

Luke 17:20-18:8

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[0 : 00] Well often the things that are most precious and worth having are the things that we have to wait longest for. Praying and waiting for something precious to come.

Hoping for something precious. Luke tells us, doesn't he, just next to the big number 18 there, that Jesus tells this parable about a widow coming before a judge.

That his disciples ought always to pray and not lose heart. Wait for it, he's saying. Praying and waiting. And the context that we've read here tells us that this waiting and praying is for something pretty specific that Jesus has in mind.

Waiting and praying for something particular to happen. So back at the beginning of the passage in Luke 17 20, we see that the Pharisees ask Jesus when the kingdom of God is going to come.

And Jesus in the conversation begins to teach them about his return. That's what it develops into. When he will bring about what we are all longing for.

[1 : 34] And actually he is what we are longing for and what we are waiting for. To bring justice for those who cry out to him day and night. That is the event, that is the day that forms the focus of this parable.

We are praying and we are waiting for him. Now let me highlight a few big ideas here. First of all Jesus shows us the challenge of waiting for him.

The challenge of waiting for him. Now obviously Jesus wouldn't have told this parable at all. And it wouldn't be here if waiting for Jesus was not challenging, would he?

It's how the parable ends if you look to the bottom of your sheet in verse 8. With the challenge, nevertheless when the Son of Man does come, will he find faith on earth?

We are showing that waiting for Jesus to come and bring vindication and to end suffering is a challenge. It is not a normal thing for us to be doing.

[2 : 41] What are we most looking forward to in the world? Well we see that Jesus' return comes into a world that looks no further forward than very short term things.

Very short term solutions to the problems that it experiences. Look at verse 26, chapter 17. He says, just as in the days of Noah, people will be eating and drinking and marrying, buying and selling, planting and building, just getting on with life now, and looking forward to the best things that the earth has to offer in the short term.

It's not that those things are wrong, is it? But the challenge Jesus gives us is to look beyond what we see as important now. And that is a challenge, isn't it?

Because it is to think differently from the secular mindset, which says that what we hope for can only be based on what this life holds now, isn't it?

Looking forward to getting married. Looking forward to finally buying the house. Looking forward to selling a car. Looking forward to a takeaway this Saturday.

[4 : 00] We're told all the time, aren't we, that we should be optimistic people. That we should have self-esteem. That we should be fearless and happy here and now.

Because we can look forward to those kinds of things. And that we can believe in ourselves. We can hold our heads up high and smile. Because we're hoping for things in the short term.

We're hoping for the best from those things. And Jesus warns us, doesn't he, with this challenge. Because it is easy to get sucked into that kind of short termism. It's the temptation for Jesus' disciples who are waiting for relief from persecution.

To place all hope of rescue in something happening now. Some political action now. Some legal thing, action now.

Some evangelical president or leader or prime minister or something like that. Now it's not that those things are bad things. But if you try and place all of your hope in those things, your hope is

bound to dry up sooner or later.

[5 : 10] If you only think short term, you forget along with the secular mindset and the secular culture around us. That there is a heaven.

And that there is a judgment day. And that there is a God who is coming who will address injustice and evil. But that is what many are saying, isn't it?

That the Christian life is all about. That you can have an end to suffering and persecution. That you can be rich. That you can succeed. That you can be delivered from oppression and suffering now. But try saying that to a Christian who is locked up in a North Korean prison camp. Try saying that to a church in Iran whose pastor has just been murdered.

Try saying that to a Christian who is not allowed to take their child to church under a communist regime. Because if Jesus' return stops becoming the main hope.

[6 : 11] If he is not what we are really hoping for. Then hope really does erode altogether, doesn't it? For people like that. For Christians like that. And their pain is made utterly unbearable.

If that hope is removed. And so as we wait. There is a fine line between thinking we have got it all now. And thinking that hope never will come.

That Jesus will never come. It is the fine balance of the now and the not yet of the Christian life. And we will stop waiting and praying if we go too far either way.

When we think we have got everything now that we need to sort all of the world's problems out. Or when we think we will never get what we need and what we are hoping for.

Jesus to come back and do it. But Jesus shows us, doesn't he, that the delay of this final rescue and relief from persecution. Is far enough away that Jesus' disciples will cry out to him for it day and night.

