

## Surviving the Fainting Spells of Life

Luke 18:1-8

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What are your expectations when you pray? Do you expect God to answer in a certain way, or on a certain timeline? The truth is: our prayers are only effective when we conform to God's will, not when we insist upon our own. Jesus taught His disciples this truth using a parable of a poor widow and a corrupt judge.

There are certain subjects that bring an immediate sense of conviction to the heart of every Christian, and one of those subjects is the matter of personal and private prayer.

Just mention the subject of prayer, and the honest Christian knows they can be more diligent, persistent, and passionate in this spiritual discipline.

A volume of rather convicting truth came from Corrie ten Boom, a committed believer who survived a concentration camp in World War II. She was fond of saying, "Prayer should be our steering wheel and not our spare tire."

Too often, it's our spare tire!

When's the last time you spent some time in prayer? What did you pray about?

Was it a need? A burden? A concern? Or maybe repeated confession as you admitted some sinful thought or act to the Lord?

Maybe you felt like that little boy—Dennis the Menace—who was shown in a cartoon one night, kneeling beside his bed, his hands folded and he was looking up as he said, "I'm here to turn myself in."

That's a common prayer isn't it—among Christians young and old?

But why should we pray, especially since God knows everything already? That might sound like an odd question to ask people in church, where we've come to pray; we know we ought to, but beside the fact that we ought to, why should we?

Let me read you 10 reasons why, written 100 years ago by the former president of Moody Bible Institute in Chicago. A man by the name of R.A. Torrey—Reuben Torrey.

He wrote this list for himself, but others copied it and passed it along:

10 Reasons Why I Should Pray:

1. because there is a devil and prayer is the way to resist him
2. because prayer is God's way for me to obtain forgiveness for daily sin
3. because the apostles, as my pattern, considered prayer the most important business of life
4. because prayer was an important part in the earthly ministry of the Lord
5. because prayer is an important part of the heavenly ministry of the Lord as He intercedes for me
6. because prayer is the means of gaining strength for my day
7. because prayer is the means of experiencing the fullness of God's joy
8. because prayer with thanksgiving replaces anxiety with peace that passes all understanding
9. because prayer is used by God to develop me and deepen me
10. because prayer empowers me to serve others and be a blessing to the body of Christ.

All of that is true.

You could add another to that list: Prayer allows you to bring your problems to God so you can go through them together.

Now if you were to ask Jesus that question—why should we pray?—He would give an answer that hasn't been mentioned yet.

His answer would be:

**Pray so that you can survive the fainting spells of life.**

That's exactly what He says to His disciples here in Luke's gospel account; if you're new to us here at the Shepherd's Church, we've now arrived at **chapter 18 and verse 1**.

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

## Luke 18:1

In other words, if we don't pray, we're going to lose heart; we will faint, you could translate it!

Warren W. Wiersbe, Be Courageous (Victor Books, 1989), p. 62

Jesus happens to be a realist. He knows His disciples are going to face discouraging, disheartening times in life and want to quit.

To have, what Charles Spurgeon called, a fainting spell in the midst of serving the Lord.

Those are times when you have no emotional energy, no spiritual warmth, no desire for prayer; as one author put it, that little thought of pointlessness slithers into your mind and the next thing you know, your motivation to pray has sprung a leak.

Adapted from Dale Ralph Davis, Luke: The Year of the Lord's Favor (Christian Focus, 2021), p. 76

The Christian life seems to be littered with obstacles that rise up unexpectedly out of nowhere: pain, disappointment, loss, grief, doubt, fatigue, conflict, heartache.

Adapted from Charles R. Swindoll, Living Insights on 1 & 2 Corinthians (Tyndale House, 2017), p. 341

The apostle Paul used the same phrase for losing heart when he wrote in Galatians 6:9 about growing weary in doing good.

Paul wrote transparently about **feeling afflicted in every way (2 Corinthians 4:8)**; that expression means to be under intense pressure; Paul writes that he was **perplexed**, which means to be at a loss to explain things, disoriented by the barrage of problems, tragedies and challenges. In **verse 9** Paul says he was **struck down, but not destroyed**. The word for struck down is a word from the world of wrestling where someone is thrown to the mat by their opponent. In our terminology Paul was saying, "He was knocked down, but he was not knocked out." William Barclay puts it, "Paul was often at his wits end but never at his hope's end."

