

Persist in Prayer

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[0 : 00] Well, please hang on to those readings, and there's an outline on the other side as well. But as Christians, we all know we ought to pray, don't we?

But sometimes it is hard to keep praying, particularly when we don't get the answer we want, or we're still waiting for the answer we ask for.

Like young Joyce, who prayed, Dear God, thank you for the baby brother, but what I really prayed for was a puppy. Little does Joyce know that puppies are just as much work.

And the point is, when we've been praying and praying and praying, and we're still waiting and waiting and waiting, it's easy to lose heart and give up, isn't it? And so Jesus tells this parable to help us persist in prayer, which is, as I said, what I want to encourage us to do this year.

And so point one, verse one, And he told them a parable to the effect that they ought always to pray and lose heart. Here is the parable's purpose quite clearly stated, isn't it?

[1 : 08] To encourage us disciples to pray regularly and not lose heart, such that we give up. Especially when we're left waiting for what we prayed for, because waiting is actually the wider context of this parable.

You see, this parable ends right down the bottom with a comment about the Son of Man coming to the earth. That is, Jesus' return. And just before the parable is also a discussion of Jesus' return. And so a few verses before, Jesus was asked by one of the Pharisees, when will the kingdom of God come? And then after responding to the Pharisees, he turns to his disciples and says, the time is coming when you will long to see one of the days of the Son of Man, but you will not see it. And as the rest of the passage goes on to say, it's not talking about his days on earth, it's talking about the days to come. And the one day he will return to establish God's kingdom throughout the whole earth, where there will be no more injustice or suffering, only life in joyful perfection. And while they may long to see that day now, they won't in their lifetime, he says. And we might not see it in our lifetime either. No one knows, do they?

[2 : 35] But what we do know is, we all have to wait for it, don't we? And waiting can be hard, can't it? Especially when you've been suffering and praying for relief, but it's still yet to come.

Like young Sarah who prayed, dear God, please change the taste of asparagus. It's grass. Thanks, Sarah. My guess is God will answer that prayer when she grows up and her taste buds change. But at the moment, she has to wait for that answer she wants. And of course, it's much harder when we're facing things that are much worse than asparagus.

You know, like health struggles or financial struggles or injustice as God's people. I like those Christians I mentioned to some of you last week at Doncaster in the Congo.

Do you remember I showed some of you last week how just a couple of weeks ago, 53 Christians were killed in one day? All of the Christians in Nigeria who continue to suffer injustice at the hand of Boko Haram.

[3 : 40] Last October, just a few months ago, they released a video showing them decapitating the heads of Christians. And one of them was their own niece.

Can you believe it? The Christians in these places, they're praying for justice, but they're still waiting for it. I mean, how long have we been praying for justice in the Ukraine?

We have to wait. And as we wait, it's easy to lose heart, isn't it? And to give up. And so Jesus tells this parable to help us not lose heart, but persist in prayer.

How? Well, let's look at the parable's content. Point two, verse two. He said, In a certain city, there was a judge who neither feared God nor respected man, and there was a widow in that city who kept coming to him and saying, Give me justice against my adversary.

In verse two, we meet an unjust judge. And he's unjust because he neither fears God nor respects people, and so he doesn't do his job.

[4 : 49] A judge's job is to give justice. That's his job, isn't it? Especially for widows, because that's the law. In the Old Testament law, there was very strong warnings for those who did not give justice to the orphans, the fathers, and the widows.

And so, because he doesn't fear God nor respect people, he doesn't do his job and give justice. But he's messed with the wrong widow, hasn't he? Because in verse three, she is persistent.

She keeps coming to the judge, keeps asking for justice. In fact, she does more than ask. She commands. The word give is actually a command in the original language.

She commands the judge, Give me justice. In our society, we might call her a tiger mum. You know, one you don't mess with. Of course, this widow had no centre link, nor any family to help, it seems. And so, this is all she could do. And she keeps doing it to the point that the judge gives in. Not because, verse four, he suddenly fears God or respects people, but verse five, so he doesn't get beaten up by the widow.

[6 : 08] The word for beat is the word used for Greek boxing to give a black eye. That's what the original word means, to give a black eye. Though I doubt it means the widow will get so fed up she'll actually sock him one in the eye physically.

Rather, as the text suggests, her persistent demands will knock him out mentally with exhaustion. Either way, it's for his own selfish sake that he eventually gives him and gives her justice.

That's the content of the parable. So what's the point? Well, it's point three, verse six to eight. And the Lord Jesus said, hear what the unjust judge says.

