

The Persistent Widow

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[0 : 0 0] For many Christians in the world, life is hard. Perhaps it's hard for some of us today. We may not be singled out by the state for special treatment, but we may face social exclusion,¹ intellectual belittlement, a block on our sporting achievements, or a glass ceiling in our career prospects for being Christians. On top of all that are the problems everyone else in our society experiences, economic uncertainty, relationship difficulty, poor mental, physical health, etc. But as Christians, we have an avenue of comfort that others don't.

We can take all our concerns to God. We can pray. The hymn we sing is right, what a privilege to carry everything to God in prayer. That's what we do as Christians when life is hard. We pray. Now, in these verses in Luke 18, Jesus is talking about a widow's persistent prayer.

He uses her persistence in prayer as a model for how we as Jesus' followers are to pray, with earnestness, with persistence, with faith. We read, he taught them a parable to the effect that they ought always to pray and not lose heart. So, there's a certain judge who settles all kinds of disputes. He's not a God-fearing man. He's not intimidated by anyone. And in that city, there's a woman who comes to him and asks for justice against her. Is it adversary or adversity? I don't know.

Well, this woman lived in a society with no social security system, so widows were often very poor and easy prey for exploitation. We don't know the precise nature of her case, but whatever it was, she came to the one place she could get justice, a judge. Now, the widow was such an insignificant person that initially the judge couldn't be bothered dealing with her, but she kept coming, and she kept saying to him, give me justice against my adversity. She was so persistent that finally, the judge said, though I neither fear God nor respect men, yet because this widow keeps on bothering me, I'll give her justice so that she will not beat me down by her continual coming. She's pestering him.

So, to get rid of her, he listens to her case and gives her justice. Now, you know that children play the same game with their parents. I'm sure Samuel James will do that with Jonathan and Naomi as yours.

[2 : 4 9] They endlessly pester until mom and dad give in. The widow is persistent, and finally, all her efforts are rewarded. Thus, Jesus says, we ought always to pray and not lose heart. Whatever it is we're praying about, we ought not to lose heart, but believe that God will hear us and answer us according to his gracious will. Well, if that's the whole story of this parable, we can now say amen. That's the sermon done. Keep praying. Don't give up. Eventually, you'll wear God down by your continual stalking.

He'll get off your back, and he'll answer your prayer. Sorry, you'll get off his back, and he'll answer your prayer. So, I want a new golf GTI. So, I'm going to start praying today for a new golf GTI, and I'm going to pray with such persistence and perseverance that I'm going to bother God to the extent that in the very near future, there'll be a 25-plate VW on my driveway.

Is that the moral of the story? Whatever you want, pester God until he gives in, albeit grudgingly, but you'll have it anyway, so who cares how God feels about it? This is a passage about something different altogether. Its meaning is connected to the previous passage we looked at two weeks ago, where Jesus has been speaking about his return.

When Jesus comes again the second time, he will judge the world, condemning the wicked and rescuing the righteous. And the key verse in this passage is in Luke 17, 33. Whoever seeks to preserve his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life will keep it. And as we saw last time, Jesus was referring to those among his followers who, for the sake of their Christian faith, were suffering. Think of the Noah, the people of his day persecuted because he was building an ark. Or think of the lot who, on account of the coming judgment on Sodom and Gomorrah, left his home and belongings and started a new life with nothing.

Putting God first comes at a cost. It will result in us losing much, suffering, perhaps even dying for our faith. But when Jesus comes again, he will rescue us from this evil age. That's what the previous passages say. Before we discover for ourselves the richness of the deeper meaning in our passage in Luke 18, there's just one more piece of additional information we need to consider. Earlier we read Psalm 13.

[5 : 48] As we enter into this parable of the persistent widow pleading for justice, let's keep one finger here in Luke 18 and another finger in Psalm 13. Okay, one finger in Luke 18, another finger in Psalm 13.

Okay, with that in mind, I want to ask five questions about this passage. For what do we pray? To whom do we pray? With what confidence do we pray? How do we pray? And lastly, what is our challenge in prayer?

