

## [Luke 18:1-8](#)

Back in the 1970s on Radio 1 the now-disgraced DJ Dave Lee Travis used to invite frustrated wives to send in stories of DIY jobs that their husbands had failed to do or failed to complete. Should their story be read on air, Travis sent them a circular object known as a 'Round Tuit', for when their husbands got 'around to it'.

Perhaps stories like that encapsulate the unhelpful stereotype of nagging women. And if you read today's Scripture superficially you may think it is about a nagging woman, the widow who wears down the unjust judge.

But that is to ignore the very first sentence of the reading:

Then Jesus told his disciples a parable to show them that they should always pray and not give up. (Verse 1)

The theme is not 'nagging' but 'Don't give up.' Specifically, don't give up praying.

And if we pay attention not simply to that first sentence generally, but to the first word, we realise we need to take into account the context. The first word is 'Then.' Luke is telling us this is related to what has just gone before.

Now we didn't read that, but let me point you to the way near the end of the previous chapter that Jesus is in discussion with people who are longing for his Second Coming, but who will not live to see it:

Then he said to his disciples, 'The time is coming when you will long to see one of the days of the Son of Man, but you will not see it.' (Luke 17:22)

As the woman in the parable longed for justice, so there are many who long for the justice of God. But we shall only see it fully when Christ appears again in glory.

So why in the parable is the widow in need? The scholar [Ian Paul lists](#) three signs of her need:

First, she has to represent herself; courts are normally the province of men, and it appears that she has no male relative who will represent her. Second, she has to return continually, which means that she does not have the financial resources to offer a bribe and have her case settled quickly (not an unusual issue in

many courts around the world today). Thirdly, she appears to have been denied justice, and the implication is that she has perhaps been deprived of her rights in inheritance. It might be that she has been deprived of her living from her late husband's estate; later rabbinic law suggests that widows did not inherit directly, but makes provision for her living from the estate for that reason.

That's quite a list. No professional representation. A corrupt legal system. And no financial support. How extraordinary that she is not cowed by her circumstances but is feisty enough to demand justice. She takes responsibility and takes the initiative in her relentless quest for justice.<sup>1</sup>

As such, she is an example for us. We may not face the same set of personal challenges as her, but there are so many terrible things in our world that we long to see changed, and so caring about justice can be disheartening. But just when we feel tempted to draw the curtains, curl up in a ball, eat comfort food, and ignore the wicked world outside our door, the widow in the parable says, 'No!'

What we have here is a character in the story whose own circumstances and actions remind us to do what Jesus said on the tin at the beginning of the parable: 'always pray and not give up.'

Look how she speaks up boldly in the face of corruption. She is so tenacious! The unjust judge gives up because he fears that she will come and attack him (verse 5)! Yes, he, the strong male judge, fears the poor, weak widow.

In fact, the Greek word for 'attack' here is one taken from the realm of boxing. It means 'to beat'. Paraphrasing it, the judge fears the widow giving him a black eye.<sup>2</sup>

The world sees a poor, defenceless widow. The judge sees Tyson Fury!

Perhaps we too feel weak and feeble in the face of the wickedness and suffering in our world. Certainly, our opponents love to construe us this way. But a church that is bold to keep praying even in the face of unequal relationships and insurmountable odds is not a pushover.

One of my favourite images of this reality is C S Lewis' description of it in *The Screwtape Letters*. You will remember that these are fictional letters written

from a senior devil, Screwtape, to a junior one, his nephew Wormwood. In one of the letters, Screwtape writes this:

One of our great allies at present is the Church itself. Do not misunderstand me. I do not mean the Church as we see her spread but through all time and space and rooted in eternity, terrible as an army with banners. That, I confess, is a spectacle which makes our boldest tempters uneasy. But fortunately it is quite invisible to these humans. All your patient sees is the half-finished, sham Gothic erection on the new building estate. When he goes inside, he sees the local grocer with rather an oily expression on his face bustling up to offer him one shiny little book containing a liturgy which neither of them understands, and one shabby little book containing corrupt texts of a number of religious lyrics, mostly bad, and in very small print. When he gets to his pew and looks round him he sees just that selection of his neighbours whom he has hitherto avoided.<sup>3</sup>

In our ministry of intercession we may present as a poor widow but we are in fact terrible as an army with banners. We are the Tyson Fury of all things spiritual. That's why we 'should always pray and not give up.'