And will not God give justice to his elect who cry out to him day and night? Will he delay long over them? I tell you, he will give justice to them speedily.

At the point here is not that God is an unloving and unjust judge, nor even that we need to become tiger prayers and keep pestering God until he gets sick of us and gives us what we want.

[7 : 20] Rather, the point is, if even an unloving and unjust judge will give justice to this random widow, how much more will our loving and just God give it to his own chosen people?

If this is the least kind of scenario that still happens, what about this one? Of course it will happen. If a judge of bad character gives it to a random person, then a God of good character will certainly give it to his people.

That's the point. So here's the encouragement. God will certainly bring about justice for his people. He will certainly one day answer our prayers for it. And so here's another reason to persist in prayer.

Not only is it a privilege, as we heard in our first reading, what other people is so great to be able to come near God, and we're able to come even nearer than Israel.

We're able to come before God's very throne of grace in prayer. Not only is it a privilege, but God will certainly one day give us what we pray for.

[8 : 29] Though, to be clear, this refers to those things he's promised us, like justice. I mean, that's this parable's prayer point, isn't it?

The word justice comes up four times in eight verses, 50% of the time. And so it's not talking about things he hasn't promised us, like a billion dollars.

I don't know if you've ever prayed for a billion dollars before. But some of these promises God will actually give us straight away, like forgiveness. But other promises we sometimes have to wait for, like healing and justice.

But the encouragement here is to persist in prayer for them, knowing that one day God will give them. I mean, if God told you that you would definitely win Tats Lotto, and that the tickets are free, wouldn't you buy one?

Well, you wouldn't have to buy one. Wouldn't you get one each day, knowing one day you'd definitely win? God told you definitely win. Now, for the record, God has not told us that we'll win Tats Lotto, and it's very unlikely we ever will, but he has told us that by the blood of Christ we can freely come to him in prayer.

[9 : 45] And by the character of God, he'll certainly one day answer our prayer according to his policies. He will bring justice to his people. He will end all suffering.

And so we are to persist in prayer for it, knowing that it will happen. We're not wasting our time. It's going to happen. In fact, it says he won't delay, but give justice speedily or quickly, which could

mean that the event will be quick.

That is, the moment it's time for Jesus to return and bring justice, it will happen quickly. God will not delay one second longer than he has planned. It's not as though Jesus, as I've said before, he won't get stuck in some heavenly traffic jam on his way back.

When the time comes, it will happen quickly. Or it could mean the time between now and Christ's return will be quick from God's perspective.

As you know, Peter says, do not fear this one thing, dear friends, with the Lord, a day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years is like a day. In other words, we see time and feel time differently to God.

[10 : 55] We think in terms of years, God thinks in terms of eternity. That's a little bit different, isn't it? And so what seems forever to us is quick to God, unlike with kids.

School went back last week, and for kids, the school day often seems to take forever, but it goes like that for us parents. Is that the time already?

Are you going to think them up already? Where did the day go? kids and adults feel time differently. So do us and God. Either way, it will certainly happen.

And so we persist in prayer for the things God promised us, like justice in our world, for ourselves or God's people in the Congo or Nigeria or China or wherever.

Of course, you may be thinking, but if God will definitely bring it one day, then why not just pray once for it and wait? Why persist in praying for it?

[11 : 55] Well, first, because you never know which prayer God will use to answer it. Like which ticket will win the lottery? We only know it will happen one day. And so we persist in case it's today that God will use our prayer to bring it.

Second, because God may well answer our prayers now, partially, like the ceasefire between Hamas and Israel. Haven't we been praying for that for ages as well?

Well, Jesus hasn't returned yet and I know it's fragile, but it's stopped. Our prayers have been answered partially now. Sure, there's not complete peace in the whole Middle East, but as I said, God has answered our prayer for justice partially now.

And third, because prayer is an expression of our faith. Prayer shows we believe in God's character, such that we pray for God's help and trust in God's timing to answer.

If we stop praying, then it suggests we've stopped believing. This is the parable's challenge, point four, the rest of verse eight, the last line there.

[13 : 11] Jesus says, nevertheless, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth? When Jesus says, will Jesus find faith on earth, we could say, will he find us praying on earth?

Because that's the context of the parabolism, it's about praying. And this is true when it comes to praying for the things God's promised us and for all things that concern us, whether God has promised them a lot.

We are to pray for all things that concern us, like a cooler day today, which hasn't quite happened, or good results, or a good job, or a godly spouse for our kids and grandkids, nieces or nephews, or whatever it is that concerns us.

