

“...AND NOT TO FAINT”

*“And he spake a parable unto them to this end, that men ought always to pray, and not to faint”
(Luke 18:1).*

J.P. Thackway

The parable of the Importunate Widow is a well-known one, occupying the first 8 verses of Luke chapter 18. This is one of the few parables where our Lord gives the explanation at the beginning: “...to this end, that men ought always to pray, and not to faint.” “It has the key,” wrote Matthew Henry, “hanging at the door.”

Here we see a problem common to of us: we do not usually see our prayers answered immediately. In some urgent, everyday cases the Lord is pleased to come in for us straight away: “before they call, I will answer; and while they are yet speaking, I will hear” (Isaiah 65:24). However, otherwise – usually with the larger petitions – the Lord tends to keep us waiting.

Therefore there can be the temptation “to faint.” The word in the Greek includes the meaning “to be afraid.” The fear that the Lord is not going to answer us can be very real – and dismaying when major issues are involved like the conversion of that family member, the solution to a pressing problem, an important provision, etc. This fear can weaken prayer; we can lose courage, grow weary, and even give up. When nothing happens, it has a profound effect: “Hope deferred maketh the heart sick” (Proverbs 13:12).

To counteract this danger, the Lord says, “men ought always to pray.” This is our duty all the time, but particularly at those times when we are tempted to lose heart over “unanswered prayer.” In addition, He gives us this vivid parable to help us to persevere in prayer until we have received the answer we seek. His words in verses 6-8 amount to a promise.

In them the Lord gives us firstly, **SOMETHING TO THINK ABOUT**: verse 6 “And the Lord said, Hear what the unjust judge saith.”

It is as if He pauses at this point, that His hearers (and we) might listen to the judge’s words and take in the situation. We will understand the promise as we understand the parable.

1. Here is the worst kind of judge.

v.2 “which feared not God, neither regarded man.” Probably one of the minor judges in Israel, he sat to hear less serious cases. However, he is totally unsuitable because he disregards the first table of the Moral Law: “feared not God,” and the second table: “neither regarded man.” The vertical affects the horizontal. If a man does not fear God as he ought, he is not likely to love his neighbour as himself.

This is particularly serious in a judge. “The powers that be (that) are ordained of God” (Romans 13:1-50) include a nation’s judiciary. Charged by almighty God to administer justice to men in His name, such can only by “just” if they rule “in the fear of God” (2 Samuel 23:3). However, so many today are like this man. This, we fear, is what lies behind the absurdly lenient sentencing of convicted criminals, and even murderers. “Murder most foul” is cursed with punishment most weak.

A modern judge, with no sense of the solemn, does not see himself as “the minister of God, a revenger to execute wrath upon him that doeth evil” (Romans 13:4) and sent “for the

punishment of evildoers, and for the praise of them that do well” (1 Peter 2:14). Instead of bringing the full weight of the law down upon the guilty, there is almost a fear of the word “punishment” and political correctness dictates sentencing. Justice is not done, deterrent is not there – and the rest of us are not protected (cf Habakkuk 1:4).

Let us pray that the Lord will deliver us from such judges, and restore to the judiciary the fear of the Lord and the proper regard for men.

2. This woman had nowhere else to turn.

v.3 “And there was a widow.” The law in Israel protected widows because, lacking the protection of husbands, they were particularly vulnerable (cf Deuteronomy 27:19). Some injustice had been done to this widow – maybe her “adversary” had defrauded her of her property, even her home – and this judge was her only hope of redress.

3. She made a definite request.

v.3 “Avenge me of mine adversary” – she is asking for a ruling against the one who has cheated her. This is all she wants and she needs it desperately. It is in this judge’s power to right a grievous wrong. It is not vengeance, simply justice and safety.

4. However, he could not be bothered.

v.4 “And he would not for a while.” In his view the case is trifling, perhaps he fobs her off with legal technicalities or empty promises for another time. This must have dismayed the widow and discouraged her from her quest. The more she tried to obtain her right, the more she was rebuffed. If anyone had cause to “faint” it was this defenceless and frantic woman.

5. The widow would brook no refusal.

vv.4b, 5 “but afterward ... troubleth me ... lest by her continual coming she weary me.”

a) She was having an effect.

v.5 “she weary me” – the word “weary” in the Greek describes the wounds and bruises caused by a boxer. Her verbal pummelling was making him black and blue!

b) The woman’s single-mindedness is impressive.

v.5 “her continual coming” – in the original the word “continual” is that of our Lord on the cross, where He declared His work “finished.” It means, “to set out for a definite point or goal.” She was not going to give up until this matter was concluded in her favour.

c) Consequently, the judge could stand it no more.

v.5 “troubleth me” – it was all too much. It was too much trouble to settle the matter for her: it is even more trouble not to.

d) He reached a point where had to give in.

v.4 “but afterward he said ... I will avenge her.” The widow’s importunity, or wearisome persistence, wore the judge down and won the day for her.