Adapted from John MacArthur, 2 Corinthians (Moody Publishers, 2003), p. 143

Adapted from Charles R. Swindoll, 1 & 2 Corinthians, p. 337

What kept him going was that he kept praying, and he and God went through it together.

Now the context of this command by the Lord to pray in order not to faint is the previous announcement that the disciples weren't going to see the kingdom come; in fact, what they would see is Jesus crucified as Jesus said in **chapter 17**, He would first suffer.

It wasn't going to be a crown in His first coming, it was going to be a cross.

So keep in mind that this encouragement to pray is based on the fact that the disciples' expectations are not going to be met.

The kingdom is going to be postponed and they now have a race to run and it will include mistreatment, persecution, disappointment, and discouragement.

There are times where they're going to want to faint, or throw in the towel. Is God listening to us?

Does He see the injustice and the heartache? Does He care?

And the Lord answers these questions by telling them a story. We call it a parable; it's a down-to-earth story with a heavenly meaning.

**Now verse 2:**

*He said, "In a certain city there was a judge who neither feared God nor respected man."*

*Luke 18:2*

Now stop a moment as Jesus sets this scene. You just read the resume of a judge you hope you will never have to stand before in court. We just read:

- He doesn't like people, and he's not afraid of God.
- He doesn't care about you, and he doesn't care about God.
- He's an atheist and an egotist all rolled up into one scary judge.

If you have to stand before him, your only hope is that he's in a good mood, because he doesn't care about you, and he doesn't believe God is watching.

Now if we go back in time, the Lord is describing a judge here who would have been appointed by Herod, the King, or some Roman official. He was a city magistrate or judge.

We know from first century history that they were typically corrupt. Paying them a bribe to go easy on you or let you go was all part of the system.

You might remember how Governor Felix held the apostle Paul in prison, even though he knew Paul was innocent, because, **Acts 24:26** says, he was hoping that Paul would give him money—pay him a bribe—to let him go free. That was just the way it worked.

In the first century, these city judges were actually nicknamed, "Robber Judges." One historian wrote that they would pervert justice for something as simple as a dish of tasty food.

So the Lord's description of this judge basically lets us know that he was crooked.

Now keep in mind that a courtroom here in this setting wasn't a beautiful building with a marble lobby and a paneled courtroom; this was a portable tent that was moved from place to place as the judge covered his circuit.

Wiersbe, p. 62

He would be seated inside the tent in a rather public place, flanked by his assistants. This wasn't a courtroom like today where it seems more like a library until it's your turn to speak.

This scene in the Middle East would have included shouting and pushing and arguing as people attempted to have their case heard.

David E. Garland, Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament: Luke (Zondervan, 2011), p. 710

And that often happened when one of the assistants was bribed in order to have someone's case heard.

And now into this raucous scene steps someone who doesn't stand a chance to have her case heard and justice served.

**Verse 3:**

*"And there was a widow in that city who kept coming to him and saying, 'Give me justice against my adversary.'"*

*Luke 18:3*

Now Jesus leaves out of the parable the specific injustice that she's experienced. I believe He did that so everyone of His disciples—down through the ages—can see themselves in this passage.

But what we *do* know is that she has almost a zero chance of being heard.

Garland, p. 709

In this culture the odds were stacked against her:

- as a woman, she had no legal standing;
- women weren't allowed to testify in court much less show up and demand an audience with the judge;
- and as a widow, she had no husband to speak for her or go with her;

- she would have more than likely been poor, with no resources to hire legal help;
- she couldn't have even been tempted to bribe the judge.

The only thing she had was a voice—and tenacity. And I mean, courageous, unrelenting tenacity.

**Verse 4 describes it:**

*“For a while he refused, but afterward he said to himself, ‘Though I neither fear God nor respect man, yet because this widow keeps bothering me, I will give her justice, so that she will not beat me down by her continual coming.’”*

*Luke 18:4-5*

Let me tell you, this judge has met his match.

And she's evidently bothering him well beyond business hours. One Bible scholar says this implies:

- she pops up at his elbow in the marketplace during the day and says; “I see you're buying some almonds, that's nice, now have you heard about my case?”;
- as he starts out in the morning, there she stands at his gate to say “Good morning your honor—now about my case...”;
- he begins to get jumpy, look over his shoulder, because no matter where he goes, she appears and says, “Now what about my case?”

