africa wrote, "**Yes, it is lives poured out that these lands need – a sowing of tears in a measure that perhaps no other peoples require. They need a Calvary before they get their Pentecost. Thanks be to God for people like this. In the light of eternity, we can ask no greater blessedness than the chance it gives for fellowship with His Son.**"

Many workers in China gave their lives in the Boxer Rebellion in the summer of 1900. One of these was Rowena Bird. She was just 35. On July 13, 1900 she wrote in her diary,

"**Last night we were almost ready to start for the hills thinking it one chance for life, but the dangers from Boxers and robbers and perils of all kinds are so great. What can we do? If you never see me again, remember I am not sorry I came to China. Whether I have saved anyone or not He knows, but it has been for Him and we go to Him. Darling ones good-bye.**"

She was murdered shortly after writing this.

Her words still ring true, "**It has been for Him**" Nothing that has been for Him can possibly be without fruit! May God help us to persevere as we strive after holiness and godliness. This is what God asks of us. The growth of His Kingdom is His business!