Okay, for what do we pray? For what did this widow pray? On four occasions in this passage, verse 3, 5, 7, and 8, Jesus uses the word justice. Justice. This widow comes to the unrighteous judge and pleads for justice. In the same way, when we cry out to God for justice, he will give justice to us.

In our passage, what Jesus is commanding us to pray for and not to lose heart is justice. It's not a new VW Golf 1.6 GTI in my driveway, but justice. Lot, who lost his home and possessions on account of the unrighteousness of the people of Sodom and Gomorrah, pleads for justice. Noah, who lost his reputation and status on account of the unrighteousness of the peoples of his day, pleads for justice.

The Christian, who on account of her faith in Jesus and her trust in the gospel, in the words of Luke 17, 33, lost her life, she pleads for justice. Now we go to Psalm 13, where King David, one of the most persecuted men in history who suffered most for his faith in God, writes, How long, Lord, will you forget me forever? How long will you hide your face from me? How long must I take counsel in my soul and have sorrow in my heart all the day? How long shall my enemy be exalted over me? Consider and answer me, O Lord my God. Light up my eyes, lest I sleep the sleep of death, lest my enemy say I have prevailed against him, lest my foes rejoice when I'm shaken.

[8 : 13] David's praying for justice. There's an unnamed enemy fighting against him, and that enemy seems to have the upper hand. The enemy rejoices in David's weakness. To make matters worse, it seems to David as though God has forgotten all about him. God's hidden his gracious face. And David turns inward, and his heart is filled with sorrow. And it's in these two words, how long we hear echoes of this widow's prayer.

How long, O Lord, David is pleading for justice against his enemy. Now it may be that in this life, David never received justice for all that was done against him. But he hands his situation over to God for God to deal with.

He knows a day is coming when God will condemn the wicked and reward the righteous. In the same way, we pray for justice, recognizing that in this life we may never receive justice for all the ways that we have suffered on account of our faith. Not reported in the news, in the Democratic Republic of Congo this year, hundreds of Christians have already died on account of their faith in Jesus.

They shall not receive justice in this life, but when Christ comes again, in the glory of his Father, their murderers will be condemned, and they shall be rewarded.

You ever throw up your hands in the air and just say, it's not fair? The reality for all of us in this life, folks, is that it ain't fair. God never said it would be fair. But a day is coming when Christ shall come again, and all that is wrong today will be put right. Then we shall have justice.

[10 : 23] All those things that went wrong for us now shall be put right. Rather than get annoyed and turn on God, Jesus is urging us in this passage to turn to God in our suffering and say, as David did, how long, O Lord? Life's not always hard, but when it does get tough, Jesus is encouraging us to pray to our heavenly Father and to hand the situation over to him pleading for justice.

You know, there are some things which have happened to me in life. I don't think I'll ever get justice in this life for the things that have happened to me, for the people that have hurt me, for the suffering I've endured on account of being a Christian, and you'll be the same. I was wronged, and it really hurt. Perhaps you can point to situations in your life just like that, but rather than let that hurt fester and take matters into our own hands, let's turn to God, according to this parable. Let him deal out justice in his own way and in his own time. How long, O Lord? That's what the widow prayed for. Question two, to whom do we pray?

To whom do we pray? When we pray for justice, do we come to a judge like the one in Jesus' story? Do we have to twist God's arm to get him to hear? Never mind answer us. Depending upon how important we are, maybe he'll answer us, maybe not. That's why we pester him and stalk him with our prayers.

We're trolling him so that even though he's unwilling to give us justice, just to get us off his back, he'll relent and answer us. Nothing could be further from the truth.

According to Jesus in this passage in Luke 18, the God to whom we pray is the God of the elect. Verse 7, will God not give justice to his elect? Now, the Old Testament people, the Jews, were called God's elect. To be one of God's elect meant that God had chosen you.

[12 : 47] He chose to love you and he chose to save you. Now, God didn't choose to set his love upon the Jewish nation because it was bigger, stronger, smarter than any other nation. He loved them because he chose to love them. To him, because he loved them and chose them, they were special. Now, in our passage here, we have a widow and widows in that day were insignificant. They were nothing. Nothing special about them at all. They were exploited. The rough end of justice. But this widow was one whom God had chosen. He loved her. He loved her. And to God she was special. The reason that the unrighteous judge was initially disinclined to grant her justice was because of her insignificance. It took her to pester him to get what she needed and wanted. When we come to God in prayer, asking for justice, we're coming to a righteous judge who loves us, has chosen us, and to whom we are special. He already favors us.