[7 : 18] They will long to see that day, he says. But it's also certain enough so that that cry should not cease until it happens, until he comes.

But it's the challenge of waiting, isn't it? It's the challenge of waiting. Secondly though, there is the confidence in waiting for his return. Confidence. And this is where we get into this parable a little bit more in detail.

In chapter 18, it is the picture, isn't it, of a widow before an unrighteous judge. Who eventually grants her her request because he is fed up with her bothering him.

Now it's important that we see that this is a parable of contrast. It is a picture, isn't it, of what God is not like that makes this parable work.

And many people have got the parable wrong because they see it as an analogy of prayer. Rather than as a picture of contrast. Because this is not a story to tell us how to badger God.

[8 : 24] Jesus is not saying if God's people make themselves like this widow and they make themselves a nuisance before God. That he will finally and reluctantly grant them their request of justice and relief from oppression.

It's not a parable about nagging God. And I wonder actually we think of God like that, don't we? As if he's some ancient pagan God who needs to be pressured into doing something that he doesn't want to do.

But God is not like that. And if we think of God like that, that doesn't give us confidence, does it? But it's not an analogy of prayer. It is an argument by way of contrast to teach us to pray and wait.

Now let me fill you in on the picture a bit. Widows in Jesus' day didn't necessarily fit our image of a widow today. Girls then would have married quite young, often in their teens, wouldn't they?

So it's highly likely that a widow could have been much, much younger than we imagine her today. And society was set up then so that these young widows were particularly vulnerable people.

[9 : 40] They wouldn't have necessarily gained a share in their deceased husband's property. They were often left with no means of support at all. And so a widow going to court asking for justice, for a share in property or for debts to be paid, would have more likely received an unsympathetic hearing.

This parable is pretty typical actually. But what makes it worse is that this judge is especially unjust, isn't he? Jesus says he neither feared God nor respected people.

He even says that himself as if he's proud of it. And so the point is, even in such a scenario where the odds couldn't be more stacked against this widow, she is awarded justice because of her asking, how much more will God grant justice to his people who ask him?

That's the point. The parable assumes, doesn't it, that God's people who are in need are in a much, much better position before God than this widow is.

Before a righteous judge who loves justice and who does care about right and wrong. And so it is designed to give us confidence, isn't it?

[11 : 00] Before him. But is that true? Is God really a just judge? Not like this unjust judge.

Does God really give justice to his people speedily, as Jesus says here? Because as we look at the world around us, it doesn't appear to be the case, does it?

Can the persecuted Christian really believe this about God? Can you believe this about God when you face all kinds of opposition and hate?

When people call evil things good and good things evil in the world around us? Well to answer that, I think what we are asking, isn't it? The question we are asking is, is the delay of Jesus' return evidence that God is an unjust judge?

Is the delay of that request being met evidence that he is unrighteous as a judge? Because there is clearly a delay in that happening, isn't there?

[12 : 06] In Jesus' return. And of course it would be the case that if a judge has a verdict to pass, but he keeps adjourning the court sentencing, that wouldn't be right.

He would be an unrighteous judge. But in God's case, it shows not his unrighteousness, but something else about him which is also true.

His patience. Because whilst justice is longed for by many, God's justice for a lot of people is not good news.

At all. And so his justice is also tempered with patience. He is just and merciful, the Bible tells us. And so while we long for justice, we are also glad, aren't we, that God has delayed, that the Lord Jesus has delayed his coming, even just for our own sakes.

[13 : 09] Because if he's going to deal with all the wrongdoing in the world, then he's got to deal with me as well. But the unjust judge does act in the parable, doesn't he?

And he acts on the basis of what is true of himself. What drives the unjust judge? It's his selfishness, isn't it?

And his own convenience. He is not bothered one jot, what is right or wrong, whether this widow gets justice. He doesn't care. He couldn't care less. What drives him is what is most convenient for him.

The fact that he doesn't want her bothering him. He does what accords with who he is as a judge. And so will God.

But by way of contrast. God will act on the basis of what is true to himself. And he is both merciful and just.

[14 : 10] And he cannot answer the prayers of his people in any other way. He cannot act in any other way. And so as we think about God in this way, this gives us great confidence, doesn't it?

It's almost like a child, isn't it, who knows what they're getting in advance for Christmas. So in October, they know what they're getting, months in advance, and they can say with confidence, I have got a train set for Christmas.

