

Don't Lose Heart

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[0 : 0 0] Well, let's turn back to that passage, Luke 18, Luke 18, and some of you may know that in Washington, D.C., there is a very dramatic memorial to Martin Luther King.

And it stands just a few hundred feet from the spot where he tried to wake up America by sharing his dream. And in the center of the memorial stands a statue of Dr. King.

And visitors can walk all around it. On the low walls around the space that it's placed in are a number of his most famous quotes. And one says this, We shall overcome because the arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends towards justice.

Many people have held on to those words when they've been wronged. As a Christian, Martin Luther King, he campaigned against injustice in his day because he believed in a God who was just. And our passage today, it picks up this theme. In it, Jesus reminds us that one day, justice will be done and be seen to be done. One day, wrongs will be put right.

One day, God himself will deliver justice. Now, sometimes, preachers, when you've got a passage in front of you, we can search high and low to try and find the meaning of the passage, and it can be a real challenge at times. Why is it here? What's the purpose of this passage?

[2 : 0 1] But we see Jesus' goal in telling this parable in verse 1, and we can't miss it, can we? Jesus told his disciples a parable to show them that they should always pray and not give up.

Jesus knows that those who follow him, people just like us, we often find prayer difficult, and we often feel like giving up. And maybe you can relate to that feeling today. It can happen for all sorts of reasons. Maybe our struggle with sin, maybe opposition to our faith, and maybe life in a culture that often seems quite hostile to Christianity. Maybe it's living with pain in our body or our mind. Or maybe it's just that life is so crammed there never seems to be much time to pray, and we kind of collapse into bed at the end of the day. In Edinburgh, we've got on some of the buses, some of you might have seen this, I don't know if you've got this in Aberdeen, there's adverts for something called try praying. And it says it's easier than you think. I think they've got an app, a website, that kind of thing. But isn't the reality of praying, if you've been a Christian for a while, that praying is so often harder than we might think. Praying can be difficult. And we need encouragement. And we can feel really starved of encouragement as God's people. And Jesus wants to give it to us. Jesus isn't here in this passage to berate us. He understands, he knows our weakness, he wants to help strengthen us. And so we're just going to walk through this passage together. We're going to meet the characters, spot some of the details, try and get into the story. And then at the end, I want to draw out three applications to our prayer lives. And that's just another way of saying this is a three-point sermon, but the introduction is the long part. Jesus tells a story.

Jesus tells a story. He often did that, didn't he? He says there once was a man, and he was a judge in a certain city. He had a position of great authority. He was important. He decided people's fates, but he was corrupt. He didn't fear God, verse 2, so he wasn't conscious of a higher authority than his own. He didn't respect men. So he didn't treat people equally. He didn't treat them with dignity. He was lazy. He was selfish. God had nothing to do with his work. He didn't view it as a way of serving other people or protecting them. And the judgments that he made never seemed to affect him.

It was just his job, and no doubt a lucrative one at that. It was also a woman. In her culture, the likelihood is she'd probably have married very young, probably to somebody who she'd known since nursery. And if we use our imaginations a bit, we can imagine them announcing their engagement. No doubt their friends were delighted.

Perhaps as they started their life together as a married couple, they hoped to have a family, maybe a house full of children. They would have enjoyed all the simple things of life which can mean so much to us. Friendship, food, work, fun, love, all the little routines of life.

[5 : 48] They had their whole lives ahead of them. No doubt there would be challenges for them, but they'd meet them together. They were going to grow old together. They were going to share anniversaries, enjoy special holidays, a life bursting with memories. But then it seems that he died.

And all of a sudden, everything changed for this woman. There was the initial wave of grief. Then there were times when it caught her off guard. Grief is like that. She started welling up unexpectedly. Maybe she was in the market and she saw some food that her husband loved. Maybe she woke up and she rolled over and saw the space that was in their bed. She heard a joke. She remembered that she'd never hear his laugh. She'd never hold his hand. And to make matters worse, she had an adversary.

There was someone in her life who just made it all so much more difficult. Their behavior compounded her grief. They treated her horribly. It seems from the text to have been a money matter. It often is, isn't it? Perhaps they refused to pay a debt owed to her husband, now owed to her.

Maybe a member of his family had written her out of a will. But whatever it was, she was in the right. That's clear, isn't it, from the passage.

She deserved justice. But it wasn't happening. And so again and again, she found herself in the same situation. Her life was uncertain. Her life was on pause. She couldn't get past this.

[7 : 49] Now, what struck me when I first read this parable is just how up-to-date it feels. We are in the 21st century world here. This is a world where women are treated badly, sometimes have to fight for things that men don't. This is the world of Harvey Weinstein, Me Too, legal disputes, all that kind of thing. A world where life often feels like a struggle. A life where people grieve.

A life where bureaucracy and procedures and other people often do more harm than good. It's the real world, isn't it? It's a world marked by frustration.

