

“Time Will Pass, Will You?”
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New Testament Lesson -- Luke 18:1-8

18 ¹Then Jesus told them a parable about their need to pray always and not to lose heart. ²He said, “In a certain city there was a judge who neither feared God nor had respect for people. ³In that city there was a widow who kept coming to him and saying, ‘Grant me justice against my opponent.’ ⁴For a while he refused; but later he said to himself, ‘Though I have no fear of God and no respect for anyone, ⁵yet because this widow keeps bothering me, I will grant her justice, so that she may not wear me out by continually coming.’” ⁶And the Lord said, “Listen to what the unjust judge says. ⁷And will not God grant justice to his chosen ones who cry to him day and night? Will he delay long in helping them? ⁸I tell you, he will quickly grant justice to them. And yet, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?”

Jeremiah 31:27-34

²⁷The days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will sow the house of Israel and the house of Judah with the seed of humans and the seed of animals. ²⁸And just as I have watched over them to pluck up and break down, to overthrow, destroy, and bring evil, so I will watch over them to build and to plant, says the Lord. ²⁹In those days they shall no longer say: “The parents have eaten sour grapes, and the children’s teeth are set on edge.” ³⁰But all shall die for their own sins; the teeth of everyone who eats sour grapes shall be set on edge. ³¹The days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah. ³²It will not be like the covenant that I made with their ancestors when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt—a covenant that they broke, though I was their husband, says the Lord. ³³But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the Lord: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. ³⁴No longer shall they teach one another, or say to each other, “Know the Lord,” for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, says the Lord; for I will forgive their iniquity, and remember their sin no more.



In his satirical work [The Devils Dictionary](#), noted American writer Ambrose Bierce defined patience as “a minor form of despair disguised as a virtue.”¹

In that same vein, someone else once said that “Patience is something you admire in the driver behind you and scorn in the one ahead.”²

Waiting is hard and sometimes, patience is hard to come by. Though most of us would agree that having patience is good, often we just want things done and we want them done now.

How many times have you pressed the “call” button on an elevator more than once in the vague hope that you can speed it up just a little bit? And when I’m crossing the street, I sometimes push the

¹ Bierce, Ambrose, [The Devil’s Dictionary](http://www.gutenberg.org/files/972/972-h/972-h.htm), <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/972/972-h/972-h.htm>

² <http://www.quotegarden.com/patience.html>

crosswalk button, even if it's already been pushed, because maybe, just maybe, that'll make the light change a little faster.

But I recently gained a new perspective on what it means to wait patiently.

The world was captivated this week, by the rescue of 33 miners from a collapsed gold and copper mine almost half a mile below the Atacama Desert in the heart of Chile. The miners had spent a little over two months in their subterranean prison.

Originally, experts thought a rescue attempt would take closer to three months, so even a two month ordeal was less than what had at first been anticipated. But still, for 69 days these 33 men had precious little to do but wait.

What went through the minds of these trapped husbands, fathers, and sons? Did they wonder if they would ever again see the sun, taste fresh air, or hold their loved ones? And what of their friends and family who kept vigil on the surface? What went through their minds as the hours stretched into days and the days into weeks? All they could do was to put their faith in the experts who were so desperately trying to dig down through half a mile of earth, and rock, and wait.

There were no guarantees. There were no buttons to press in hopes of speeding things up. There was only hope and trust and patience; lots and lots of patience.

The parable of the widow and the unjust judge that we read from Luke's Gospel this morning appears on its surface, to be a lesson about persistence in prayer, but I believe it is actually a lesson about patience, and waiting for God.

The woman petitions a judge for vindication. We are not told the details of her case, or the reason for why she is consistently ignored by the judge. But what we ARE told is that she is a widow, one of the weak and oppressed members of society for whom the Israelites have always been taught to care.

The judge, on the other hand, is one of the most respected figures in Israel. He should be a person of great honor and integrity. Yet he is described as unjust and Luke tells us he has no regard for anyone or even for God.