We might be nobodies to the world around us, but to God we are special because he is the God who chose us because he loved us and loved us because he chose us. When we pray, we're not shouting in an unwilling ear. Rather, his ear is already open to listen. We might be insignificant in the eyes of this world, but to God we're his precious children. And which of us would turn a deaf ear to his hurting child?

He is the God of the elect. Third, with what confidence do we pray? With what confidence do we pray? You know, for many in our society, prayer is pointless. What's the point of praying to a God who doesn't exist? For others, even though they do pray, they have no confidence that their prayers are being heard. And perhaps that's sometimes like us, right? We've prayed for so long, we've been denied the answer for which we have been praying. We're losing confidence in prayer. And if truth be told, we're losing confidence in God. Jesus is at pains in our passage to point out that God is not only listening to our prayers for justice, but getting ready to answer them. In verse 7, Jesus talks of God's elect who cry out to him day and night. The clear implication is that even as they cry out to him day and night, the God who hears them, hears them day and night. Even as they open their hearts to God, he opens his heart to them. Jesus assures us that whatever seems to the contrary, God is carefully listening to us. You know, in what is a remarkable statement of faith at the end of Psalm 13, even though David is still faced by his enemy, he prays to God, saying, but I have trusted in your salvation.

I've trusted in your steadfast love, rather. My heart rejoices in your salvation. I will sing to the Lord because he has dealt bountifully with me. Even though it felt to David as though God had forgotten all about him, he always knew the reality was different. Behind David's feelings lay the fact of God's love for him. He knew that though the whole world should hate him, and maybe it did, God loved him. The judge in our story had no special feelings for the widow. He answered her pleas to stop her trolling him, but the God to whom we pray loves us infinitely, eternally, and unchangeably.

David looks back and he sees how bountifully God has dealt with him in the past, how God cared for him, how God watched over him, and therefore God will do the same again. Yes, even greater things than these.

[17 : 09] As he looks back on these things, it gives him confidence to look ahead and begin to rejoice in God's salvation even before it's happened. Perhaps we can do the same.

Look back at God's goodness in the past, so that we can have confidence in God's goodness to us in the future. But then you say to me, you don't know my life.

How has God been good to me? How can you possibly say, he has dealt bountifully with me? Do you know the situation I'm in? Well, suppose we cannot trace his goodness in our own lives.

We can trace it in the life of the Jesus who speaks these words to us. The ultimate demonstration of the goodness of God is that while we were yet sinners, this Christ died for us.

He died for us because God is good and God loves us. The cross of Jesus gives us confidence to keep praying, knowing that in Paul's words, he who did not spare his own son, but gave him up for us all, how will he not, along with him, freely give us all things?

[18 : 28] If today, you are losing confidence that God is listening to or answering your prayers for justice, look to the cross where the justice of God met the injustice of our sin and overcame.

Look to the cross, for there you'll see the steadfast love of God for you demonstrated in real life. With what confidence do we pray? The cross.

Fourth, how do we pray? How do we pray? The widow came to the unrighteous judge and we read she kept coming. She kept coming. The judge says of her that she's bothering them continually.

Later on, in verse 7, Jesus says, will not God give justice to his elect to cry out to him day and night? While David was suffering on account of his faith, when he was praying, how long, O Lord, it wasn't a one-off prayer.

He talks about having continual sorrow in his heart. For continuous as his sorrow was as continuous as his prayer. When sorrow struck, the prayer went up, how long, O Lord?

[19 : 42] Most of the time, it's really hard to keep praying about something, but when that something is the difference between life and death to you, and when prayer is our only option, praying day and night isn't hard.

It's automatic. Think of the martyrs of the early church. They were arrested, tortured, and fed to the lions for no other reason than that they were Christians.

They had no earthly high authority they could appeal to for justice, so they prayed. They had no other option. They prayed. This is what marks out prayer for things unnecessary from the kind of prayer Jesus is talking about.

