

Persist in Prayer

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[0 : 00] I'm going to be using the insert, so if you've got an insert, you should receive one in your bulletins. I'm just using the ESV version of our passage tonight. There was too many translation issues with NIV to kind of explain them to you tonight, so I just thought, because I was using it across the whole day, I'd just print it out instead.

Well, we all know Christians ought to pray, don't we? But I wonder if you've ever found it hard to keep praying. To persist in prayer, especially if what we've been praying for hasn't happened yet.

We're still waiting for what we asked for. Like young Joyce, who said, 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 as baby brothers. But the point is, when we've been praying and praying and praying, and we are still waiting and waiting and waiting, it's easy to lose heart and give up.

And so Jesus tells us this parable to help us persist in prayer, which, as I said, I want to encourage us as individuals and a church to do, particularly this year. So we're at point one in the outline, and then verse one in the passage.

[1 : 18] And he told them a parable to the effect that they ought always to pray and not lose heart. You don't always get a crystal clear purpose statement for parables, but here it is, isn't it?

This is the parable's purpose, to encourage us disciples. That's who he's speaking to here. Disciples, us disciples, to pray regularly and not lose heart, to not give up, especially if we are left waiting for what we prayed for.

Because waiting is actually the wider context behind this parable. You see, if you look at the very last line of the reading, it talks about the Son of Man coming to earth.

That is, it's talking about Jesus' return. And just before the parable was also a discussion about Jesus' return. And so some of the Pharisees asked Jesus a few verses in chapter 17, verse 20, when the kingdom of God would come, when it would be fully established physically on earth.

That is, when Jesus would return. And then once he kind of talks to them, he very quickly moves to his disciples and tells them that the time is coming when they will long to see one of the days of the Son of Man, but you will not see it.

[2 : 39] One of the days here in the passage is the day he'll return to establish God's kingdom throughout the earth. What the Pharisees asked about. Where there'll be no more injustice, no more suffering, only life in joyful perfection.

And while they made long to see that day, Jesus says you will not see it in their lifetime. We might not see it in our lifetime either.

And no one knows when Jesus will return, do they? But what we all know is that we have to wait for it, don't we? But waiting is hard, especially when you're suffering and praying for relief, but it hasn't come.

I like little Sarah who prayed, Dear God, please change the taste of asparagus. It's grass. Thanks, Sarah. My guess is God will actually answer her prayer when she grows up and her taste buds change.

But at the moment, she has to wait for the answer she wants. Of course, it's much harder to wait when we're facing much worse things in life, whether it's health struggles or financial struggles or employment issues or injustice against God's people.

[3 : 58] For those who are at 5pm Blackburn, I mentioned last week the Christians in the Congo who just recently, about two weeks ago, 53 were killed in one day, 128 since Christmas.

Or like the Christians in Nigeria who continue to suffer injustice at the hands of Boko Haram. In October last year, just a few months ago, they released a video showing them decapitating Christians' heads.

And one of them was their own niece. Can you believe it? For Christians in these places, they're praying for justice, but they're still waiting for it.

Or how long have we been praying for justice in Ukraine? When we have to wait, it's easy to lose heart such that we give up praying, isn't it?

And so Jesus tells us this parable to help us not give up, but to persist in prayer. How? Well, let's look at the parable's content.

[5 : 03] Point 2, verse 2. Verse 2 says, Jesus 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 2, we meet an unjust judge, and he's unjust because he doesn't fear God nor respect people, which means he doesn't do his job. A judge is supposed to give justice.

That's their job, right? And in the Old Testament, it's especially for widows because that's the law. The Old Testament talks about serious consequences for those who withhold justice from the foreigner, the fatherless, or the widow.

But because he neither fears God nor respects people, he doesn't do his job and give justice. Somebody's messed with the wrong widow, hasn't he?

Because in verse 3, she is persistent. She keeps coming to the judge, keeps asking for justice. Actually, she does more than that. This is one of the translation issues.

[6 : 16] She demands it. Where it says, Give me justice, it's literally a command. She's commanding the judge to give her justice.

In our society, perhaps we call her a tiger mum, you know, one you don't mess with. Of course, this widow had no center link back then, nor it seems family to help.

So this is all she could do. But she keeps doing it, doesn't she? To the point that the judge gives in. Not because, verse 4, he says, not because he fears God suddenly, well, not because he suddenly loves people.

No, no, no. But verse 5, so he doesn't get beaten up by the widow. The word for beat there is a word used in the Greek boxing arena, and it means to give a black eye.

Though I doubt it means that she might get so exasperated, she ends up socking him one physically in the eye. Rather, as the text suggests, her persistent demands will knock him out mentally with exhaustion, so to speak.