And people just not getting what they deserve. And maybe today you feel exactly like this woman. Maybe you're in a situation that wasn't your own making. It wasn't your own fault. Something happened that you'd never have chosen or expected. It was terrible. And then life got worse. Life is often like that, isn't it? I mentioned buses a minute ago.

You wait for one, and then two come along. One of the lessons that we need to remember is that being a person of faith, trusting Jesus Christ, does not prevent us from a life like that. Following Jesus is never an inoculation against trouble.

And it almost goes without saying, doesn't it? But I think things like that are always worth saying, aren't they? One of the books in the Bible that I appreciate the most, that I'm so glad is in the Bible, is Ecclesiastes. I don't know the last time you read that book, but it describes the joys and the frustration of living east of Eden. In the words of the author of that book, life often feels like chasing after the wind. It challenges a simplistic spirituality that says, do your bit for God, and He will always ensure that everything turns out all right. No, life is more complicated than that, isn't it? Life, even as a Christian, is often hard. Terrible things happen to ordinary disciples like you and me. And there is mystery. We don't have all the answers. It's okay to say that.

[10 : 33] Well, back to the story. The widow is determined, isn't she? Again and again and again, she files her complaint. She won't take no for an answer. She doesn't give up.

And I don't know what you make of this, woman. Sometimes the impression can be given in certain Christian circles that really godly women probably wouldn't behave a bit like this, that they would just be passive and so on, and that the perfect Christian women would never fight for anything. But read the Bible, and you will see women acting in remarkable ways, countless acts of strength and wisdom and courage and faith by women. You'll see women defying the authorities in Exodus 1 and 2, if you read that later, in order to save lives. You'll see women at Christ's cross, going to his tomb, going to his tomb, sharing the news that he was risen.

So there's never to be a place, is there, in church, for attitudes that demean women, for men who roll their eyes at a woman like this and think, there she goes again.

No, no woman is perfect. But I think this widow behaves in a way that we should admire. Just look at the judge's response, verse 4.

For a while he refused, but afterward he said to himself, even though I don't fear God or care what people think, yet because this widow keeps bothering me, I will see that she gets justice.

[12 : 14] And the idea in the second half of verse 5 is, if he doesn't give her what she deserves, she's, well, he's going to get a black eye. And so eventually, finally, at long last, after all the waiting, all the longing, after all the form-filling and the reasoning and all the disappointment, after all the delay, well, she finally gets what she's owed, doesn't she?

And Jesus says, verse 6, listen to what the unjust judge says. Let him be your teacher. Will not God bring about justice for his chosen ones who cry to him day and night?

Will he keep putting them off? I tell you, he will see that they get justice, and quickly. Now, the principle here is what we might call the how much more principle.

If an unrighteous judge is able to deliver justice to a woman he doesn't care about, and if he only does that so she will stop bothering him, then how much more will God finally one day deliver justice for his precious children, his elect?

Now, you don't need me to tell you that the challenge, of course, with this is that we often doubt it, don't we? We find it really hard to believe. We often cry like the psalmist, how long, O Lord?

[14 : 04] But one day, the Bible is so clear on this, one day God will finally act. One day he will bring relief to his people, to persecuted Christians down the generations, to people who've been misunderstood, marginalized, rejected, to Christians who long for him to act, to people like you and people like me.

One day he will. Notice that Jesus says it will happen quickly. All of a sudden, in the blink of an eye, as Paul puts it.

And we need God's help to believe that, don't we? To not let delay cause us to doubt. I think the implication in that final searching question in verse 8 is that at the end, faith in Jesus will be a minority position.

We don't tend to like that, do we? That's quite uncomfortable. But the judge will return. Jesus will come back.

And when he does, the Christian has nothing to fear on that day. He will come as our friend, our deliverer.

[15 : 29] He will come as our great and our mighty Savior. He has experienced the justice that we deserve on the cross. All our sins have been paid in full by him.

You see, you and I are united to Christ if we are Christians. We have been married to him. But unlike the widow in this parable, nothing can ever separate us from our spouse.

This is the wonderful truth of our union with Jesus. Paul puts it like this in Galatians chapter 2. He says, I have been crucified with Christ.

And I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I now live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God who loved me. He loved me.

And gave himself for me. See, when Jesus died, we died. His death was our death.

[16 : 41] You might know the old song. It goes like this. Were you there when they crucified my Lord? Well, we were, weren't we? We died with him. And so his resurrection, that has guaranteed ours as well.

I want to draw to a close by applying this parable to our prayer lives. You've had to wait a while for my three points, but I've just got a few thoughts for each.

And the first thing I think this parable teaches us is to pray boldly. We might say frankly, maybe even stubbornly. See, the widow had the law on her side, didn't she?

And the widow appealed to it. God has revealed truth to us as well, hasn't he? God has shown us his character.

God has made promises that we can pray back to him. And so maybe we could pray like this. Lord, your word tells me that you are good.

