

## EYES AND SKIES OF FAITH

### *Wineskin in the Smoke*

Psalms 119:81-88

Intro: This metaphor, "I am like a wineskin in the smoke," takes my mind back to the high Andes Mountains in northern Peru nearly 20 years ago, to a cemetery of Incan warriors and a little man in that cemetery who had a tiny pot to sell.

He told us that he found this pot while digging around in those open graves. The huge pyramid-shaped stones that once covered the graves and been blasted apart by grave robbers. All the gold was stolen. But stirring with a stick in one crypt, he hit something, he said, and it turned out to be this little pot.

It had been sitting in this house for a long time, he told us, but he would sell it to us. I took it in my hand and handed him the money. The pot smelled like smoke and was tarnished with soot.

"What happened to this pot?" I asked Larry Johnson, the missionary. He told me that the Qechua Indians did not build chimneys or smokestacks in their homes. The smoke curls up from the perpetual fire, rises to the ceiling, and creeps around the top of the room until it finds a crevasse or crack through which to escape. In doing so, the odor of smoke permeates their clothing and covers, and the soot coats everything.

A Bedouin tent in the Middle East does not have a chimney. As with the little Qechuan houses, the smoke from their fires curls around the tent until it makes its way out.

A wineskin is a bottle made of leather. The leather needs to be dried when it is new, but continual drying will ruin it. A wineskin in a Bedouin tent, hanging on a line, would be coated with soot and partially dried and cooked by the smoke.

A wineskin hanging in the smoke would be dried and cracked, tested by heat and smoke. It would be hanging in a tent rather than a palace, and indicates a nomadic life, maybe even the life of a fugitive.

Think of King David no longer in the palace but on the run from his enemies, hiding in hills, living in tents. This psalm points to the contrast between good times and bad, between the palace and the tent, between sitting on the throne and running from those who want to kill you. It is a variation on the theme of life's extremities.

When you are on the edge:

#### **I. BE HONEST WITH GOD:** "I am like a wineskin in the smoke" (v83).

A. The psalmist is speaking to God. We know that from the term "your salvation" and similar uses of "your" throughout these verses. How long since you addressed God and told him what is going on in your life?

B. The psalmist tells God honestly how he feels.

1. We know he is talking about feelings because he is using metaphors and descriptions that point to his despair.
2. Your feelings are important to God. He knows and cares how you feel. Feelings are real, and you should not deny them. They are internal to your life and are a window to your soul.
3. We do not depend upon feelings for our walk with God, but feelings affect our walk with God and all of our relationships.
4. Have you told God how you are feeling? Have you groped for the words to describe your condition? Have you used similes and metaphors to get at the truth of your state?

C. He feels like he is being slow-cooked—tormented, tortured, and killed by inches.

1. "My soul faints." He wants to be delivered from sin, fear, and his enemies. He is waiting for God's rescue. But it seems never to come. He is "longing for your salvation."
2. "My eyes fail." While he is waiting on God, things are deteriorating. His eyes are growing dim looking for God's promise. He is aging, the hours, days, weeks, months, and even years are passing. He is still hounded by his fears, beset by his enemies, and tormented by his sins. He asks God, "When will you comfort me?" He wonders when God is going to keep his promise of rescue and deliverance.
3. "I am like a wineskin in the smoke" v83. His soul is fainting because the heat is drying up all the moisture in his life. He is being cooked. His eyes are failing because the smoke is getting in them and it is blocking the view. His eyes are irritated. He cannot see like he used to see. When he was younger things were clearer. Now they seem more cloudy. When he was younger the world his eyes worked better. Both his eyes and the world are affected negatively by the smoke that is cooking him day after day.

D. How long since you honestly described your feelings to God, holding nothing back? It is time for you to write it down, as this psalmist did, and tell God how you feel.

## II. EMBRACE THE WAIT: "How long must your servant wait?" (v84).

\*\*\*Some have waited five years to get things straightened out from the terrible flood of Hurricane Katrina. And still they wait. \*\*\*We all are waiting with sinking hearts for the Deepwater Horizon well to be plugged. Eleven weeks after the explosion of that giant rig in the Gulf of Mexico, we are still waiting for someone to stop the flow of oil.

A. The waiting is draining the psalmist, discouraging him. He wonders now how long it will be.

B. WAITING is a common theme in the psalms and the prophets.

1. They waited 400 years for deliverance from Egypt.
2. They waited 70 years for deliverance from Babylon.
3. They were waiting in the time of Jesus for deliverance from Rome. The people of God seemed always to be waiting, looking to the future, watching the horizon for the coming of God's promise.

C. The Church of Jesus Christ has been waiting 2,000 years for his promised return: "If I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am" (John 14:3).

1. Jesus said that he was coming back. The first followers of Jesus looked for him around every corner, expecting him shortly.
2. When the church took root in Thessalonica, hundreds of miles from its birthplace in Jerusalem, that church was caught up in the expectation of the Lord's soon return. Some of them quit their jobs. They did foolish things with their resources. Like some groups in our own time, they camped out on hilltops, so to speak, waiting for the expected return and suspending their lives in the process. The Apostle Paul had to urge them back into the disciplines that support faithful living on this planet: go to work, care for family.

D. Expect the return of Christ. We are to live on tiptoe, scanning the horizon. We are all, believers in Christ, in a waiting mode.

E. Sometimes we will be worn out by waiting. We will be weakened and discouraged. And we may be tempted to say, "The Lord delays his coming," just as Jesus predicted (Matthew 24:48). "Where is the promise of the Lord's return?"

1. Long waiting will test your faith.
2. Long waiting may weaken your resolve.
3. Long waiting may tempt you to sin, to ignore the promise of his coming, and to change your behavior in ways that do not fit a faithful steward of the Lord's work.

## III. HOPE IN GOD'S WORD: "I have put my hope in your word" (v81). I am praying today that everyone in this room will leave with their hearts full of hope. I have not told you anything you did not already know. You are waiting. Waiting is difficult and even excruciating. Yet you do not give up. You hold fast to the promise.

A. Every human needs HOPE. When we are hopeless, only death is left. We were without hope when we were without Christ (Ephesians 2:12). Not anymore.

1. Romans 12:12: "Be joyful in hope, patient in affliction, faithful in prayer."
2. "We are saved by hope" (Romans 8:24).

\*\*\*Jorgen Multmann wrote a "Theology of Hope" in which he rightly observed that the people of God live in hope for the future. God draws us toward the future.

3. All humans live from hope to hope. We wait and we hope. As children we wait to be teenagers. As teens we wait to be adults. As adults we wait to be parents and grandparents. We hope and wait for retirement and the life of leisure. As sickness comes and death approaches, we fix our eyes on the hope set before us in Christ our Savior and Lord. We live from wait to wait and hope to hope.

B. HOPE is anchored in God's Word. We hope because we believe the Word of God. We believe Jesus, the living Word. We believe the Bible, God's written Word. We believe the proclamation of God's salvation, the promise of new life in Christ, and the expectation of living forever in the house of the Lord.

Our HOPE is anchored in Jesus Christ and his Word.

C. HOPE prompts these mental and spiritual disciplines:

1. We look for the promise, no matter how long the wait.
2. We "do not forget your decrees" (v83).
3. We confess the trustworthiness of God's Word (v86).
4. We do not forsake the precepts, the teachings, of Christ.
5. We obey Christ as Lord (v88).

Conclusion: A call to the only real hope that dying people have: the hope of salvation and rescue through Jesus Christ.