

Think Long – January 27

[Table with the following items set out – large cooking pan, bottle of vegetable oil, stick of butter, salt shaker, bag of popcorn (unpopped kernels), big bowl, microwave bag of popcorn (1 popped, 1 unpopped), bag of popcorn purchased at the store]

Making popcorn has certainly changed a lot since I was a kid. I remember getting out the big pan and putting it on the stove, pouring in the kernels and then waiting for the oil to heat and the kernels to start popping. It felt like it took forever! But while that was happening we needed to melt the butter and get out the salt and the big bowl. When the kernels started popping you grabbed the pan and started shaking it so that the kernels didn't burn. Then you poured the popcorn in the big bowl, poured on the butter (which you had to melt in a different pan) and salt, ummm!

We've come a long way since then. Now you unwrap the package, put it in the microwave and in about 2 minutes you have a bag of popcorn- buttered, salted, and already in the bowl. Best of all; no dishes to wash!

We've made popcorn simple and fast! Well there is one other way that is faster (opening bag of store bought popcorn), but it just doesn't taste as good!

We live in a fast-paced world where just about everything comes quickly! And for many things, like popcorn, that is great. But, when it comes to prayer, we have a hard time understanding why things don't happen with such immediacy. After all, what else could God have on his agenda that he can't answer my prayer right away?

Well today I want to challenge you to realize that prayer is like planting. Each prayer is like a seed that gets planted in the ground. It disappears for a season, but it eventually bears fruit that blesses future generations.

That's the lesson that Honi, the Circle Maker, learned near the end of his life. I'll let Mark Batterson explain. Video Carob Tree [3:28-4:36]

Honi learned a lesson that all of us can benefit from: Prayer is like planting.

And like any seed that we plant, waiting for the final product to mature takes patience and dependence upon God. God never promises instant results; but the prayers that we bury in the fertile soil of God's heart are growing and at the right time they will bring a harvest.

One of the best things about Honi's story of the carob tree is that it gives us a long range perspective on prayer. Prayer isn't just about what happens now, but what happens in the next generation.

I know that I am a recipient of prayers that have been prayed for many years. When I declared my intention of entering the ministry I had several people who told me that they had prayed for me to answer the call of God to enter full-time ministry.

I also know that I've prayed for many years for my sons as they further their education and enter the work that God has called and prepared them for. And one of the prayers that I've prayed for them is taken from 2 Kings 2:9.

This passage of scripture details the relationship of the prophet Elijah and his protégé Elisha. They both know that Elijah's days are numbered and Elijah asks Elisha, "What can I do for you?" (sounds like what Jesus asked those 2 blind men at Jericho, What do you want me to do for you?)

Elisha knew what he wanted and responded, 'Let me inherit a double portion of your spirit.' I've been circling that prayer for my sons for a number of years, believing that God will bless their work even more richly than I have seen God bless my work. And one of the things I look forward to the most is when I can be a part of placing the mantle (the stole) around Aaron's neck.

You see, I've inherited the prayers of many people before me; and I want to be certain that I leave a legacy of prayer on behalf of those who will follow after me. So what prayers are you planting on behalf of others? What promise have you circled on behalf of someone else?

I know that you are being blessed by the prayers prayed years ago on my behalf; and I believe that many others will be blessed by the prayers I pray now for my sons.

Because we are surrounded by a fast-paced lifestyle most of us view everything from that perspective as well. Because of that we often allow that fast-pace to spill over into the spiritual realm as well. But the Bible tends to use the agricultural terms that remind us that things don't happen at the speed of light but at the speed of a seed planted in the ground.

In 1980, the Swedish Navy received a remarkable letter, in which the forest administration on the island of Visingsö, in Lake Vättern, informed the naval authorities that the wood which had been ordered for ship construction was now ready. The baffled naval authorities rummaged around in their books and finally found the order - which had been placed in 1829. It turned out that members of the Swedish parliament had perceived a threat to the country's future defense capabilities.

Oak was at that time considered the best material for shipbuilding, but oak trees take about 150 years to grow and mature. Since oak forests were disappearing (because of construction needs), the legislators foresaw that at the end of the next century (that is, in our own time), there would be a shortage of this crucial material. So they ordered that 20,000 young oak trees be planted on Visingsö and reserved for the future use of the navy.

Now that is thinking long!

By the way, the only objector to this decision was the bishop of Strängnäs. He argued that although there would surely still be wars 150 years hence, warships would probably no longer be made of wood.

One dimension of thinking long is thinking different and prayer is the key to both. Prayer doesn't just change circumstances. More importantly, it changes us. It doesn't just alter external realities. It alters internal realities so that we see with spiritual eyes. It gives us peripheral vision. It corrects our nearsightedness. It enables us to see beyond our circumstances, beyond ourselves, beyond time.

It's not enough to dream big and pray hard. You also have to think long. If you don't, you'll experience high degrees of discouragement. Why? Because we tend to overestimate what we can accomplish in a year. Of course, we also tend to underestimate what we can accomplish in a decade. The bigger the vision, the harder you'll have to pray and the longer you'll have to think. But if you keep circling, it'll come to pass in God's time.

Next Week we will have the opportunity to discover the rhythms and routines that work for you when it comes to pray. What works for others might not work for you, and what works for you might not work for others. As Oswald Chambers said: "Let God be as original with other people as God is with you." At 8:45 we will focus on personal prayer disciplines and at 10:00am we will focus on family prayer disciplines.

As we wrap up this series today I want to share with you the story behind the image that accompanies our sermon series.

In the early 1900's a British born evangelist named Gipsy Smith was known for great revivals at which many people would give their lives to Jesus. Gipsy had a habit that he would undertake when he desired to see God do a great work. Gipsy would take a piece of chalk and make a circle on the floor. Then he would pray: Lord, send a revival and let it begin inside this circle.

As you leave today we are giving you a piece of chalk to remember that while we want to Dream Big, Pray Hard, Think Long and Draw the Circle; it begins when we draw a circle around ourselves and pray, 'Lord, send revival and let it begin inside this circle.'

My prayer is that each of you will find a time to get on your knees before God and draw a circle around yourself and invite God to do a great work in your life.