[17 : 52] Lord, please help me to believe that in this terrible situation that I'm in. Lord, your word tells me that you're gracious.

So please help me believe that as I confess my sin. Lord, you've said that anyone who comes to you will never be driven away by you.

Lord, please, please open the eyes of that person I love who's still to trust in you. See, this is exactly the type of prayer that we see all through the Psalms.

Cries to God based on who he is, what he's like. God is our Father. And so we're free to come to him humbly, of course, but boldly.

Boldly. I think this parable also teaches us to pray patiently. And sometimes God says yes to our prayers, doesn't he?

[19 : 01] Sometimes he says no. Often like a good parent, he says wait. And that's because he knows how best to answer. And he often uses delays in our lives, I think, to teach us wisdom, to teach us patience.

And you can't learn patience in a hurry, can you? There's no quick way to become wise. And these are things that we can only learn when we're faced with challenges, but God uses them to form us and to make us more like him.

And one of my favorite books is the Screwtape Letters by C.S. Lewis. Somebody gave me that book when I started at university here in Aberdeen, 2001. Seems like a long time ago.

It's a wonderful book. And in it, C.S. Lewis, he writes from the perspective of a senior devil, Screwtape.

He's corresponding with a younger one called Wormwood. He's giving him advice on how to trip up a new Christian. And C.S. Lewis said that it was the hardest book he ever wrote.

[20 : 19] But many people have found it incredibly helpful. And at one point, Screwtape, he says that God, who he calls throughout, of course, he calls God the enemy.

He says that God, the enemy, allows his children to go through valleys. He says it is during such trough periods, he writes, that it, the Christian, is growing into the sort of creature he wants it to be.

And so the prayers offered in the state of dryness are those that please him best. Be not deceived, Wormwood.

Our cause is never more in peril than when a human, no longer desiring, but still intending to do our enemy's will. Looks around upon a universe in which every trace of him seems to have vanished and asks why he's been forsaken and still obeys.

See, God sees our lives from a different perspective to us, doesn't he? And sometimes we get a hint of this. We look back, we see things maybe we asked God for that we're glad, actually, that he didn't give us.

[21 : 42] That doesn't make it any easier at the time, does it? But as someone once put it, he knows what he's about. God knows what he's about, and that means that we can trust him.

Last thing I think this parable teaches us is to pray hopefully or confidently. And I mentioned at the start the quote from Martin Luther King, the arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends towards justice.

There is, that is something that so many people long for in our culture today, isn't it? Justice. It's all over the news. We care about people in need, those who've been wronged or abused in some way.

But without God, without a judge, well, there is no reason at all why true and lasting justice should come.

If you take him out of the picture, there is actually no foundation at all to even say that this is a moral universe. Who are you to question my morality?

[22 : 59] On what basis? How can you say that things are just destined to get better? Who's going to decide? When will this justice come?

Why? How? But as Christians, we have grounds for rock-solid hope, don't we? Because Christ has died, Christ has risen, and Christ will come again.

In Acts 17, Paul puts it like this, God has set a day, so it's in His calendar, when He will judge the world by the man He has appointed. He has given proof of this.

It's going to happen. How do we know? He's given proof by raising Him from the dead. One catechism, the Heidelberg Catechism, puts it like this, how does Christ's return, here's the question, how does Christ's return to judge the living and the dead comfort you?

It's an interesting word, isn't it? Comfort. Answer, in all distress and persecution with uplifted head, I confidently await the very judge who has already offered Himself to the judgment of God in my place and removed the whole curse from me.

[24 : 29] Christ will cast all His enemies and mine into everlasting condemnation, but will take me and all His chosen ones to Himself into the joy and glory of heaven.

Do you believe that? Dunkirk, I used to be a history teacher. Dunkirk is one of my favorite films the last few years.

It tells the story of British troops stranded on the beaches of Normandy. They're backed into a corner with no chance of escape. All hope seems lost.

And in one of the most moving scenes in the film, Kenneth Branagh's character, he suddenly spots something on the horizon. And as he picks up his binoculars, the camera, brilliantly, stays focused on his face as he breaks into a smile.

Tears start to well up in his eyes. What do you see? Asks a friend. And after a long pause, he simply says, Home.

[25 : 46] A huge number of civilian boats are on their way. The cheers from the men are deafening. Rescue is coming. Well, how much more with us?

Christ is surely coming. Justice will be done. We will see our bridegroom. So don't give up.

Don't lose heart. And let's pray together. The prophet Isaiah describes our future.

He writes, In that day, they will say, Surely this is our God. We trusted in him and he saved us. This is the Lord.

We trusted in him. Let us rejoice in his salvation. So help us, Heavenly Father, to persevere, to encourage each other, and to look forward to the day when we see Christ's face.

[26 : 58] Though we've not seen him, we love him. And we pray all this in his strong and his wonderful name. Amen. Amen.

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