

Prayer and Faith

The story goes of an atheist lecturer who, when teaching in a college class one day, told the students that he was going to prove that there is no God. He said, "God, if you are real, then I want you to knock me off this platform. I'll give you 15 minutes!"

Ten minutes went by. The lecturer kept taunting God, saying, "Here I am, God. I'm still waiting." He got down to the last couple of minutes when an ex-Marine, just released from active duty, and newly registered in the class, walked up to the lecturer, hit him full force in the face, and sent him flying from his platform.

The lecturer struggled up, obviously shaken and yelled, "What's the matter with you? Why did you do that?" The ex-Marine replied, "God was busy, so He sent me."

Now I'm not sure as to how true the story is but it does illustrate the point that when answering prayer, God doesn't necessarily do it in the way that we ask Him to. Many a time we can all be guilty of praying for specific things and then presume our petitions to be answered in the way that we see fit. God's answers can be challenging, if not even puzzling. Take the scenario of family members of a loved one who is critically ill. They pray in faith for healing, earnestly looking for that miracle to occur. But, when the miracle doesn't happen, doubt and confusion can set in, if not anger at God. It may also raise the question, "Does prayer really work?", a question heavy with emotion and that its answer must be anything but simple.

And in questioning the value of prayer, we can easily fall into the trap of not continuing on, of not persevering, because we didn't get what we wanted. There has been of late, something of a prosperity gospel preached amongst the world wide church. This is where, it is claimed, that God has untold, unclaimed blessings for us, that God wants us to be selfish in our prayers, that it is appropriate to ask God to increase the value of your stock portfolio, give you unending health and that He will open the storehouse of heaven if you pray persistently.

But as many people up and down the land can testify, that is not the daily experience of many sincere and faithful Christians. Despite praying heartfelt prayers, many requests seem not to be fulfilled. Huston Smith, who was a world leading authority on religion and a practising Christian, once observed: "When the consequences of belief are worldly goods, including even health, fixing on these turns religion into a service station for self-gratification and churches into health clubs. This is the opposite of religion's role, which is to decentre the ego, not pander to its desires."

In the reading from Luke, Jesus tells a parable about persistent prayer. Luke even tells us what the purpose of the parable is: the disciples' need "to pray always and not to lose heart" (v.

1). And from the start, Jesus sets out, not to resolve the mystery of answered and unanswered prayer, but to teach his disciples persistence. It is an interesting story about two unforgettable characters, a harsh judge utterly without conscience who "neither feared God nor had respect for people" and a widow who is poor, helpless, defenceless, and in need of justice although no details are provided about her case. You can imagine that the scene must be something like a large hall of justice, a judge seated on the dais, throngs of petitioners gathered about, some represented by lawyers, others just shouting their requests from the crowd. The woman is in that crowd every day when the court convenes. She wants "vindication" against an unnamed adversary. Every day she asks for justice, shouts for justice. Every day the judge ignores her. Maybe she follows him home and repeats her request nightly and the first thing in the morning. She nags and badgers, she is relentless.

Finally, realizing that he is encountering some kind of primal force, indeed, an alternative, quite literal, translation of verse 5b is "so that she may not finally come and slap me in the face," This shows that this widow could stand her own ground, that she was not going to give up, the judge relents and renders a favourable judgment. And Jesus asks in V7 "If an unjust judge can grant justice in response to badgering, how much more will God grant justice to those who cry out day and night." To avoid the notion that God must be worn out before granting justice, Jesus states categorically that "he will quickly grant justice to them" (v. 8a).

But how does Luke understand a widow's persistence and an unjust judge's granting justice to be "about their need to pray always and not to lose heart"? To answer that we need to look at the context of the parable and also Luke's teaching on prayer.

Looking at the context, first consider what verse 8 says: "And yet, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?". Jesus is saying here that perseverance in prayer and not losing heart are elements of faith. And He will be looking for this when He returns.

In the previous Chapter 17, Jesus was asked by the Pharisees as to when the Kingdom of God was coming. He answers, "The kingdom of God is not coming with things that can be observed; nor will they say, 'Look, here it is!' or 'There it is!' For, in fact, the kingdom of God is among [or, within] you" (17:20-21). What follows in verses 22-37 of Chapter 17 is Jesus's discourse on the coming of the Kingdom. But most relevant for understanding the parable in Luke 18 is Jesus' saying to the disciples, "The days are coming when you will long to see one of the days of the Son of Man, and you will not see it" (17:22). In turning his attention from the Pharisees to his disciples and speaking of "longing" for the days of the Son of Man, Jesus shows concern for the disciples who must endure, who must "pray always" and "not lose heart" (18:1). The final phrase in 18:8, therefore, is not a throwaway line, but in fact draws 18:1-8 within the context of Jesus' end-times teaching. If the disciples are to be among the faithful when the Son of Man comes, they must persevere in prayer and not lose heart.

Luke makes a similar point in the parable found in Chapter 11. In this parable, like the one in 18:1-8, there are two characters. Here the "friend" who asks for a loaf of bread at midnight is like the widow who seeks justice; the "friend" who refuses to get up and give it to him is like the judge. Here too, the "lesson" of the parable is persistence (11:8). As he will do in chapter 18, Luke applies the lesson to prayer, for he places this parable between his account of the Lord's Prayer (11:2-4) and his version of the "Ask, and it will be given you" saying (11:9-10). He concludes this section, moreover, with *"If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!"* (11:13).

So, the parable speaks of perseverance in prayer, no matter what, and no matter the outcome. I had two good and loving parents. They did not give me everything I wanted and I asked for many things when I was growing up. My requests were always heard and, for the most part, turned down. In retrospect, I understand that I received, not always what I most wanted, but what I most needed.

That is at least part of what Jesus is teaching his disciples, and us, in this parable. The early church, which first read it, certainly prayed for many things it did not receive, safety, protection from persecution, for instance. It did receive though what it most needed, a sense of God's loving presence and attentiveness, and the strength and resilience and fortitude it needed to survive.

So, we can count on God to come down on the side of justice. We can count on God to hear the ones who have no power, no influence, no voice. We can count on God to hear those who have nowhere else to turn. We can count on God to not always grant our requests, but to hear, with loving, parental patience, the persistent prayers of our heart.