C.H. Spurgeon depicts the scene for us: “...the next morning she comes again. As soon as ever the courthouse is open, there is the woman at the door. Before anybody can be found to enter, there she is. She had established herself there as soon as the people came to get the place ready. Well, before they can begin the business of the day, the woman begins crying out, “O my lord, my husband is dead.” “Did you not come here yesterday?” says the judge. “Yes, my lord.” “Well, I thought I told you this was not the proper time and place to apply. I cannot attend to you.” “O my lord, if you would but just hear my case a little” “Bring the next case up,” says the

judge; and there is a case brought up, and the judge proceeds. There happens, however, to be an interlude in the business, such as the poor widow has been looking for a long time, and his honour is just going out of court for a little refreshment, and as he is going, the woman steps up, and says, "My lord." "Now take that woman away; she is always coming here, and disturbing me." The poor woman is taken away, but she returns, and all day long the poor soul is there. She comes the next day, and when the judge arrives, there is the apparition of this poor woman to startle him again.

What is to be done all day long? He knows that at every possible opportunity she can get she will be down upon him to ask him to avenge her of her adversary. At length he says, "Well, what is your case?" and as soon as it is stated, he thinks to himself, "I know that man very well, that has taken away her property; he is a friend of mine. I shall not interfere in the case. I neither fear God, nor regard man, but as a friend of mine has got her property, I shall not interfere;" and then, addressing the woman, "I absolutely forbid you ever to come to this place again." But she comes again, and again, and again, until one day she steps into the witness box, and says, "My lord, I am a woman of a sorrowful spirit." "Now I do not want any more of that; you are always giving me your long sermons in court." "My lord," continues the woman, "I will have a hearing to-day. I am a woman of a sorrowful spirit; I have been here many times before, and you have sent me away, when I ought to have had justice at your hands; and now this day, unless I am dragged out of court by main force, I will stop until I get justice." Well, the judge thinks to himself a moment or two, and says, "If I were just to decide this woman's case, I should get rid of her. Well, come, my good woman, let us hear about it." So she tells the whole history of the case; the judge sends the officer of the court to enquire into it; and at last he says, "Though I fear not God, nor regard man yet because this widow troubleth me, I will avenge her of her adversary." He accordingly sets all her accounts square, and she goes home to her cottage with a joyous heart, and her children are fed, and all is happy; for the judge has set her free from all her dilemmas. Now, friends, there you have a case of importunity even going before the claims of justice" (Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit, volume 49, number 2,836).

The Lord gives us secondly, **SOMETHING TO LEARN FROM**: verses 7, 8 "And shall not God avenge his own elect, etc."

This is not something for comparison but *contrast*. We shall then learn how encouraging this is to persevering prayer.

1. We come to no unjust judge.

He is "your Father which is in heaven (who) is perfect" (Matthew 5:48). Perfect love, perfect wisdom, perfect omnipotence, perfect justice characterises our God. Like the judge, He is our only resort, but the difference is that He encourages our hope. He "forgetteth not the cry of the humble" and "will regard the prayer of the destitute, and not despise their prayer" (Psalm 9:12; 102:17). Dear reader, He has heard all your prayers and they are recorded in heaven (Acts 10:4). None of them is lost.

2. And we are not "widows."

We are the bride of Christ. Or, children of this heavenly Father. We are not facing some callous official who doesn't know or own us. The One who loves us bids us "come boldly unto the throne of grace" (Hebrew 4:16). In Christ's righteousness, we are as welcome there as He is.

3. He wants to answer our prayer.

"Call unto me, and I will answer thee, and shew thee great and mighty things, which thou knowest not" (Jeremiah 33:3). Importunity is not necessary to remind Him, or try to wear Him

down. Only to show him we are truly in earnest: that we believe His word, reckon on His faithfulness and hope in His mercy. He urges our persevering petitions because He wants to do great things for us.

4. Delays are for a different reason.

With the judge, He couldn't be bothered. Nothing would move him except the verbal battering of his petitioner. With God it has a very different cause. Among the reasons for unreturned prayer are the following,

a) His pleasure.

A father, whose little girl asks for something, enjoys the look of entreaty in that sweet face. He may say, "W...e...l...l, I don't know..." That is not being unkind – it is paternal love making the most of an opportunity! Our Lord is like that; His apparent reluctance is only saying to us, "let me see thy countenance, let me hear thy voice; for sweet is thy voice, and thy countenance is comely" (Song of Solomon 2:14).

To change the metaphor, years ago we sometimes went to Bath. There, in the shopping precinct, was a musician in a white suit sat at a white upright piano. He would play classical and modern pieces with such expression that passers-by stood mesmerised. I noticed that people readily dropped money in his bucket, but I found myself hovering over the receptacle with my coin suspended, thinking more of the music than the money. Eventually, after having enjoyed some more music, the coin would drop. And so the Lord enjoys the music of our importunate prayers – they give Him pleasure - so much that it lies behind the delay in their being answered.

b) His purpose.