[7 : 23] Either way, it's for his own selfish sake that he eventually gives in and gives her justice. That's the content of the parable.

So what's the point? Well, it's point 3, verse 6 to 8. And the Lord said, hear what the unjust judge says.

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

The point is, not that God is an unloving or unjust judge, nor even that we have to become tiger prayers and keep pestering God until he gives in and gives us what we ask for.

Rather, it's a comparison of how much more. That is, if even an unloving and unjust judge gives justice to this random widow, or how much more will a loving and just God give it to his own people.

[8 : 37] That's the point. If a judge of bad character will give it to some random widow, then certainly a God of good character will give it to his chosen people.

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

Not only is it a privilege, as we heard with our first reading from Deuteronomy, where Moses says, what other nation is so great to have their gods near them the way our God is near us whenever we pray to him?

And that was Israel without the Holy Spirit, without access straight to God's throne. They could only get near to God at the temple. We can come even nearer through Christ, can't we? We can come before the throne of God above.

Prayer is an extraordinary privilege. But more than that reason to persist in prayer is that God will certainly one day give us what we pray for.

[9 : 41] Now, to be clear, this refers to the things that God has promised us, like justice. I mean, that's the prayer point of the parable, isn't it?

The word justice comes up four times in eight verses. I mean, that's quite a bit, really. It's not a guarantee that he will give us the things that he hasn't promised us, like a billion dollars.

I was going to use a million dollars, but house prices these days just doesn't cut it. But some of these promises that God has given us, he will actually give us straight away, like forgiveness.

forgiveness the moment we pray. But other promises we sometimes have to wait for, like healing or justice. But the encouragement to persist in prayer for them is knowing that one day he will give them, he will keep his promises.

I mean, if God told you that you would definitely win Tats Lotto one day and the tickets were free and he says, go and, you know, you'll definitely win it, go and get a ticket. They're free.

[10 : 54] Wouldn't you keep getting a ticket every day? Knowing that you definitely win one day? Again, for the record, God has not told us to do that and it's unlikely we will win.

But God has told us that by the blood of Christ we can freely come to him in prayer. And by the character of God he will certainly one day answer our prayer according to his promises.

He will bring justice to his people. He will end suffering. In fact, it says in the text that he won't delay but give justice speedily or quickly.

Which could mean that the event itself will be quick. You know, that is the moment it's time for Jesus to return and bring justice. it will happen quickly. You know, God will not delay one second longer than he has promised.

Jesus won't get stuck in some heavenly traffic jam on his way back to earth. When it comes it will happen quickly. Or, it could mean the time between now and Christ's return will be quick from God's perspective.

[12 : 07] As Peter says, I'm sure you're familiar with this verse, don't fear this one thing dear friends, with the Lord a day is like a thousand years and a thousand years are like a day. In other words, we see time differently to the way God does.

We think in terms of years, God thinks in terms of eternity. That's a bit different, isn't it? And so what seems forever to us is quick to God.

You know, it's like this in life, isn't it? You know, when we're younger time seems to go slower. You know, it takes forever to get your 120 hours on your learners, you know, so you can go for your peas and it takes forever to get off your red peas to go to your green peas.

My daughter just got on her green peas last week and she was so excited about it. When I was younger, I thought it would take forever to get to 50. I'm 50 next year but for those who are close or over it, Mark, time has flown, yeah, just like that, just like that.

The point is we know this experience of feeling time differently depending on our perspective and it's the same with us and God. Either way, it will certainly happen.

[13 : 29] And so we're to persist in praying for the things that God has promised us like justice in our world, justice for ourselves or God's people in Congo, Nigeria, China, wherever.

Of course, you may now be thinking though, well, if God is definitely going to bring it, why don't we just pray once and wait for it? Why persist in praying for it?

Well, first, because you never know which prayer God will use to answer it, like which ticket will win the lotto, if you like. We only know it will happen one day and so we're to persist in case it's today that God will use our prayer to bring it.

Second, because God may well answer our prayers partially now, like the ceasefire between Hamas and Israel. I mean, isn't that what we've been praying for?

Peace in the Middle East? Sure, it's not complete peace in the entire Middle East, but it has been partially answered that prayer, hasn't it? And third, because prayer is an expression of our faith.

[14 : 41] Our prayer shows that we believe in God's character and so we pray for God's help and trust in God's timing to answer. If we stop praying, then it can show that we've stopped believing.

That's the parable's challenge, point four and the last sentence of the passage. Jesus says, nevertheless, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on the earth?

And given the parable's all about prayer, I think we could say or paraphrase and say, will he find us praying on earth? because faith expresses itself in prayer amongst other things.