The relationship between this widow and this judge is remarkable only in that it is so disproportionate. She has no hope of impacting the decisions or actions of so powerful a person as this judge. She is the mail room clerk requesting a meeting with the Chairman of the Board. She is the peasant girl demanding an audience with the King. She is the ant of the Frank Sinatra song "High Hopes," working to topple that rubber tree plant.

She has no power, but she's got "high apple pie in the sky, hopes." And she is relentless. How long does she plead her case? We do not know, but she continues to plead her case, crying out for justice, with no real expectation that she will actually get the judges attention.

Yet in the end, her persistence is rewarded when the judge decides that he would rather give her what she wants than be troubled by her any longer.

And Luke sums this up by saying, in essence, if this unjust man with no regard for anyone, can grant justice to so insignificant a person as this widow, how much more can you expect our good God to bring justice to God's own people?

But we must be careful here, the unjust judge does not represent God, and the point of Jesus' parable is NOT that if you just ask hard enough and long enough, eventually you can wear God down and God will grant you your wish.

Such an idea is tough to defend and tricky theologically. For even though we remember that in Matthew 7, Jesus says "If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give good things to those who ask him!"³ We know from experience that God does not always grant us the things that we ask.

This past week, when I heard about the 33 Chilean miners being brought to the surface, I began to think how great it was that their prayers and the prayers of millions of people around the world had been answered. But just a few days ago, I read in my morning paper about a little girl who was reported missing by her step-mother on October 9th but who authorities now believed to be a victim of homicide, with her step-mother the prime suspect. And I wonder, did someone not pray hard enough? Was someone not persistent enough to get God's attention?

We are quick to praise God for answered prayers, when the missing are found, when the treatment works, and even when parking spaces turn up at the right time. But we're not sure what to do with the unanswered ones... or at least the ones that don't appear to be answered like we'd want.

Fred Craddock writes that "the human experience is one of delay... even while acknowledging the mystery of God's ways. Is the human petitioner being hammered through long days and nights of prayer into a vessel that will be able to hold the answer when it comes? We do not know. All we know in the life of prayer is asking, seeking, knocking, and waiting trust, sometimes fainting, sometimes growing angry."

"In a large gathering of persons concerned about certain unfair and oppressive conditions in our society, an elderly black minister read this parable and gave a one sentence interpretation: 'Until you have stood for years knocking at a locked door, your knuckles bleeding, you do not really know what prayer is.'"⁴

We understand that "God doesn't give us what we want; God gives us what we need," and that "God doesn't necessarily answer prayer in our time, God answers prayer in God's own time." And that Garth Brooks was right: sometimes God's greatest gift IS unanswered prayer. I get that.

And when prayer is frivolous or petty or counter to God's redemptive plan, we can understand that. But when the prayer is for the health of a child; for the success of a medical procedure, for protection from an abusive spouse, for the strength to beat an addiction... well, an "unanswered prayer" just doesn't seem very fair, or frankly, very God-like.

³ Matthew 7:11 (7-11)

⁴ Craddock, Fred, "Luke." Interpretation: A Commentary for Preaching and Teaching, ed. James L. Mayes, John Knox Press, Louisville, KY, 1990 pg. 210

But in the end, we go to God with our prayers of deepest need, and we wait. Like Moses, and Elijah before us, we wait. And if you're going to wait, you're going to need a healthy dose of patience, which is after all, one of the elements of faith.

Faith is belief, yes. We must believe that God is good and that God desires what is best for us. Faith is trust, yes. We must trust that God has redeemed us and that the way God calls us to live and to be really is what is best; that loving is better than hating; that serving others is better than serving ourselves. But Faith is also patience; patience to wait for God's Kingdom to come to completion, patience to endure difficulties while we wait for God's plan to unfold; patience to keep doing God's will even when evil prospers; patience that allows us to trust and believe even when there is plenty of reason not to.

