

Tireless Prayer for an Exhausted Heart

Luke 18:1-8

Introduction: I love great speeches. They have a way of recapturing hearts, redirecting minds, and reigniting emotions, like Churchill's speech to the House of Commons on June 18, 1940, inspiring England to brace for war, where after 1000 years' people would say "this was their finest hour", to the speech in Henry V before the Battle of Agincourt on St. Crispin's Day, where the king rallied his troops as a "band of brothers". Facing long odds, each group needed to be inspired in the midst of long, despairing odds.

A modern day speech that has been immortalized was given by coach Jim Valvano in 1993. Diagnosed with cancer, he would die on April 28, 1993 at the age of 47. But on March 3 of that year, he gave a speech at the Espy award show and kicked off the Jimmy V Foundation for cancer research, and has been called the "Don't give up" speech, which is the motto of the organization.

"How do you get through life? Each day is the same. To me, there are three things we all should do every day. We should do this every day of our lives. Number one is laugh. You should laugh every day. Number two is think. You should spend some time in thought. And number three is, you should have your emotions moved to tears, could be happiness or joy. But think about it. If you laugh, you think, and you cry, that's a full day. That's a heck of a day. You do that seven days a week, you're going to have something special...we are starting the Jimmy V. Foundation for cancer research. It's motto: 'Don't give up, don't ever give up', and that is what I'm going to do with every minute I have left!"

Valvano's memorable ESPY acceptance speech became legendary. He closed by saying:

Cancer can take away all of my physical abilities. It cannot touch my mind, it cannot touch my heart, and it cannot touch my soul. And those three things are going to carry on forever. I thank you and God bless you all".

A group of hurting people, uneasy about a certain future was given encouragement and freedom to move forward. This is the essence of what Jesus does in this section of Luke. At the end of chapter 17, the disciples were left with a vivid picture of the coming Kingdom, one that would be clear, unmistakable, but accompanied by God's wrath being poured out. He referenced the days of Noah, Lot, and Sodom as times in history where God visibly poured out wrath corporately over sin. The last verse was a question as to the location of His return, the answer to which was, "follow the vultures, because they fly over the corpses that will be left." Jesus would come to bring vindication but also judgment, and this mixture of seemingly mutually exclusive emotions would have left the disciples with questions as well as uneasiness. *Can you feel the same tension today? Things are going from bad to worse, justice is low, judgment is looming, and despair is a high possibility.*

So Jesus follows up with a parable to stay persistent in prayer and to not despair. He knew the road would be difficult for His disciples, including us, so gave a story to strengthen their resolve and fortified their heart. This whole section and emphasis on prayer has to do **specifically with the desire to see the return of Christ and establishment of His Kingdom.**

A Principle of Persistence (1)

Luke 18:1 And he told them a parable to the effect that they ought always **to pray** and **not lose heart.**

Don't Stop Praying – the Kingdom's coming

Luke gives us specific insight into the parable Jesus told, making the point Jesus was making abundantly clear. The first command was to **always pray**. This is not an unusual command, since we know we are to *pray without ceasing* (1 Thessalonians 5:17) and in *everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving making our requests known to God* (Philippians 4:6). Jesus taught the disciples to pray (Luke 11:1-4) and modeled it for them (Mark 14:32). Prayer is to be a regular, consistent, and primary part of our life with God in Christ. Prayer is **essential, not secondary**. Prayer is often the first thing jettisoned in a busy life while simultaneously being a most important element to a joyful, satisfied, content, and anxiety buffered life. Where there is no/little prayer, there will be no/little growth, maturity, perspective, or settled disposition. When there is no prayer, God will still work, but we will be by-standers who miss out on the joy of that work.

But in this instance, Jesus is not calling for **prayer in general**, but specific prayer for the return of Christ and the hastening of the Kingdom. It is a prayer of "Maranatha", Lord come quickly (1 Cor. 16:22). It is a persistent prayer that desires to see Christ, receiving vindication, and having justice established. Things are NOT RIGHT...but they will be made so.

