

STRIKE WHILE THE IRON IS HOT

Dr. Arthur Maricle

There's an old saying that came from cowboys who were working the open range of America's Old West: "You've got to strike while the iron is hot."

Once a year, the cowboys have to round up all the new calves in the herd and brand them so there will be no dispute about the ownership of the cows out on the range. To accomplish this, you have to place in an open fire your branding irons (which carry the unique marking for your particular ranch so that everyone will know which cattle are yours, once their hides have been branded), get those branding irons red hot, pull a calf over to a spot near the fire, force him down, tie up his legs so he won't hurt himself or you while he struggles, select a red hot iron, take it over to the calf, and press it into his flank so that the brand will scorch the mark of your ranch into his hide.

If you wait too long to strike after you've pulled the branding iron out of the fire, and the iron has had time to cool down, you'll get an imperfect, marred brand — or perhaps no mark on the hide at all. You'll have to do the work all over again. That's why cowboys say you've got to strike while the iron is hot.

Certainly you have something about which, or someone about whom, you have praying diligently. That prayer is like an iron in the fire of the Holy Spirit's power, while the object of the prayer is the calf that needs to be branded. To stoke the flames, you'll often get other good Christians praying with you about something you want to see accomplished, or someone you want to see saved, or perhaps some you long to see restored to full fellowship with the Lord and serving in His church. Through all those prayers, you've got that branding iron red hot.

Let me ask you a question: when are you gonna lasso that calf, pull him over to the fire, wrestle him down, and hit him with your red-hot branding iron?

Let me remind you of a sage piece of cowboy wisdom: *You've got to strike while the iron is hot!*

Once you sense that the iron is red hot, get that calf *over*, get that calf *down*, get that brand *applied*, and get the job *done*. You've got a branding iron glowing red hot in the fire. There's no better time to strike than *right now!*

 Nehemiah 1:

- 1 The words of Nehemiah the son of Hachaliah. And it came to pass in the month Chisleu, in the twentieth year, as I was in Shushan the palace,
- 2 That Hanani, one of my brethren, came, he and certain men of Judah; and I asked them concerning the Jews that had escaped, which were left of the captivity, and concerning Jerusalem.
- 3 And they said unto me, "The remnant that are left of the captivity there in the province are in great affliction and reproach: the wall of Jerusalem also is broken down, and the gates thereof are burned with fire."

What effect did this distressing news have on Nehemiah?

- 4 And it came to pass, when I heard these words, that I sat down and wept, and
mourned certain days, and fasted, and prayed before the God of heaven,
5 And said, I beseech thee, "O LORD God of heaven, the great and terrible God,
that keepeth covenant and mercy for them that love him and observe his
commandments:
6 "Let thine ear now be attentive, and thine eyes open, that thou mayest hear the
prayer of thy servant, which I pray before thee now, day and night, for the
children of Israel thy servants, and confess the sins of the children of Israel,
which we have sinned against thee: both I and my father's house have sinned.
7 "We have dealt very corruptly against thee, and have not kept the
commandments, nor the statutes, nor the judgments, which thou
commandedst thy servant Moses.
8 "Remember, I beseech thee, the word that thou commandedst thy servant
Moses, saying, 'If ye transgress, I will scatter you abroad among the nations:
9 "'But if ye turn unto me, and keep my commandments, and do them; though
there were of you cast out unto the uttermost part of the heaven, yet will I
gather them from thence, and will bring them unto the place that I have chosen
to set my name there.'
10 "Now these are thy servants and thy people, whom thou hast redeemed by thy
great power, and by thy strong hand.
11 "O Lord, I beseech thee, let now thine ear be attentive to the prayer of thy
servant, and to the prayer of thy servants, who desire to fear thy name: and
prosper, I pray thee, thy servant this day, and grant him mercy in the sight of
this man." For I was the king's cupbearer.

What was Nehemiah doing with that prayer? He was putting an iron into the fire. He didn't know how God was going to answer his prayer, but Nehemiah was praying in faith believing that God could and would do something that was seemingly impossible. That impossibility which he yearned to see accomplished was the deliverance of Israel's ancient capital city, Jerusalem, from its degradation and distress.