The justice for which the widow pleads is the difference between life and death for her. In the same way, we're not playing with God in prayer. We're not playing a game with him.

We're praying for things that really matter. In Psalm 13, David prays, O Lord, light up my eyes lest I sleep the sleep of death for David's God.

[20 : 45] To hear an answer really was the difference between life and death for David. Are there things in your life today which are so important to you that you cannot but pray about them day and night?

The last thing you think about at night, the first thing you think about in the morning, they're with you all day. Burdens and problems you're facing, perhaps no one else knows about them but you do.

And this is how you're praying. For as often as you feel the sorrow, you're lifting up your heart to your heavenly Father because you've got confidence in him and you know he loves you.

The last question. What's our challenge in prayer? What's our challenge? Jesus closes this parable with a very somber, serious challenge.

Nevertheless, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith in the earth? Will he find faith on the earth? When the Son of Man returns, as promised he will, will he find his people continuing to pray for justice?

[21 : 52] Or will they have plain lost heart? Will he find them for the sake of their own comfort and pleasure, compromising with the world so they don't suffer for their faith? Or will they still be standing firm and suffering as a result?

This is our challenge in prayer. Don't lose heart. Don't give up praying for God's justice.

I'm told that when the famous Welsh preacher Martin Lloyd-Jones would greet people at the door of his church after the service, he would shake their hands and say to them, go on, go on, before moving to the next person.

Now, some would take offence, supposing that he was just trying to get rid of them. Go on. But what he was doing was using those two wee words, the little time he had with them, in the best way possible.

Two wee words, go on. Two words, which were his way of encouraging each person who had heard him preaching to put what he had said into practice and not give up on their faith.

[23 : 06] Go on, he would say to them. Do not lose heart. Do not stop praying. Though your heart may be breaking within you, go on.

Though you cannot see a way ahead, go on. Though your mind is clouded by a million worries, go on. Though an enemy prevails against you, go on.

Though you are suffering on account of being a Christian, go on. Though you cry tears at the thought of praying anymore, go on. Do not give up so that when the Son of Man returns, though he might not find faith in him everywhere, he'll find it in you.

Those among us, there may be many among us today who have very painful questions we want to ask God. and there's no answer here in this life.

Why did God allow this devastating thing to happen to me or to the one I love most in this world? It's not fair.

[24 : 25] Why? There will be no justice in life for those who ask these questions. But Jesus promises God will not delay long over them.

God will give his justice speedily, always remembering that for the Lord a thousand years is a day and a day a thousand years. Christ will soon come and then there will be answers to these questions.

You will be vindicated. Christ will be vindicated. The gospel will be vindicated.

Until then we keep praying along with David. How long oh Lord? I once had a Christian friend a wee bit older than me, just a few years older than me.

I've known him since he was a boy. He was a picture of health and happiness. He had the world at his feet. He met and married a lovely girl and had two wonderful children.

[25 : 35] And he bought them a dream home, a wee converted church. One day he lost his balance at work and before long he couldn't walk.

He went to the doctors and was diagnosed with an extremely rare and untreatable brain tumour. Changed his personality. his wife left him and he died all alone in his house.

His reputation destroyed, his legacy ruined. To the very end in his own way as a rough diamond he loved Jesus.

He could hardly speak to me on the phone but he would say to me I don't know why any of this is happening but I do trust God through all the pain of dying.

He trusted God. So I went to his funeral and I presented Psalm 40 at the front of the church. My heart was breaking within me and I couldn't stop the tears so I waited for the Lord my God and patiently did bear at length to me he didn't climb his voice and cry to hear.

[26 : 57] My heart and the heart of others who were his friends were breaking and we wondered whether our friend would ever get justice for the way he was treated in this life.

Not in this life he did not. But on the basis of Luke 18 verses 1 through 8 I'm satisfied that he now has his questions answered and that God will in his own good time vindicate my friend's reputation and his legacy.

For many Christians today life is guy hard. Is it hard for you? If it is take this passage to heart and in the words of Martin Lloyd-Jones go on go on trusting that God in his grace will one day give you justice.

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