Davis, p. 78

Finally, he's had enough!

**He says in verse 4 again:**

*“‘Though I neither fear God nor respect man, yet because this widow keeps bothering me, I will give her justice.’”*

*Luke 18:4b-5a*

He's concerned he's going to ruin his reputation by doing something compassionate!

Can you imagine? “I'm not like this, but I'm going to do the right thing!”

**Why? Verse 5b again:**

*“I will give her justice, so that she will not beat me down by her continual coming.”*

*Luke 18:5b*

This phrase translated beating him down is a boxing term for giving someone a black eye.

Charles R. Swindoll, *Living Insights: Luke* (Zondervan, 2012), p. 421

“She’s got me on the ropes! Everywhere I turn—wham! There she is. I have to get rid of her.”

So he delivers a just and righteous verdict after all.

Now with that, the Lord concludes the parable and gives His disciples a pop quiz comprised of three questions.

***First question—here in verse 7:***

*“And will not God give justice to his elect, who cry to him day and night?”*

*Luke 18:7a*

You could paraphrase this question by asking, “Is God going to right every wrong?”

You want justice? And you’re not getting it! You want fair treatment in the world? And you’re mistreated!

Isn’t God going to do something about it?

One of the primary reasons we have fainting spells in our Christian experience is because God doesn’t do what we expected.

We expected God to put a little force field around His elect—His chosen people—so problems can’t reach us; we get applauded and appreciated; our children are the best behaved, our grandchildren are smart and creative—well, that part’s true!

We’re the ones with good lab results and we’re the ones promoted in our careers; we’re the ones vindicated in court.

God is our own personal vending machine; we put in enough money, we push the right buttons and out comes the blessing!

Swindoll, p. 419

But that doesn’t seem to be happening. The wrong decision was made. Something bad happened. Injustice was served. We’re mistreated, not applauded or even appreciated.

Could that possibly be the will of God?

Beloved, who's delivering this parable? Who's asking these questions? Someone who has a few weeks left before His crucifixion, which will represent the greatest act of injustice and unkindness in all of human history.

*And* it was all the perfect plan and will of God.

Will God right every wrong? Yes, but not according to your plan, but His.

***Here's the second question—verse 7 again:***

*“Will he delay long over them?”*

*Luke 18:7b*

I'll paraphrase this question as well. Jesus is effectively putting into words the question we often asked during our fainting spells—here it is:

How long is God going to wait to do something?

Besides, I'm asking for something good and holy and just and righteous; why would He withhold that? What's He waiting for?

Oswald Chambers writes on this text, “Some prayers are followed by the silence of God because they are wrong; but sometimes because the answer is bigger than we can understand.”

Quoted by R. Kent Hughes, *Luke II* (Crossway Books, 1998), p. 188

- Sometimes the answer is “No, not ever.”
- sometimes it's “No, not that.”
- sometimes it's “No, there's something better.”
- but most of the time it seems to be, “No, not now.”

So, if not now, when?

What does Jesus mean here in the next phrase? It sounds like we shouldn't have to wait long for anything, ***verse 7, the latter part:***

*“Will he delay long over them? I tell you, he will give justice to them speedily.”*

*Luke 18:7b-8a*

That's my kind of verse.



The word speedily describes the manner of judgment, not the timing.

Think back to the preceding context where the judgment of God came in the form of a global flood. God had warned the human race for 120 years that His judgment was coming and when it came, it came suddenly—the flood came speedily.

It seemed like it would never arrive, but suddenly it did.

Today, the injustice of the world seems to be without penalty or judgment.

But if you think of a few thousand years of human history as a prelude to eternity, it will seem like only moments until the justice of God arrived.

That's what Paul meant when he wrote to the Corinthian believers: ***For this momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison. (2 Corinthians 4:17).***

***And now the third question is here in verse 8:***

*“Nevertheless, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?”*

*Luke 18:8b*

The context here, from chapter 17, is specifically given to the believers living during the days of tribulation, as the antichrist is killing those who've come to faith in Christ—especially the Jewish people who've come to faith by the tens of thousands; in fact, 144,000 of them will have become global evangelists for the gospel of Christ.

