

Pray Hard: Persistence Quotient

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How persistent are you? How long do you work at something before you decide it's time to move on? It doesn't matter whether it's athletics or academics, music or math. For those who are driven to achieve, to see their big dreams realized, it takes persistence. More than ability, talent, or just about anything else, success comes out of persistence.

More than a decade ago, Anders Ericsson and his colleagues at Berlin's elite Academy of Music did a study with musicians. With the help of professors, they divided violinists into three groups: world-class soloists, good violinists, and those who were unlikely to play professionally. All of them started playing around roughly the same age and they practiced about the same amount of time until the age of eight. That is when their practice habits diverged. The researchers found that by the age of twenty, the average players had logged about 4,000 hours of practice time; the good violinists totaled about 8,000 hours; and the elite performers set the standard with 10,000 hours. While there is no denying that innate ability dictates some of your upside potential, your potential is only tapped via persistent effort. Persistence is the magic bullet and the magic number seems to be ten thousand.

"The emerging picture from such studies is that ten thousand hours of practice is required to achieve a level of mastery associated with being a world class expert—in anything," notes neurologist Daniel Levitin. "In study after study, of composers, basketball players, fiction writers, ice skaters, concert pianists, chess players, master criminals, and what have you, this number comes up again and again. No one has yet found a case in which true world-class expertise was accomplished in less time. It seems that it takes the brain that long to assimilate all that it needs to know to achieve true mastery."

Is prayer any different? Jesus taught about that in Luke 18. It is a habit to be cultivated. It is a discipline to be developed. It is a skill to be practiced. And while reducing "good praying" to time logged is a sin Jesus warned about, if you want to achieve mastery it might take ten thousand hours of private practice. The bigger the dream, the harder you will have to pray. Here's what Jesus had to say, **"One day Jesus told his disciples a story to show that they should always pray and never give up. 'There was a judge in a certain city,' he said, 'who neither feared God nor cared about people. A widow of that city came to him repeatedly, saying, 'Give me justice in this dispute with my enemy.' The judge ignored her for a while, but finally he said to himself, 'I don't fear God or care about people, but this woman is driving me crazy. I'm going to see that she gets justice, because she is wearing me out with her constant requests!'"**

The parable of the persistent widow is one of the most clear pictures of prayer in Scripture. It shows us what praying hard looks like: knocking until your knuckles are raw, crying out until your voice is lost, pleading until your tears run dry. Praying hard is praying through. And if you pray through, God will come through.

The phrase used to describe the widow's persistence, **she is wearing me out**, is similar to boxing terminology: the **rope a dope (Ali v Forman pic)**. Praying hard is going twelve rounds with God. A heavyweight prayer bout with God Almighty can be excruciating and exhausting, but that is how the greatest prayer victories are won. Praying hard is more than words. It's blood, sweat, and tears. **Praying hard is two-dimensional: praying like it depends on God**

and working like it depends on you. It's praying until God answers, no matter how long it takes. It's doing whatever it takes to show God you're serious.0020

Desperate times call for desperate measures, and there is no more desperate act than praying hard. There comes a moment when you need to throw caution to the wind and draw a circle in the sand. There comes a moment when you need to defy protocol, drop to your knees, and pray for the impossible. There comes a moment when you need to muster every ounce of faith you have and call down rain from heaven. For the persistent widow, this was that moment.

While we don't know what injustice took place, we do know that the persistent widow wouldn't take no for an answer. That's what made her a circle maker. Maybe her son was falsely imprisoned for a crime he didn't commit. Maybe the man who molested her daughter was still on the streets. Whatever it was, the judge knew she would never give up. The judge knew she would circle his house until the day she died if she didn't get justice. The judge knew there was no quit in the persistent widow.

Does The Judge know that about you? How desperate are you for the miracle? Desperate enough to pray through the night? How many times are you willing to circle the promise? Until the day you die? How long and loud will you knock on the door of opportunity? Until you knock the door down?

One of the classic movies is **Shawshank Redemption (pic)**. Tim Robbins' character, Andy Dufresne, eventually becomes the prison librarian. The library is actually pathetic, and Andy wants to ask the state for money to get more books and make improvements. The warden refuses and sees little benefit of putting money to that kind of use in prison, but suggests he can write the state legislature to get the funds directly. Andy says, "They can't ignore me forever." Warden replies, "Sure can."

After 6 years, he gets money and book donations. Andy's response? "Now I'll write twice a week." His persistent pays off with all sorts of donations. Prisoners get a record player, books, and many go get their GED's. Why? Because Andy was persistent and desperate for something of value in prison life.

If you aren't desperate, you won't take desperate measures. And if you don't pray like it depends on God, the biggest miracles and best promises will remain out of your prayer reach. But if you learn how to pray hard, like the persistent widow, God will honor your bold prayers because your bold prayers honor God.