And that is what this parable is ultimately about: Patience in the face of confusion, despair, and unanswered prayer. It is the key to Jesus' question at this parable's conclusion: "when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?"⁵

If you have your Bible with you or can flip open one of the Bibles in the pew near you, notice that in the passage right before this one Jesus is teaching the disciples about the Kingdom of God that is surely coming. In chapter 17, Jesus says "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 you."⁶

The Kingdom of God, as John Bright writes, is "the unifying theme of the Bible."⁷ It is the complete establishment of God's rule on earth; it is that present reality, and future hope of the will of God being done completely, and of God's reign being established on earth. It is what we are talking about when in the Lord's Prayer we say "Thy Kingdom Come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. The Church then, as now, stood in the "tension between the victory won, and the victory anything but won."⁸

But remember, Luke is writing towards the end of the 1st Century, AD (CE), anywhere from 40-60 years after Jesus death and resurrection. 40 – 60 years may not be such a long time and for some of you, it may seem like the blinking of an eye. But Jesus' had promised that the kingdom was not only coming, it was already established in his presence and would soon be fulfilled. In the Gospel according to Matthew, Jesus says "Truly I tell you, there are some standing here who will not taste death before they see the Son of Man coming in his kingdom."⁹ So after 40-60 years, folks might have begun to doubt the truth of those statements.

Think about it like this. Harper Lee published "To Kill a Mockingbird" in 1960 and she hasn't written another book since. If you are anxiously awaiting her second novel, then you've been waiting 50 years, and it would be understandable if you had begun to lose patience.

The fledgling Christian community to which Luke writes, would have had some doubts at that time as well, about whether the Kingdom of God would ever actually come to fruition. And so in the crafting of his story, Luke addresses these doubts and questions, by following Jesus' discussion of the coming of the Kingdom of God, with this parable about the persistent widow.

⁵ Luke 18:8 NRSV

⁶ Luke 17:20-21 NRSV

⁷ Bright, John, The Kingdom of God, 1953, Pierce & Washabaugh/Abingdon Press, Nashville, TN, pg. 244

⁸ Ibid, pg. 244

⁹ Matthew 16:28 NRSV

The passage begins “Then Jesus told them a parable about their need to pray always and not to lose heart” and it ends with the question, “when the Son of Man comes, will there be faith on earth?” This is a parable encouraging the early Christians to hold fast to God and reminding them that God is faithful and just and that God will do what God has promised to do; God will hear their prayers and God will bring God’s kingdom and with it, justice and vindication. But it will require them to wait out the long periods of silence. In short, it will require patience.

“When the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?” In the context of patient waiting for the Kingdom of God, it stands as a challenge to Luke’s readers and to us: when things are difficult and the Kingdom seems very far away; when the situation, like that of the widow in this parable, seems hopeless and overwhelming; when circumstances threaten to crush you beneath their weight, will you still patiently wait for the Lord who has kept and who will keep all promises?

When the elevator doors open, will you still be waiting to get on?
 When the crosswalk sign turns green, will you still be waiting on the curb?
 When the rescuers reach your subterranean prison, will you still be patiently waiting to come out?

I have always been a bit of a clock watcher. I’ve discovered that when we want time to speed up, it seems to crawl, and when we want time to slow down, it flies by at break-neck speed. One of my earliest memories of becoming aware of this phenomenon was in a Chemistry class during my junior year of high school. Struggling through a lesson on noble gasses or covalent bonding that seemed to have lasted hours, I checked my watch to find that we had only been in class a few minutes.

Amazed at how little time seemed to have passed and convinced that my watch was broken, I looked up to confirm the time on the large wall clock above the teachers desk. There, I found that a plain sheet of blue lined notebook paper had been taped over the clock face, and on it, someone had scrawled these five words: “Time will pass, will you?”

I was struck by those words and convicted by them as well for I had to admit, my answer, at that point, was no. But it reminded me that the reason I was there in the first place was to DO something and not simply to pass the time. Phrased another way, the question asked: You will inevitably reach the end of this class, but when you get there, will you have met the standard that has been set?

As disciples, the standard that has been set is to trust in God, to allow Jesus Christ to be Lord of our lives, and to live each day seeking to be Disciples of Christ, loving God and one another.

The time will indeed pass, and with it will come days of darkness and desperation and days when God seems very far away indeed. But when those days are through, will we still be standing with God, patiently waiting for the inevitable keeping of God’s promises?

Time will pass... will we?

To God be all honor, power, glory and dominion; in this world, and in the world that is to come.