 Nehemiah 2:

- 1 And it came to pass in the month Nisan, in the twentieth year of Artaxerxes the king, that wine was before him: and I took up the wine, and gave it unto the king. Now I had not been beforetime sad in his presence.
2 Wherefore the king said unto me, "Why is thy countenance sad, seeing thou art not sick? this is nothing else but sorrow of heart." Then I was very sore afraid,
3 And said unto the king, "Let the king live for ever: why should not my countenance be sad, when the city, the place of my fathers' sepulchres, lieth waste, and the gates thereof are consumed with fire?"

There was good reason to fear. Anyone who appeared before the king in anything less than a contented demeanor, and who thereby makes the king feel depressed, is subject to severe punishment — even death. But when the king asked a point-blank

question about Nehemiah's emotional state, Nehemiah didn't give the typical reply: "Oh, nothing."

He had his branding iron in the fire, and that gave him the boldness to attempt something novel. He answered a direct question with an honest answer.

Would the king respond by shouting, "*Off with his head!*"? He certainly had that power. And perhaps he was known for exercising that power, which would explain Nehemiah's anxiety.

But the iron that had been glowing in the flames of intense prayer struck home.

- 4 Then the king said unto me, "For what dost thou make request?" So I prayed to the God of heaven.**

A door of utterance had opened itself to Nehemiah, and he didn't beat around the bush. He took a deep breath, transmitted a silent prayer to Heaven, and stepped boldly through the opening that appeared before him.

You've got to strike while the iron is hot.

- 5 And I said unto the king, "If it please the king, and if thy servant have found favour in thy sight, that thou wouldest send me unto Judah, unto the city of my fathers' sepulchres, that I may build it."**
- 6 And the king said unto me, (the queen also sitting by him,) "For how long shall thy journey be? and when wilt thou return?" So it pleased the king to send me; and I set him a time.**
- 7 Moreover I said unto the king, "If it please the king, let letters be given me to the governors beyond the river, that they may convey me over till I come into Judah;**
- 8 "And a letter unto Asaph the keeper of the king's forest, that he may give me timber to make beams for the gates of the palace which appertained to the house, and for the wall of the city, and for the house that I shall enter into."**
- And the king granted me, according to [what? — read the rest of the verse out loud] the good hand of my God upon me.**

Nehemiah got to go out and do something great for God and His people after he got a fire started with his prayers, sticking his branding iron into the flames and the glowing coals, getting it red hot, and then sticking his branding iron into a big calf by the name of King Artaxerxes.

Let me remind you that Artaxerxes could do more than merely get mad at Nehemiah, or refuse to talk to him, or talk bad about him behind his back, or turn Nehemiah's friends and relatives against him. Those are all the fearsome outcomes that too often rob you of your voice when you finally have the opportunity to speak to someone about Christ. Artaxerxes could do more than merely fire him from his job, or punch him in the nose, or have him beat up. This mighty emperor had the power of life and death in his hands. At a word, this absolute monarch could have Nehemiah flogged, or his eyes gouged out, or starved in a nasty prison cell, or hung from a crossbeam, or roasted alive, or flayed, or sawed asunder, or beheaded.

But Nehemiah trusted his God completely. The iron was hot, and it was time to strike.

So how's *your* God these days? Is He alive? Is He well? Assuming you're doing any real praying, is He hearing those prayers? Are you stoking the flames with added prayer time, and with more intense prayers? Are you making them even hotter by getting other good Christians praying on your behalf? Have you got the branding iron of a specific, vital prayer request in the flames? When are you going to drag that big calf over, wrestle him down, tie him up, pick up your red-hot branding iron, and strike his tough hide? When are you going to let the Holy Spirit make an unforgettable, inerasable impression on that big problem of yours?

Speaking of striking while the iron is hot, let me add a vital element to this concept. I'm gonna put you on the spot. The iron is getting red hot. Let me challenge you: *When are you going to go get your calf, pick up that iron, and get the job done?*

You've got to strike while the iron is hot.

Let me be so bold as to ask: "What are you doing to make your prayer requests a reality?"