But these will be terribly difficult times for those who've come to faith in Christ, after the rapture of the church has taken place.

Jesus is effectively telling us, and especially them, keep praying like you've been taught to pray, ***“Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done.”***

“Lord, we're praying for your kingdom to come!” We're looking forward to that day when you reign on the throne of David and set everything right!

***Thy kingdom come!*** We've been praying that now for 2,000 years.

Have you ever thought about the fact that Jesus taught us to pray a prayer request that hasn't been answered for 2,000 years.

How long have you been praying for one of yours?

Now we need to clear something up here, lest we think that this crooked judge represents God and the widow represents believers.

Far from it.

This is not a parable of comparisons, but a parable of contrasts. And this is the smelling salts, so to speak, to help us survive the fainting spells of life.

Let me give you several contrasts here:

- The judge is unjust.
  - God is just;
- The judge eventually acts contrary to his crooked character,
  - but God always acts consistent with His just character;
- The judge shows compassion reluctantly,
  - but God has great compassion for the needy;
- The woman was a stranger to the judge,
  - but we are the children of God by faith in Christ;
- The widow was insignificant to the judge,
  - but we are eternally significant as the chosen people of God;
- This woman had no friend at court to help her get her case on the docket,
  - but we have an Advocate who pleads our case;
- She could never approach the judge's bench,
  - but we can come boldly before the throne of God in prayer;
- She had no promise that the judge would care about her,
  - but God has given us a book of promises that He cares about us;
- This widow's only hope was a court of law,
  - but our hope is in God's throne of grace.

Adapted from Wiersbe, p. 64

Adapted from Hughes, p. 186

All that to say, beloved, you're not a widow who has to somehow wear God down to finally hear your case.

He actually planned the details of your case, your life, and your hope and trust can remain confident in Him.

The only comparison to make is that we should be as persistent in praying as this widow, not to get the Lord's attention, but because we already have it.

I believe the greatest statement of faith a believer can make is in these two persistent activities:

- First, *trusting* in God when wrong seems to win.
- Second, *talking* to God when His absence seems obvious.

For you today, perhaps you're making the greatest statement of faith in your own life now by showing up here, by singing through tears. by trusting in God when wrong seems to win, and talking to God when His absence seems obvious.

When you do that, you don't faint, you don't lose heart.

The answers *will* come one day, just as certain as the kingdom of God will come to earth one day, and Christ will be the king over all!

When our children were young, before bedtime my wife would read novels and biographies to them, typically in the living room with our children perched around her. One of them would be brushing her hair, which was their clever way to get her to read longer than usual. It's a sight I cherish to this day.

One evening, Marsha was reading from the missionary biography of Adoniram Judson. He was barely into his work in Burma when he was taken captive, charged as an English spy. His wife, Anne, explored every possible channel to have him released.

Meanwhile, Adoniram was imprisoned in a tiny cell with other prisoners; the sun was unbearably hot, they were not allowed to bathe, the conditions were putrid and terrible.

One day the officials decided to torment Adoniram even more by hoisting him up by his thumbs. Pain filled every fiber of his being. When he returned to his cell, Anne would arrive for a visit and she'd always say to him, "Hold on, Adoniram, God will give us the victory."

After months of incarceration, Adoniram was released to serve as an interpreter between the English and Burmese, in order to reach a peace settlement. He was separated from Anne for some time. During that time no one told him that Anne was dying.

Months later he was freed to return home, his body so broken it was a miracle he could walk. As he slowly limped toward his home, he saw a little girl playing in the dirt, so covered with filth that he failed at first to recognize her as his own daughter, Maria.

He picked her up and brushed her matted hair away from her face, went inside their little hut – squinting through the darkness saw his wife, so weak with fever and so frail. He knelt down beside her and wept. One author wrote, “His hot tears fell on her face and slowly her eyes began to move with recognition.

She struggled to speak and then, just as she passed away and into eternity, she whispered her last words to him: “Hold on, Adoniram, God will give us the victory.”

This is the message of Jesus to His disciples; He said in John 16 and verse 33: *In the world you will have tribulation. But take heart, I have overcome the world.*”

That sounds a lot like, “Hold on; God will give you the victory.”

Remembering that, trusting that is like spiritual smelling salts, enabling you to survive the fainting spells of life.

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