Don't Lose Heart – *the Kingdom's coming*

The second command or encouragement was for His disciples to **not lose heart**, or literally not to faint, grow weary, despair, or give into evil. This was equivalent to Jesus saying "Don't give up, don't ever give up". Jesus, as a good Shepherd, leader, and Lord, knew about the human condition. We are results oriented, time crunched, and prone to forgetfulness. He knew that His return was sure but the timing would be unknown, and could be far off into the future. We are prone to the "out of sight, out of mind" syndrome, and wanted to make sure His disciples, and by extension, us, to make sure that His return was at the forefront of thought, since there are practical implications to forgetfulness, as well as benefits to hopeful expectation.

Why do we fail to pray and lose heart for this fact? Why do we not long for the return of Jesus, to see Him? What does this reveal about our heart?

- **Wrong thinking about the Kingdom** – When we think the kingdom is here and now, we seek justice and vindication now, moving away from our mission of the gospel and identity as aliens and strangers. This means we do not long for Jesus return because we like it here. We fill our minds with all kinds of worldly wisdom (James 3:15) and lose sight of an eternal perspective (Col. 3:1).
- **Preoccupied and thus forgetful** – We are simply mired in stuff, busyness, and life. This is our plight in December, isn't it, as we try to contemplate the greatness of Christ in the midst of gift buying, parties, and shows. Absorption in the daily grind causes us to look down instead of up, looking today instead of forever.
- **So much more that we want to do, see, and accomplish** – We may be ok with Jesus' return, but not until we get married, have grandkids, _____, etc.
- **Hard to visualize what it will be like** – Because we take it by faith, and faith is the substance of things hoped for and evidence of things *unseen* (Heb. 11:1), it is both necessary and hard. When His return is in the realm of "unimaginable", we can quickly offload it from our thinking and imagination. We struggle to believe that the future kingdom and eternal state will live up to the hype.

- **We seek and find comfort in this world** – This is why we only cry out to God to return in the hard times, when life is going poorly or not according to our plan. We are truly self-absorbed, and believe Jesus needs to yield to our plans and desires, not the other way around.
- **We wonder if it will actually ever happen (and most likely not in our lifetime)** – This command was 2000 years ago (ish), every generation has thought it would happen in theirs, and it STILL hasn't come to pass. Plus, it's hard enough for us to think about planning for retirement in a few years/decades, let alone an event ushering in eternity.
- **We simply love this world more than Christ** – This is (possibly) the reality that is revealed in our losing heart and desire for the return of Christ. We cling hard to the world we can see, touch and feel rather than the one promised to be better.
- **We have not tasted the glories of Jesus** - This is why we love the sentimentality of Christmas over Christ Himself. If living is not Christ, then our death or His return is not gain for us (Phil. 1:21). When we taste and see that Christ is good, we respond "**When Christ who is our life appears, then you also will appear with Him in glory.**" (Col. 3:4). The return of Christ is a means of encouragement and fulfillment of promise to those who love Him, not a means of fear or threat. Do you long to see Jesus? Do you desire to be with Him? Does that flavor your prayer? Is your prayer merely a laundry list of physical needs or material wants?

In order to encourage His disciples, He offered a story of comparison, from lesser to greater, "if even this is so, how much more will *this be!*" It is a parable of persistence, to never give up in prayer.

A Parable of Persistence (2-7)

Luke 18:2-7 He said, "In a certain city there was a judge who neither feared God nor respected man.³

And there was a **widow** in that city who kept coming to him and saying, '**Give me justice against my adversary.**'⁴ For a while he refused, but afterward he said to himself, 'Though I neither fear God nor respect man,⁵ yet because this widow keeps bothering me, I will give her justice, so that she will not beat me down by her continual coming.'"⁶ And the Lord said, "Hear what the unrighteous judge says.⁷

And will not God give justice to his elect, who cry to him day and night? Will he delay long over them?

A Desperate Widow's Plight & Plan

In order to understand this parable, we need to be aware of a few cultural markers. In Jewish cities, they'd have judges that would preside over civil matters, like money and property. These would not be dealing with religious Law that the Pharisees or Scribes dealt with, and judges could be appointed by Rome. These judges were often corrupt, so much so that the people used a play on words to call these "Robber Judges" instead of Judges of Prohibitions.¹ Finally, widows had very minimal legal covering, and though the Law, common grace, and compassion would have demanded it, they were easy targets for injustice.

