

Series: Stories of God and Life: “Don’t Give Up!”

Have you ever prayed for something, but felt your prayers didn’t make any difference? Nothing much changed (or things even got worse). I’m thinking of a situation I’ve been praying for now for quite some time. But I’ll admit, of late, I sometimes say to the Lord, “My prayers haven’t seemed to make any difference.” If you pray, you have probably felt discouraged at times, and wondered, “Why bother to pray for this?”

Jesus once told a parable related to this. “Then Jesus told them a parable about their need to pray always and not to lose heart” (Luke 18:1). “He said, ‘In a certain city there was a judge who neither feared God nor had respect for people’” (Luke 18:2).

One of the characters in this parable is a judge. A lawyer! Lawyers aren’t exactly the most beloved people in our society! There are plenty of lawyer jokes! 36.5% of the people in Congress are lawyers! However, that percentage has been going down – so maybe there’s hope for our country! The guy in this story is no model citizen! He’s sort of an independent so-and-so who doesn’t fear God and doesn’t care what people think of him. We don’t know a whole lot about the judicial system in small Palestinian villages of Jesus’ day, but indications are that judges were not very ethical. Judges appointed by Herod were notorious for being crooked and taking bribes. We can guess this judge might have been among them!

The other character in the story is a widowed lady. “In that city there was a widow who kept coming to him and saying, ‘Grant me justice against my opponent’” (verse 3). She was probably poor, and didn’t have much influence or clout. She kept coming to this judge so he would hear her case, but he refused. Why should he bother with this “nobody” – who was too poor to slip him bribe money under the table? *But didn’t give up!* She kept at him, “Listen to me! Help me! Hear my case!” “For a while he refused; but later he said to himself, ‘Though I have no fear of God and no respect for anyone, yet because this widow keeps bothering me, I will grant her justice, so that she may not wear me out by continually coming’” (verses 4-5).

For some time, he put her off. But finally, she wore him down! He figured: “Even though I couldn’t care less about her or her problem, she’s driving me crazy! I’ll give her what she wants *just to get her off my back!*” (The Greek here is very descriptive. He’s saying, I’m afraid she’ll eventually come back and “beat me” or “give me a black eye”)! *So, because of her persistence, she got what she wanted!*

This is a parable...a parable of the kingdom...what God is like and how He rules. In this case, God is *not* like this self-centered, uncaring judge. Just the opposite – *He wants to give good gifts to His children, He is concerned that they are taken care of.* Listen to what Jesus says after telling this story: “Listen to what the unjust judge says. And will not God grant justice to his chosen ones who cry to him day and night? Will he delay long in helping them? I tell you, he will quickly grant justice to them” (Luke 18:6-8a).

Elsewhere, Jesus tells us about our generous heavenly Father. “Ask, and it will be given you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you. For everyone who asks receives, and everyone who searches finds, and for everyone who knocks, the door will be

opened. Is there anyone among you who, if your child asks for bread, will give a stone? Or if the child asks for a fish, will give a snake? If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give good things to those who ask him!" (Matthew 7:7-11). We're evil, yet we want to give our children good things. *How much more* does God want to give *His children* good things. He doesn't have to be coaxed or arm-wrestled to do that! *That's why we should pray and not get discouraged.*

But in making this point, what's the question that naturally follows? ***If God's so willing to give good things when we pray, how come we have to wait so long for answers? Or we never do get what we pray for?*** I don't know all there is to know about this, but I think some things can be said that hopefully will shed some light on this matter.

For one thing, God delays answering some prayers so that our motives can be purified. Some of our prayers can be *selfish or very limited in their perspective.* ***For instance, we ask for things without taking into consideration other peoples' needs, or how getting what we ask for would affect other people.*** We're going on vacation, maybe to the beach. So we pray for good weather. But perhaps farmers in that area are hoping for rain to water dry fields. ***Or, we ask God for things that are trivial, foolish, or even hurtful.*** When we pray to win a game, of course that means we are asking God to make someone else lose. Some people pray to win the lottery. Now, do you really think God wants to arrange the Powerball numbers and give you millions through gambling when millions of people today lack the basic necessities of life!

Some of our prayers are just not in harmony with the kingdom of God, or how God wants to govern the world. We can ask for foolish, or hurtful, or selfish things. James 4:3 says, "You ask and do not receive because you ask wrongly to spend it on your passions." So when we pray, it is good to ask, "Lord, show me if what I'm asking for is selfish, or inconsiderate of others; and if so, help me change my request."

"Jesus told his disciples a parable to show them that they should always pray and not give up" (Luke 18:1). ***Being persistent in prayer helps us to learn to wait for God to give His gifts at the right time.*** Sometimes God delays answering our requests *because we're not yet ready to receive.* A person may pray for a promotion at work, but not yet be experienced enough to handle more responsibility or a different workload. A single person can ask God for a marriage partner, but not really be mature enough to marry; or if the person is divorced, he or she may not yet have healed emotionally from a prior marriage. I was almost 28 when I got married. I had prayed quite a while for a wife. At times I would say, "C'mon Lord, can You lead me to a woman who would be a good partner!" It didn't happen as fast as I would have hoped, but as I look back, I was pretty immature during that time. Speaking of being immature, I still wonder at times if I will ever grow up!

