

February 14, 2021
Hanging on by a Thread
Luke 18:1-8

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We love those "Go-buy-your-books" kinds of stories. Frankly, they make great sermon illustrations. Maybe you know similar stories of how, thanks to persistence and tenacity, God did amazing things. Maybe you have experienced those in your own life. Praise God! It seems like the perfect illustration to go with our Scripture reading, today: *"One day Jesus told his disciples a story to show that they should always pray and never give up ..."*

"There was a judge in a certain city," he said, "who neither feared God nor cared about people. A widow of that city came to him repeatedly, saying, 'Give me justice in this dispute with my enemy.' The judge ignored her for a while, but finally he said to himself, 'I don't fear God or care about people, but this woman is driving me crazy. I'm going to see that she gets justice, because she is wearing me out with her constant requests!'"

Jesus adds, *"Learn a lesson from this unjust judge. Even he rendered a just decision in the end. So don't you think God will surely give justice to his people who cry out to him day and night? Will he keep putting them off? I tell you; he will grant justice to them quickly!"*

This story is about a woman facing a real problem. She's a widow – that's bad in ancient Jewish culture where she had no job prospects. She was suffering from some miscarriage of justice – perhaps a small inheritance was stolen, her meagre property was seized, or the community was not caring for her as prescribed in the Law. The judge is a wretch himself, but eventually gives justice. God is so much better to us than this harsh judge!

But ...

I have a problem with this parable, however. Personally, I've struggled with chronic pain for 25+ years. I have prayed, faithfully and persistently, not for 2 weeks but 25+ years. Other people have prayed, anointed me with oil, claimed healing ... and I still have pain. Some (well-meaning people) have blamed me – I don't have enough faith. What do I do with that?

At a pastoral level, in my 20 years at our church, I have conducted 110+ funerals. That's 110+ families who prayed, faithfully and persistently, that God would answer their prayers for healing for their loved one ... but their loved one died. What do we do with that?

Right now, people we know are enduring serious health crises. They, their friends, and families are praying faithfully and persistently. Not only is there no good news, the news keeps getting worse. I know people who have put in literally dozens of job applications over the past 12 months. They are praying faithfully and persistently. And they have not even got interviews. I know people who are desperately lonely and others dealing with mental health issues. They are praying faithfully and persistently, but nothing seems to change.

Right now, in places like the Middle East, North Africa, China, Indonesia, and India, faithful followers of Jesus are persecuted for their faith (and no, I don't mean they have to wear masks to services or are limited to 15% capacity) – I mean real, prison-risking, torture- and life-threatening persecution. They pray, faithfully and persistently for justice, and it's not happening. They are suffering for their faith and dying for their faith. What's with that?

For some of us, Bob-Goff-type miracles ring hollow. They are true enough. But not in our experience. The problem is, when we **ONLY** tell these stories, we set up the expectation this is how God works, always, in every circumstance. What happens when no dean says, "*Go, buy your books?*" No healing happens? No job offer comes after two weeks, or two years? What happens when God does not grant justice quickly to those literally dying for their faith in Libya or Syria? How do we understand this parable in the REAL world?

It's too easy to JUST tell the one-in-a-million story and say, "*There, just stick it out for a whopping 12 days and you too will be healthy, wealthy, and get a book deal.*" We feel inspired. We feel good. Until it doesn't "work" for us. Then what happens to our faith?

The final verse ...

There's a final statement Jesus makes as He concludes this story. We easily overlook it. Did you notice? "*But when the Son of Man returns, how many will he find on the earth who have faith?*" or "*When the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on the earth?*"

Yes, this is a parable about how we should pray and never give up. But, bottom line, it's a parable about faith. It's about our relationship with God and how we journey with Jesus. This widow does get justice. But all is not roses. She still is a widow – a tough place to be. She still is poor. She still will struggle to eke out a living. She is still going to have to live moment, by moment, day by day, with faith in God. This parable is about that daily faith.