In this story, there was a widow with no covering: no brother in law, no son, no advocate who could take care of her or give her legal representation. If her husband left her an estate or inheritance, that had been taken away from her, swindled out of her possession in an unscrupulous way, her only recourse was to go to the "small claims court" and take civil action against those who took advantage of her, appealing to a judge and throwing herself on the mercy of the court. She was **helpless, powerless, desperate, unloved, destitute, uncared for, and alone.** Hold onto this description because Jesus is describing US in the here and now.

¹ Alfred Edersheim, *The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah*, 2.287, p. 674

A Wicked Judges Response

Though judges tended to be corrupt, the judge in Jesus' story is the gold standard of evil. He had a reputation of being "that judge", the one who did not care about God or Law, believing to be above both, nor did he care about people. He was Ebenezer Scrooge with a gavel, possessing neither truth nor grace, and loving the only person in his life that he admired the most: himself. You could imagine this type of judge could only be persuaded by money or force, bribery or threat. Those with the means to do this got judgment in their favor. A widow with a just cause had nothing to offer this judge, and was unceremoniously dismissed.

But this widow was neither weak nor intimidated. She decided her only option was to affect the judge against what he loved the most: himself. She "kept coming to him", a continual action in the text which means she would show up in the city gate where he was, when he was eating, when he was walking. She would appeal to him in public, in front of his friends, when he thought he was alone. As this continued day after day, the judge finally broke. He declared, "just to be clear, I don't fear God nor do I care about this woman. But good night, this woman will not leave me alone. She is beating me down (literally giving me black eyes – a boxing term), and has become such a nuisance, I will **give her justice**."

God's Greater Response to His Own

In Jesus' explanation of the parable to the disciples, we see several clear principles about them not losing heart and not ceasing to pray to a God who is categorically different than the judge:

- **Our God is Full of Grace and Truth** – In comparison with the unrighteous judge, the worst possible kind, God is not only the exact opposite, He is categorically different. When Jesus came to the earth, He came "**full of grace and truth**" (John 1:14) and grace and truth come through Jesus Christ (17). God upholds justice because of His character and care, His nature and His attributes. He will not violate His Law and operates out of love. When we pray to Him, we bank on His character and attribute of being **just by nature** (Deut. 32:4)
- **We are His elect, not marginalized** – The widow found herself in a culture where she could be outcast, left to the side, and thusly found herself alone. Jesus describes His own as His 'elect', the same description of those that He loved before the foundation of the world (Eph. 1:4-5). Before we could DO anything or PROVE anything, God loved us. We are precious to Him. Just as a good dad hears the request of his kid, God loves to hear His kids make their requests known to Him. **God did not choose us because we begged Him, but we can go to Him as beggars because He chose us.**
- **He will answer our prayers and bring justice** – Jesus calls His disciples to approach God day and night. This is not a pestering Him for some selfish gain. When our kids are small, they search for holes in the fence-line to try to get what they want. They will ask not once time, but **17 times** for the same thing, hoping for a positive response on the 18th attempt. As a fallible, earthly parent, this type of request grates on us, and we are more prone to say "no" to a request the more times I hear it. But the type of prayer that is called for here is a call for justice, for vindication that will come only at the return of Christ. This is the prayer that God hears and WILL RESPOND TO, and will NOT DELAY but bring justice quickly, immediately, and completely.

A Prospect of Persistence (8)

Luke 18:8 I tell you, he will give justice to them speedily. Nevertheless, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?"

The Timing of God's Answer

This leaves us, as it did the disciples, in an obvious conundrum. We pray night and day for His return, He promised He will listen and come speedily, yet He has obviously not come back. **Where does that leave us?** It teaches us about the faithful, gracious, and lovingly kind nature of God.

Praying for Jesus' return is a double edged sword. Yes, we want justice to reign and to be with our Savior. Yet when He does return, it signals the judgment of many, including our loved ones that we have diligently prayed and hoped for in terms of salvation. Just like I don't always answer my kids requests immediately because there is something else important going on, God's prolonging His return displays His patience with those He loves. Here is how Peter described it in **2 Peter 3:9**:

2 Peter 3:9 The Lord is **not slow** to fulfill his promise as some count slowness, but **is patient toward you**, not wishing that any should perish, **but that all should reach repentance**.