Do you get the point? I may *think* I'm ready to receive the good thing I ask for in prayer, but God knows I'm not quite there yet! *God knows the right time to give His good gifts to us!*

Then, too, sometimes answers to our prayers are delayed and it's not yet the right time because

God has to put other things in place. When I pray for something, it's so easy to see only *my perspective*. But God sees the big picture: other people may be involved and other pieces need to come into place. So, here's a person out of work, praying for a job. Certainly God wants us to be able to work and provide for ourselves and our family. God has told us to ask for what we need. But maybe the job God has in mind will only open when someone retires, or when the person currently in that job leaves that company. To us, out of work, it seems like an eternity. But God knows what we need and He will provide!

We may be praying for a family member or friend to come to Christ. We pray and pray, and nothing seems to happen. But maybe God needs time to prepare that person's heart. Or, God needs to bring someone into that person's life who will help turn that person to the Lord. So don't give up praying for someone to be saved simply because it hasn't happened yet. (I pray every day for some of the people I know and love to come to Christ. It's easy to get discouraged, but Jesus says don't give up)!

Here's another point to consider: ***God doesn't always answer our prayers right away because He doesn't want to spoil us!*** What happens in families where parents give their children everything they ask for? What are children like who are overindulged by a parent? You know, don't you? These children often become spoiled, and don't appreciate what they have. Usually we are more thankful when we have to wait a while for what we want! "God, I want to be healed – right away! How about a little miracle here!" "Lord, help us to sell our house – at our asking price. Quick!" But God's gifts are often more cherished when we've waited for them a while. God doesn't delight in seeing us wait, or agonize over a need we have. But how shallow our souls would be if we got everything we ask God for right on the spot.

Also, some prayers are not answered because we refuse to do our part. Sometimes I think God says to us, "I'll be glad to help you and provide your needs, but you've got to cooperate here and do your part." Doing our part might mean seeking counseling, going to a financial advisor, getting more education or skills training, making an appointment with a doctor or lawyer, giving up something that's not good for us. There was a segment on a news program about a cult in Florida, where cult members refuse medical help. They rely only on prayer. Some of these folk are dying when they could easily be cured. No doubt we've all heard or seen stories in the news where parents refuse medical help for their sick child, and trust only in "faith healing".

As a counselor and family therapist, I have worked with many people seeking help – whether in their family relationships or their marriage or whatever. Some of them have told me they are praying for God to help them. But at the same time, some of these people refuse to look at themselves and how *they* are contributing to the problem. They keep blaming someone else for their situation. Then they get discouraged or mad at God for not answering their prayers!

On a larger stage, we can pray that the horror of mass shootings in our country will end. But we also have to work as a society to address the root causes of such violence – whether it be fair and sensible gun laws, updating mental health laws and procedures, or whatever. So, if we're praying for something and nothing seems to be happening, we might ask, Is there something I need to do

to help bring this to pass?

“Jesus told his disciples a parable to show them that they should always pray and not give up” (Luke 18:1). There is at least one more reason why God’s answers to our prayers may take time and we ought not give up: ***God’s answer is never entirely separate from human freedom.***

Even when what we are praying for is something God wants very much, and in harmony with His kingdom and will, we still exist in a world where evil is present – where people have ***free will***. God has given us freedom to choose good or evil, to obey God’s laws or reject His commandments. So, let’s say we are praying for a family member or friend to become a Christian. We know God wants all persons to be saved! But that person has free will – God not made us puppets. God may answer our prayer by sending the Holy Spirit to convict that person of their need for Christ, or God may try to speak to that individual through events and circumstances. But that person still has the free will to decide for or against Christ.

Should we quit praying? No! I believe all our prayers weigh in for good and count for something! Sometimes it takes years for people to finally surrender their lives to Christ. The person praying for them may even have died and never sees the result of his or her prayers. And, yes, sometimes as far as we can tell, the person we’ve been praying for never does come to faith in Christ. *But we may never know what difference our prayer has made!* I like what Mark Batterson suggests. He says every time we pray, we are planting a seed. Every time we pray for someone to come to Christ (or any other thing we pray for), we are planting a seed that will in due time take root, and produce change. So don’t get discouraged. Don’t give up! Keep on praying, no matter what!

In preparing this message I thought of an Old Testament Scripture, Exodus 2:23-25: “After a long time the king of Egypt died. The Israelites groaned under their slavery, and cried out. Out of the slavery their cry for help rose up to God. God heard their groaning, and God remembered his covenant with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. God looked upon the Israelites and God took notice of them.” The Israelites were slaves in Egypt. As the years of slavery dragged on, they prayed to God for deliverance. *And God heard their cry and did deliver them!* Uh...er...only problem, it took 430 years. Exodus 12:40 says, “Now the length of time the Israelite people lived in Egypt was 430 years.” I wonder how many times the Israelites got discouraged and wanted to give up praying. But God cared, and set them free. It just took 430 years!

That puts it into perspective, doesn’t it? “Oh Lord, the bills are piling up. I need money – now!” 430 years! “God, our country is a mess! Bring a moral and spiritual revival to our land!” 430 years! “Lord, please straiten my son out. His life is coming apart and he won’t even go for help. You’ve got to act immediately, please!” 430 years! “Holy Spirit, please breathe new life into our congregation and help us grow again and reach new people for Christ!” 430 years.

You say: “I don’t have 430 years!!” No. But calm down. God hasn’t forgotten you or your request. Have faith in Him. As Jesus said after teaching this parable: “When the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?” (Luke 18:8). Trust Him! And by all means, don’t give up!