For example, what will you do to get the Gospel to those loved ones of your for whose salvation you have praying for a long time? I know you've tried to witness to them loved ones in the past, and it seems like there's no one harder to win to Christ than the people you love the most. But you have branding irons glowing red-hot in the fires that are being stoked by several good Christians. Isn't it time to try witnessing to them *one more time*? Isn't it time to write them another tear-stained letter explaining salvation again, and begging them to get saved? Isn't it time to start sending in your cards and letters tracts, appropriate pamphlets, and sermons that you think may make an impression on them?

If you can't or won't try, let me ask you 3 difficult, pointed questions:

1. Are you more interested in them having a Saviour, or in them having a good relationship with *you*?
2. Why are you asking your church family to pray for someone you have no intention of trying to win to Christ?

We're happy to pray on your behalf for him, for her, for them. But why aren't you doing something with all that power we're generating for you? As the Apostle Paul said to the Christians in Corinth about a matter concerning them: **"Now therefore perform the doing of it; that as there was a readiness to will, so there may be a performance also out of that which ye have."**¹

3. Are you worshiping and serving and praying to *the living God* who loves that person even more than you do, and can give you the words and the power to witness to them — or do you worship and serve a dumb, impotent, mental idol? If He's real (and I am here to testify that *HE IS!*), why not give your Heavenly Father an opportunity to show Himself strong on your behalf? **"For the eyes of the LORD run to and fro throughout the whole earth, to shew himself strong in the behalf of them whose heart is perfect toward him..."**²

I was not born Arthur Maricle. Although I did not know it for many years, my original name was Arthur Hughes, Jr. My parents were divorced while I was too young to know my biological father. My mother remarried, and I was raised by a good man named Vernie Maricle, who quietly adopted me as his own and gave me his surname. I did not meet my actual father until I was about 40 years old, and my "dad" (the man who raised me)

¹ 2nd Corinthians 8:11

² 2nd Chronicles 16:9

had passed away. Of course, I wanted my father, Art Hughes, to be saved. After praying to that end for a prolonged period, I sensed that a **reservoir of power** was building that needed to be utilized before it could **evaporate**. I broached with Father the subject of Heaven during one of our telephone conversations. Though he was a very rough man (a retired trucker who was a heavy drinker and had apparently sired children via various women all over the continent), he listened meekly as I explained to him the Gospel. When I asked if he understood that he was a sinner headed for Hell, he said, "Yes." When I asked if he understood that Jesus Christ had died on the cross to pay for our sins, and was offering him eternal life as a free gift, he again said, "Yes." And then, when I asked if would like to invite Jesus to be his personal Saviour right then and there, he once more assented. He then humbly prayed with me, asking Jesus Christ to come into his heart, wash away his sins, and taking him to Heaven when he died; declaring further that he was trusting nothing else to take him to Heaven, and thanking Jesus for saving his soul. It was a wonderful moment! I am so glad that I struck while the iron was hot, for my father is now deceased, gone to be with our Lord, and awaiting me in Heaven.

Your church family is *glad* to pray for you and your specific needs. They'll pray for you when you need a job. But when they do, you need to go to work finding work. They'll pray for the good success of your business. But then you need to get up, get out, exert yourself, and make it happen. When God opens the windows of Heaven and pours out a blessing, you had better be sure to return the firstfruits to the Lord through your local church. They'll pray for your health. But you need to do all you in your power to take good care of yourself. They're delighted to pray for the specific families that comprise our Church. But, as the head of your household, will you adopt the attitude that "**...as for me and my house, we will serve the LORD**"³? Will you raise those children in the nurture and admonition of the Lord? Will you use that added spiritual power we're praying into your home? They will faithfully pray that God will turn the stubborn, rebellious hearts of your teenage and adult children back to Him. Week by week the flames are being stoked, and the iron is getting red hot. When was the last time you talked to your child about his salvation, his spiritual responsibilities, his walk with God? Parents, you've got to strike while the iron is hot.

You ought to have several calves waiting to be branded at any given moment in your life, and several irons in the fire with which to do the job. At some point, you need to get busy branding. You need to strike while the iron is hot.

³ Joshua 24:15