Now they know that they won't unwrap that gift until the day comes. But even in October, they can say, I have a train set. It's on my parents' wardrobe in their bedroom at home.

And they can keep waiting, and they can keep saying every day to their parents, Is today Christmas? And God's people can confidently say, I have justice.

And each day pray and wait, saying, Is this the day? Because God acts according to his own nature, and we stand by contrast before a just judge, who acts not according to his own convenience, but who sees and will judge between what is right and what is wrong, the Lord Jesus.

[15 : 31] It's the challenge, but it's the confidence, and thirdly, it's the end of waiting for Jesus, the end of waiting for him. As you go through the Bible, there is a theme, isn't there, with the way that God brings justice, and he sorts out wrong things in the world, because there is a tension, that there's a tension between a delay in that happening, and a quickness of that happening.

It is slow to happen, isn't it? Just like in the days of Noah, it looked like it was never going to happen. And then it's fast. Just like in the days of Noah, just like in the days of Lot, Jesus says. It's long awaited, and it's quickly given. And there's a tension between the two. And the way that justice will come, and it will, that evil will end in the world, is also to help us to have confidence while we wait.

Because notice, neither Luke nor Jesus are concerned with chronology here. They don't give us a date, do they, on which this is going to happen.

That is not going to help our confidence. But what they do tell us, is the impact, and the abruptness of justice, when it does come. We've seen that when Jesus returns, people will be taken up entirely with external things, getting married, doing business, getting on with life.

[17 : 02] And so when God acts, it will happen suddenly, and it will intrude into a world like that. And there will be no appeals.

God is patient, for a long time, for the sake of many, many people, but when he does act, it is stunning, and it's quick. And that's what Jesus means, when he says that his people, will receive justice, speedily.

That final justice, will come, in a way that brings, abrupt, sudden, quick, gospel relief, to his people, who call out to him.

And so we can wait, because when it comes, it will come soon. And we can slow down, and we can pray, and we can wait daily, because it will be fast.

And we can hold on, because it will be hurried up, when it happens. So as we end, we come full circle here, because there will be this deliverance, but the question is, will we wait for it?

[18 : 13] Nevertheless, when the Son of Man does come, will he find faith, on the earth? Will he find us, waiting, and praying? This parable isn't so much, about our disappointment, with God, when he doesn't give us, what we ask for, when we ask for it.

But rather, it is a warning, isn't it? It's a warning, of his disappointment, in us, when we stop asking, altogether. Father, and it's a spur, to keep praying, Father, thy will be done, on earth, as it is in heaven.

Because he is a just judge, and justice will come speedily, with him. It's praying, with the ongoing tension, of the now, and the not yet, and not to give up, isn't it?

In 1947, the African-American scholar, Howard Herman, gave a lecture, at Harvard University, on the meaning, of the Negro spiritual, and what his aim was, to tackle claims, at the time, by slave owners, that these songs, that these slaves, were singing, were actually making them, worse as workers, it made them docile, they said.

They didn't want them, singing these songs. But he argued, no, that wasn't the case. He says, the facts make clear, that these songs of faith, served rather, to deepen capacity, to endurance, and to the absorption, of suffering.

[19 : 46] The truth, within these songs, taught the people, to rise high in life, to look squarely, in the face, of those facts, that argued, most dramatically, against all hope.

And enabled them, to reject annihilation, and to affirm, a terrible right, to live. It was because, those Christian slaves, knew about a hope, beyond concrete, political action, in their day.

Their hope was not, in the present day, at all, was it? Their hope, was in a future day. In a judgment day. A day they knew, they would have to wait for.

But waiting for Jesus, and hoping in Jesus, they made a worthless life, worth living. John Newton writes, by prayer, let me wrestle, and he will perform.

With Christ in the vessel, I smile at the storm. It's a very, very different way, of hoping, isn't it? From how the world operates. If you can erode hope, in the Lord Jesus, then suffering, becomes unbearable, doesn't it?

[20 : 57] And that is what we do, when we lose sight, of the return, of the Son of Man. But Christmas is coming. And so, in the slowness, we know it will be quick.

And in the delay, we know it will be sudden. In the crying, we will suddenly, be smiling. Waiting and praying. Waiting and praying.

Waiting and praying. Because Jesus says, he will give justice, and he will give it speedily. Let's pray.