Let's look at a real-life experience Jesus' disciples had (Mark 4:35-41): Jesus says, *"Let's cross to the other side of the lake."* Jesus is inviting them on a journey with Himself, to get to know Him better, to bring good news to other people. That's great! They get in a boat with Jesus and start out. Everything is fine. But soon a fierce storm comes up. High waves break into the boat. It begins to fill with water. Jesus is asleep at the back of the boat. The disciples wake him, shouting, *"Teacher, don't you care that we're going to drown?"*

This is the REAL world in which we live our lives. Any given day can start off calm and pleasant, but unexpectedly go sideways. Storms can come out of nowhere. Suddenly, it feels like "our boat" is filling with water and we're going under. I find that, as Covid drags on, as I deal with crises in my own life, as I speak with people in our church, many of us feel like these disciples. Life was good. But now, like the disciples or the widow in Luke 18, we find ourselves struggling. We pray, *"Lord, help! Don't you care I'm going under?"*

The good news? Jesus is with the disciples on the lake. The bad news? He's asleep. The good news for us? Jesus promises He is with us always, even to the end of the age (Matthew 28:20). We are never alone. The bad news? When the biggest crises blow up in our faces and we pray like never before – with urgency, even fear – it can seem like God is asleep. He does not rush to our aid. We pray. And pray. And pray. And the storm still rages.

In Mark 4, Jesus does rebuke the wind and says to the waves, *"Silence! Be still!"* Suddenly, the wind stops, and there is a great calm. Wouldn't that be nice!

Then He asks His disciples, *"Why are you afraid? Do you still have no faith?"* On the one hand, this seems like a crazy question when you're in a tiny boat, in the middle of a storm, with water coming in. On the other hand, it is **THE** question to ask ourselves in the storms of life: **"WHY am I afraid?"** What is it about my situation that is so troubling?

Often the WHY question we ask is *"Why is God doing this to me?"* or *"Why doesn't God make things right, right now?"* The better question may be the question Jesus want us to think about, *"Why am I so afraid?"* That's our real issue. Think about the disciples' situation. Really, the safest place they could be was right where they were – in that storm, on that boat even with the waves crashing over the gunwales. Why? Because Jesus is with them. They are far safer than their friends in other boats following them (Mark 4:36). They are safer there than those people who are on the shore, without Jesus. They are NOT alone. Jesus is with them. The One, whom even the wind and the sea obey, is with them.

"Why are you afraid? Do you still have no faith?" Jesus asks. They need to learn to actually **have faith** in Him, to actually **trust** Him. It's one thing to say you believe in Jesus, to make

a profession of faith accepting Him as Saviour; it's quite another thing to actually trust Him and have faith in Him when the storm is raging and the waves are crashing in.

Again, this is where, simply telling one isolated story about a miraculous two-week answer to prayer is OK, but not enough. The widow in Jesus' parable gets "justice," but she is still a widow, a tough place to be in ancient Israel – she still has to have faith and depend on God, day by day, to survive. 25+ years into dealing with chronic pain – not exactly a fierce storm, but certainly not tranquillity either – God, through doctors, has provided modest relief, but I need a faith that is robust enough to cope with decades of suffering. The people I know dealing with cancer, looking for a job, or coping with the loss of loved ones may be blessed with good doctors and friends, too, but they need to know Jesus is really with them through the hardship and heartache – for the LONG haul. I cannot begin to imagine how those facing real persecution in the name of Jesus must struggle as they suffer with no relief in sight ...

What I do know from my personal struggles are that the facts that:

- **Jesus IS with me.** In Psalm 121:3-4, I am reminded that *"the one who watches over you will not slumber; indeed, he who watches over His people never slumbers or sleeps."* God is not asleep. He always hears my prayer.
- **He gets me through the storms of life.** No, He rarely calms the storm. He does, however, give me practical help. He gives me comfort. He gives me peace. He gives me hope. He gives me strength to endure. Step by step, He provides a way forward.
- **I am learning faith.** James writes, *"When your faith is tested, your endurance has a chance to grow. So let it grow, for when your endurance is fully developed, you will be perfect and complete, needing nothing"* (James 1:3-4). Through the hard times, I am learning to trust Jesus more – to have faith in God more. I have no choice.
- While I would love to be healed, I know my pain is **keeping me humbly dependent on God** – and that's a good thing. Were I to be miraculously cured, I would be tempted to live independently from God. Pain is the spiritual guide I love to hate! 😊

"When the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on the earth?" Because of our faith in Jesus, we have hope. Chances are, He may not give us a 12-day miracle. Like, the widow, we need faith for the long haul. He will get us through the storms, even if He doesn't calm the seas.

In English, hope is abstract; in Hebrew hope is more tangible. The word "hope" in Hebrew comes from the same word as "cord/rope/thread." You can see a rope; it's something you can grasp hold of with your hands. Hope is not out of our reach. Hope in God is real and tangible enough that we can cling to it. You can imagine holding onto it for dear life.

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