There is more to prayer than our asking and getting. The Lord has lessons to teach us: lessons in faith, patience, pleading the promises, fervency, reasoning and argument, self-examination. These can only be learned if we are exercised and drawn out in prayer. When the Canaanite woman came to the Lord for her demon-possessed daughter, *that* was first in her mind – however, by the Lord's silence and then rebuff, she ended up saying "Lord, help *me*" (Matthew 15:25). Prayer is relationship with God, His dealing with us, changing us, working gracious things into us. All the while we plead and plead, the Lord is having His way for our soul's good. The answer to our prayer is often to be bigger than we think. "And therefore will the LORD wait, that he may be gracious unto you" (Isaiah 30:18).

c) His programme.

The Lord has set the time to favour us (Psalm 102:13), but it is by His own clock. It can seem so slow only because we are so hasty: "Heaven's clock does not beat at the same rate as our little chronometers" (Maclaren). The seeming delay is because He is pursuing an agenda to do other things for us as well. Joseph's 13-year exile in Egypt could not end until He, the butler, his brothers, Pharaoh, and Egypt and his father were to benefit in God's purposes (Genesis 50:20).

A modern example of this concerns a missionary who did not receive her monthly salary cheque. She became seriously ill, and because she had no money for her usual food, she had to live on oatmeal and canned milk. Doubtless she prayed repeatedly, and wondered why the Lord did not come in for her. She received her cheque thirty days later. After mentioning this incident while on furlough, a doctor asked the nature of her illness. She described the intestinal digestive trouble she had been having and the doctor said, "If your cheque had arrived on time and you had been eating your current diet you would now be dead, because the best treatment for your

illness was a thirty-day oatmeal diet.” The Lord knows what He is doing in keeping us waiting – it is to further His wider purpose concerning us.

Let us remember these reasons. Often, when no answer come the devil accuses us and suggests it is because God does not love us, or we are too unworthy – or even that we cannot be a Christian. The Lord would not have us suffer that added burden of these fears. Rather, see the delay as part of His wise and perfect way for us. It is because we mean so much to Him that He deals with us like this.

5. Our gracious God can be prevailed upon.

If this widow succeeded with this unjust judge, how much more we and our God, when the time has arrived. Our Lord says,

a) v.7 “his own elect.”

We are that: His chosen bride, His beloved children, and His dear flock. Whereas the widow was nothing to the judge, we are everything to our covenant God. By His abounding grace we are worth His eternal choice, worth covenanting with His Son for, worth the obedience to blood of Christ, worth working upon and in to bring us to salvation, worth owning and blessing in this world, worth bringing to glory and sharing heaven with us, worth crowning and rewarding us forever to His praise. If He blesses us like this, will He forget us in our current prayers?

b) v.7 “which cry day and night unto him.”

It can be like that. Our burden in prayer leads us to pray in the daytime and also in the night hours sometimes: “which shall never hold their peace day nor night” (Isa.62:6).

c) v.8 “I tell you that he will avenge them speedily.”

When God’s time to answer prayer comes, He will act at once: not one prayer more will be needed. It was like that for Joseph – we read in Genesis 41:4 that “they brought him hastily (margin: ‘made him to run’) out of his dungeon ... and came in unto Pharaoh.” Although the answer will not come one second sooner, it will not come one second later: “speedily.”

Spurgeon applies this lesson to praying for individuals laid upon our hearts: “when you are tempted to cease from pleading for certain persons you must not yield to the suggestion. They have ridiculed your prayers: they tell you that they do not want them: they have even made a taunt and a jest of your pious wishes on their behalf. Never mind. Retaliate by still greater love. Do not cease to wrestle with God for them. It may be you have been very disappointed in them; your heart breaks to see how they have gone aside, yet go with your deep anxieties to the mercy-seat, and cry out again for them. What will become of them if you leave them to themselves? Do not leave off interceding, my dear friends, though you are provoked to do so in ten thousand ways ...

It may be that you think, partly in unbelief, and partly through trembling anxiety, that really their doom is sealed, and they will go on to perdition. Let this rather increase the intensity of your prayer than in the least degree diminish it. Till sinners are in hell cry to God for them. As long as there is breath in their bodies and in your body cause the voice of your supplication to be heard. When once souls pass into the spirit-world prayer is unavailing, but up to the last hour it may prevail. Perhaps you have sometimes been tempted to wish you could pray for the dead; let that vain wish stimulate you to be in earnest for the living. Agonise in prayer while your entreaties can be heard. Cry mightily unto God whatsoever happens to damp your hopes, considering that it is a temptation of Satan if it is suggested to you that you should cease to supplicate.

Your husband, good woman, what if he does grow more drunken and more profane, pray for him still; for God who can draw out leviathan as with a hook, can yet take this great sinner and make a saint of him. What if your son does seem to be more profligate than ever, follow him with many entreaties, and weep before God about him still. Loving mother and gracious father, join your fervent cries day and night at the mercy seat and you shall yet obtain your desire. Let nothing quench the flame upon the altar, nor the hope in your souls.”

May this encourage us to pray with importunity this New Year. And may it be that before it is through, we will have cause to praise God that He has answered us. “Praying always with all prayer and supplication in the Spirit, and watching thereunto with all perseverance” (Ephesians 6:18).

“Men ought always to pray, and not to faint.”