God is waiting for all the elect to come to repentance. When the last of those have repented, He will return. For us, that means the longer He waits to return, the more He continues to save. As we pray for loved ones' salvation, we remember and hope that as long as the Lord waits, there is still hope.

What God Expects in the Meantime

Notice the last phrase of this section. Jesus jumps to the sure time when He will return, and asks the rhetorical question: *will He find **faith** on the earth?* Will he find those who loved His appearing?

2 Timothy 4:8 Henceforth there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, will award to me on that Day, and not only to me but **also to all who have loved his appearing**.

This faith is in the fact that Jesus is ultimate, that He is all satisfying and worthy of our praise. It's faith in the fact that when He appears, we will be like Him, because we will see Him as He is (1 John 3:2). It is faith in the reality that we will NOT EVER FIND perfect justice and vindication on this side of the kingdom. **Those who get caught up in trying to establish perfect justice in a broken world not only misunderstand what is to come, they misunderstand our mission now.** We not only are more like the widow than not in this world, but God never promises that vindication will come until HE BRINGS IT! We will be mistreated, suffer, and face injustice in this world simply because we are followers of Jesus. When this happens, we call out to God for justice, and He will bring it, **in His time**. Until then we live each day through persistent prayer, not losing heart.

The Power of Knowing the End of the Story

If you had to summarize the story of **Cinderella**, **The Wizard of Oz**, or **The Lord of the Rings** to someone, and you had a limited amount of time to do it, how long would it take you to get to the end? If you never did, these stories would not only be tragic, they would stink. Cinderella is locked in a clock tower and the evil stepmother wins, Dorothy is stuck locked away by freaky monkeys with wings and skates, and Frodo never gets to Mount Doom and Sam never gets married!

Now, if you were to tell the story of the gospel, or what we refer to as the story of redemptive history, how long before you brought up the return of Jesus to establish His kingdom? How many lessons about God, our sin, Jesus, His life and death, obedience, service, and worship before you bridged the reality of His 2nd coming?

We may think this is secondary material, not as important as other things, but we'd be wrong. Knowing the end of the story is motivating, captivating, and essential for our life today.

Prayer and hope in Christ's return **promotes holiness** (2 Peter 3:11-12), **spurs on evangelism** (2 Cor. 5:10-11), and **provides clarity in standing firm**, immovable, and working hard in the Lord, knowing that all of this is NOT IN VAIN (1 Cor. 15:58). Diligent prayer for Christ's return helps us stay **humble**, **thankful**, and gives us **perspective** on the material we possess. Persistent prayer helps **drive out fear**, helps remind us of our future as we are mistreated in the present, and keeps us from losing heart in **depression** and **anxiety**.

It unites us with saints of old who cried out "**How long, O 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 day long? How long shall my enemy be exalted over me? ... But I have trusted in your steadfast love; my heart shall rejoice in your salvation. I will sing to the Lord because He has dealt bountifully with me.**" (Psalm 13:1, 2, 5, 6; Cf. Psalm 35:17; 79:5; 89:46; 90:13; 94:3; Rev. 6:10)

This past week the world said good-bye to a giant in the preaching and pastoring world. John MacArthur boldly proclaimed God's Word for well over 50 years and did so in a way that exemplified what Paul explained at the end of *his life* in 2 Timothy 4: to **preach the word**, to be sober minded, endure suffering, do the work of an evangelist, and fulfill ministry. In doing that consistently, one can lay his head on his pillow and await with joy the **departure from this world**. Life is not easy, nor do we experience perfect justice here, but we persevere with joy, knowing that as an outcome of faith in this world. We will receive the award from a righteous judge (2 Tim. 4:8), the LORD, and will be ushered into the presence of Christ.

So, do you long for Jesus? Does this enter into your regular prayer? Are we embracing the hardship of this life to the point that we groan to be free? Are we tired? Have we grown weary? Jesus calls us today, as He called His disciples that day, "**To never give up, don't ever give up**".