**Nevertheless**, bold as we may be with our prayers God is still playing the long game and we do not always see our prayers answered. I pray regularly that God will bring to naught various wicked regimes around the world that inflict persecution on their populations. But it hasn't happened yet. I long for regimes to fall in China, North Korea, Iran, Cuba, Mexico, Vietnam, and other nations. I watch and I pray, longing for the day.

So how in the meantime do we cope with unanswered prayer? If God is so unlike the unjust judge and promises a quick administration of justice, why have these governments not fallen yet?

I have found a response by Pete Greig, the founder of the 24/7 Prayer movement stimulating in considering this. In the midst of seeing many wonderful answers to prayer in the movement in its early days, Greig was facing caring for his wife who developed epileptic seizures. His prayers for her health went unanswered. Much of his wrestling with that painful dilemma can be found in his remarkable book [God On Mute](#), a book I highly commend.

But he gives a shorter account in a YouTube video where he describes three reasons why we don't always see the answers to prayer that we desire.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ITyEo83Y0Fg>

One reason Greig calls 'God's World', in other words the laws of nature. He talks about how because God has set up a creation that works consistently according to reliable laws then miracles must by definition be rare occurrences, as C S Lewis (that man again) said. You would no longer be able to rely on those laws in good ways if every time something painful were about to happen they were suspended. Suppose, says Lewis, every time a Christian dropped a hammer that God answered the prayer for the hammer not to hit their toe. We would be walking around in a world where we could no longer rely on gravity. We would be making our way every day through lots of hammers floating in the air!

One preacher I heard described scientific laws as being descriptions of God's habits. Miracles happen when God occasionally changes his habits. But these occasions really are occasional. Otherwise, the many good things that follow from having predicable laws of nature would fall apart.

A second reason Pete Greig gives for prayer being unanswered is 'God's Will.' There are many ways in which we do know God's will, particularly in terms of the ethical ways in which we are to live. But there are other ways where we shall not always know God's will, and where his ways are not our ways. His ways are higher than ours. No mere human being knows the entire will of God.

Perhaps you thought it was God's will that you married a particular person but it proved to be unrequited love. How many of us look back on things like those in our lives and are glad that life did not pan out the way we wanted? God did something better for us, but we could not have seen it, and so our initial prayers went unanswered. It may have been painful at the time, and it may be something we can only appreciate with hindsight, but sometimes God overrules or ignores our prayer requests because he has a better outcome in mind than we can anticipate.

The third reason Greig describes for not seeing answered prayer is what he calls 'God's War.' There is opposition to God's ways. There is a spiritual conflict. I am not blaming everything on demons, but I am saying that human beings actively choose to do things that are opposed to the will of God., from small acts of selfishness to large-scale acts of violence. Jesus may be reigning at

the right hand of the Father, but there are still forces arrayed against his kingdom, just as we have King Charles III on the throne but there are still criminals at work in our society.

What should we do in such circumstances? Why, we should pray all the more boldly for God to overcome his enemies. It may take a long time, but it is worth the investment in prayer.

Indeed, in the face of all that we encounter in creation that is not according to God's purposes of love, let us be bold in prayer. The weak widow is but a disguise for the heavyweight boxer. Spiritually speaking, we can punch above the widow's weight.

And if we do, then the Son of Man will find faith on the earth (verse 8).

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<sup>1</sup> See Joel Green, *The Gospel of Luke*, p640.

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.psephizo.com/biblical-studies/does-god-respond-to-nagging-in-luke-18/>

<sup>3</sup> Cited at <https://www.thespiritlife.net/about/81-warfare/warfare-publications/1877-chapter-2-the-screw-tape-letters-cs-lewis>