And this is true when it comes to praying for the things that God has promised us and for all things that concern us, whether he's promised them or not.

We're to pray for everything. Faith will express itself in prayer for all things. And so in this parable, faith believes in God's character of justice, so prays for God to bring it.

[15 : 54] And then faith trusts in God's timing to answer. But faith also believes in God's character of goodness and so looks for God's help in all things and then trusts God's answer will be for our good.

Just as Jesus said elsewhere, he said, if you then, and he's talking specifically to earthly fathers, if you then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more, it's another how much more argument like the judge and God, how much more will your father in heaven give good gifts to those who ask him?

And so he is more encouragement to pray, not just for what he has promised us, but for all things that concern us, knowing that God only gives good gifts. I mean, Christmas was not that long ago and kids around the world did not hold back asking Santa for good gifts.

They believed that Santa was real and only gives good gifts. Well, we actually have evidence that God is real and gives good gifts and yet so often we don't take advantage, we don't ask, we don't pray.

Of course, by good, Jesus means good as God defines it. Again, we may think a billion dollars is good for us but God knows it's likely to entice us away from trusting in him and just trusting our bank balance.

[17 : 24] You know, I've got plenty of money, I don't need to worry, don't need to think about God, don't need to depend on God. And so if we do pray for a billion dollars, God's good gift to us is to say no.

Just like parents sometimes say no to their kids for their good. Faith believes in God's character of goodness which encourages us to pray. But faith also believes in God's character of sovereignty which then trusts that he sees the bigger picture and will answer for our good even if it doesn't make sense to us.

I still remember a young guy at uni. He was a few years behind me. He became a Christian. He started sharing the gospel with his friends and suddenly they became Christians.

It was amazing. Slightly depressing for me. I tried to share the gospel and they didn't become Christians but anyway. This guy was a gifted evangelist. About a year later he went swimming at a beach and drowned.

And I remember thinking or even crying out to God what are you doing? Surely God this is nuts. I know God that you want people to become Christians and so why would you allow this evangelist to drown?

[18 : 40] It didn't make sense to me. But we don't know the bigger picture. Years later many years later I heard through the grapevine that his autopsy showed markers for a degenerative disease which his death actually saved him from.

Took him straight to heaven. Maybe that's why God allowed him to drown. We just don't know. But God does. The point is faith will express itself in persistent prayer not only for what God has promised us but for all things that concern us.

But it will believe in God's character of justice and goodness and sovereignty and so pray persistently trusting in God's timing and answer that he sees the bigger picture that it is somehow for good.

If we stop praying then it seems it shows we stopped believing. When Jesus returns will he find faith that prays on earth?

In fact the actual act of persistent prayer is for our good too because it helps us grow our faith. I mean you could represent it a bit like this diagram on the screen.

[19 : 55] The end of verse 8 the last sentence there really is the first arrow on the right there. Faith shows itself in prayer but it also helps us grow in faith in return.

And so I know of someone who was looking for a job last year to help provide for the family and so their faith in God showed itself in prayer for a job and it showed itself in persistent prayer because they had to wait almost a year to get it which was not easy.

As their savings went down their stress went up. But after they got the job they looked back and could see how their persistent prayer taught them to hand over their stress and to trust God more.

In other words the whole process grew their faith. That's the left hand side of the diagram which is another reason to pray isn't it? Because it helps us grow in faith.

And so this year I want to encourage you as individuals and us as a church to persist in prayer for all things. And in light of Hope 25 especially for non-Christians because as we already heard in our service today it's God who makes things grow.

[21 : 14] And so a great way to start is you guessed it this Wednesday night. Come along and pray for non-Christians in Timor.

Hear about the ministry that's happening there. Pray for non-Christians there and around the world. And for those who've been praying for their non-Christian family for years then keep praying.

I still remember a lady in the morning Jean Winter is her name and she'd been praying for her husband for over 60 years to become a Christian.

One of our members I don't know I went and visited him and shared the gospel with him to no effect. Maybe I'm in the wrong job. But this other member from 9 o'clock congregation went a few times, shared the gospel and he became a Christian two months before he died, age 96.

You just never know, do you? And so keep praying. So here's the encouragement as we begin this new church year. Persist in prayer for promised things since God will certainly give them.

[22 : 28] If not now partially, then fully later. And persist in prayer for all things since faith believes in God's good and sovereign character and so prays and trusts in God's answer.

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

Let's pray now. Let's pray. Our gracious Father, we do thank you for this reminder to persist in prayer.

And although it's a pretty simple passage, and it's probably things we've heard many times before, the difficulty is always to put it into practice.

And so help us, we pray, to put it into practice, to persist in prayer this year. For we ask it in Jesus' name. Amen.