Faith believes in God's character and so prays to God for all things, trusting God's timing and answer. And so in this parable, faith believes in God's character of justice and so prays for God to bring justice and trusts in God's timing to give it.

But faith also believes in God's character of goodness, so looks to God's help in all things and trusts in God's answer that it will be for our good.

[14 : 34] Just as Jesus said elsewhere, if you earthly fathers, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more, here's another comparison of how much more will your Father in Heaven give good gifts to those who ask Him.

And so here's the encouragement to pray for all things that concern us, knowing God only gives good gifts to us. I mean, it wasn't that long ago when children around the world at Christmas didn't hold back from asking Santa for all sorts of things.

gifts. I mean, we saw it on TV and movies and the like. Gifts because they believed Santa was real and only give good gifts. We have actual evidence to believe that God is real and really does only give good gifts.

So how much more should we ask? Of course, by good, God means it's good as God defines it. As I said before, we may think a billion dollars is good for us, but God knows it may well entice us away

from trusting him and instead trusting in our bank account.

And so, God's good gift to us is actually to say no to that prayer, just like parents say no to their children for their good. But faith believes in God's character of goodness which encourages us to pray.

[16:04] And faith also believes in God's character of sovereignty. That sees the bigger picture, which encourages us to trust in God's answer and timing, even if it doesn't make sense to us.

I still remember a young guy at uni becoming a Christian. He started sharing the gospel with his friends, and they suddenly become Christians. He was a gifted evangelist. And then about a year later, I think it was, he was swimming at a beach and drowned.

And I remember thinking and asking God, God, surely you've got this wrong, haven't you? Don't you want people to become Christians? And here is a gifted evangelist.

It didn't make sense to me why God would allow this to happen. But we don't know the bigger picture. A year later, I heard through the grapevine that his autopsy showed markers for a degenerative disease.

And so perhaps his death saved or his death did save him from something like that. Maybe that's why God allowed him to drive it. We just don't know that God does. The point is faith will express itself in persistent prayer, not only for the things God has promised us, but for all things that concern us.

[17:20] For faith believes in God's character of justice and goodness and sovereignty, and so encourages us to pray persistently, trusting God's timing and answer.

If we stop praying, then it suggests we have stopped believing. In fact, the act of persistent prayer is for our good, because it helps us to grow our faith.

You could represent it by this simple diagram on the screen. Faith not only shows itself in prayer, which is the end of the parable, but prayer also grows us in faith. Like a church member last year who needed work to help provide for his family.

Their faith in God showed itself in prayer, and persistent prayer, because he had to wait almost a year to get a job, which was not easy.

In fact, as his savings went down, his stress went up. But after they got a job, they looked back and could see how the persistent prayer taught them to hand over their stress to God and grow their faith in him.

[18:33] In other words, the whole process grew their faith. And so, like the diagram, faith will show itself in prayer, which in turn grows us in faith.

And so here's another reason to persist in prayer. Not just for the things God's promised us, but for all things that concern us. things. And so this year, I want to encourage you as individuals and as a church to persist in prayer for all things, and in light of Hope 25, especially for non-Christians.

As we heard before, it's only God who makes things grow. And again, our first monthly prayer night is coming up, there is, this Wednesday evening.

And if you can't make it, then let us know and we can give you the prayer points for it so you can pray during the week. And for those who have been praying for years already, then keep praying. Even for your non-Christian family. Many of you might recognise the name Gene Winter, who prayed for a husband, Ted, to become a Christian for over 60 years, I think it was.

[19:44] I can't remember how old Ted was when he became a Christian, I can't remember, 96 or something like that, not long before he passed away. Actually, he became a Christian. Another member at 1030 Church, his father resisted the gospel for many years.

He went over to Sri Lanka to visit his father who was unwell. His father became a Christian. And two weeks later, he passed away. You never know. So keep persisting in praying.

So here's the encouragement as we begin the year. Persist in prayer for promised things, since God will certainly give them. If not now, then later, certainly.

And persist in prayer for all things, since faith believes in God's good character. And so prays for all things and trusts in God's timing and answer.

And in light of Hope 25 this year, pray for those non-Christians you know, so that when Jesus returns, he might find even more faith on earth.

[20:47] prayer for us. Our gracious Father, we thank you for your word. And this morning, your word to us is quite simple.

It's not hard to understand. In fact, it's quite familiar to us, I'm sure. The hard part is putting it into practice. And so help us, we pray this year, to persist in prayer for those things you've promised us, but also for all things that concern us.

And also those non-Christians known to us, that you might use our prayers to grow your church for your glory. We ask in Jesus' name. Amen.