Like Honi the Circle Maker, the persistent widow's methodology was unorthodox. She could have, and technically should have, waited for her court date. Going to the personal residence of the judge crossed a professional line. The common denominator in each of these stories is holy desperation. People took desperate measures to get to God and God honored them for it. Nothing has changed. God is still honoring spiritual desperadoes who crash parties and climb trees. God is still honoring those who defy protocol with their bold prayers. God is still honoring those who pray with audacity and tenacity. And the persistent widow is selected as the gold standard when it comes to praying hard. Her unrelenting persistence was the only difference between justice and injustice.

Several centuries before the drought that threatened to destroy Honi's generation, there was another drought in Israel. For three years long years, there was no puddle jumping in Israel. Then the Lord promised Elijah He would send rain, but like every promise, Elijah still had to

circle it via persistent prayer. So Elijah climbed to the top of Carmel, fell on his face, and prayed for rain. Six times he told his servant to look toward the sea, but there was no sign of rain. And that is when most of us give up. We stop praying because we can't see any tangible difference with our natural eyes. We allow our circumstances to get between God and us instead of putting God between us and our circumstances.

Like Honi who said, "I will not move from here," Elijah held his holy ground. He stood on the promise God had given him. I think Elijah would have prayed ten thousand times if that is what it took, but between the sixth and seventh prayer, there was a subtle shift in atmospheric pressure. After the seventh circle, Elijah's nearsighted servant strained his eyes and saw a small cloud the size of a man's hand rising from the sea. **But what if things happened differently? (CUE VIDEO)**

One thing is certain: our most powerful prayers are linked to the promises of God. Just as the one Mark just spoke of in how the Spirit prays for and with us. When you know you are praying the promises of God, you can pray with holy confidence. It's the difference between praying on thin ice and praying on solid ground. It's the difference between praying tentatively and praying tenaciously. You don't have to second-guess yourself because you know that God wants you to rely on His promises.

There is a promise in Joshua 1:3. Joshua is now leading the Israelites after Moses has died. He leads them across the Jordan and will lead them through the taking of the promised land, and God says this to Joshua, **"I will give you every place where you set your foot, as I promised Moses."** God promised Joshua that He would give him everyplace he set his foot, but there is a little addendum at the end of the promise: just as I promised Moses. The promise was originally given to Moses. Then it was transferred to Joshua.

In much the same way, all of God's promises have been transferred to us via Jesus Christ. While those promises must be interpreted intelligently and applied accurately, there are moments when the Spirit of God will quicken your spirit to claim a promise that was originally intended for someone else. So while we have to be careful not to blindly claim promises that don't belong to us, our greatest problem is when we don't circle the promises we could or should circle.

By the most conservative estimates, there are more than 3,000 promises in Scripture. By virtue of what Jesus Christ accomplished on the cross, every one of them belongs to you. Every one of them has your name on it. The question is: how many of them have you circled?

We often view prayer and Scripture reading as two distinct spiritual disciplines without much overlap, but what if they were meant to be linked? What if reading became a form of praying and praying became a form of reading? One of the primary reasons we don't pray through is because we run out of things to say. Our lack of persistence is really a lack of conversation pieces. Like an awkward conversation, we don't know what to say. Or like a conversation on its last leg, we run out of things to talk about. That's when our prayers turn into a bunch of overused and misapplied clichés. So instead of praying hard about a big dream, we're left with small talk. Our prayers are as meaningless as a conversation about the weather.

The solution? Pray through the Bible. It starts with changing the way you read the Bible. The Bible was meant to be prayed through. And if you pray through it, you'll never run out of promises to circle. The Bible is a promise book and a prayer book. **Reading is the way you get through the Bible. Prayer is the way you get the Bible through you.** As you pray, the Holy

Spirit will quicken certain promises to your spirit. It's very difficult to predict what and when and where and how, but over time, the promises of God will become your promises. Then you need to circle those promises, both figuratively and literally.

What is it that God has promised you? What is it you need to Pray Big and Pray Hard about? Are you left here saying, "I don't know,"? Then it's time to pray through the Bible, not just read through. Let words seep into your soul, and be mindful of when the Holy Spirit of God grabs your attention. Circle that promise, and never let it go. Always remember this truth.

God never promised life would be without hardships. In fact, God often promised the opposite. Some hardships we bear responsibility for, and others happen to us without any doing of our own or God. God knew from the moment sin entered this world all sorts of bad things would happen to all sorts of good people, and the promise He made was to be with us through it all until He remade this world. More than any promise worth holding onto, worth praying hard through, it is this one that God will never abandon us, that God is with us every step of the way.