

THE FAITH JESUS IS LOOKING FOR

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Pastor Chris Micks, Cedarview Community Church, Newmarket, ON

“And he told them a parable to the effect that they ought always to pray and not lose heart. [2] He said, “In a certain city there was a judge who neither feared God nor respected man. [3] And there was a widow in that city who kept coming to him and saying, ‘Give me justice against my adversary.’ [4] For a while he refused, but afterward he said to himself, ‘Though I neither fear God nor respect man, [5] yet because this widow keeps bothering me, I will give her justice, so that she will not beat me down by her continual coming.’” [6] And the Lord said, “Hear what the unrighteous judge says. [7] And will not God give justice to his elect, who cry to him day and night? Will he delay long over them? [8] I tell you, he will give justice to them speedily. Nevertheless, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?” (Luke 18:1 - 8)

Look at that strange, provocative question that Jesus asks at the end of our reading in verse 8.

“**When the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?**” Now, the way that I've heard Christians thinking about this question is in the sense of saving faith. I've heard Christians that is talking like this, that Jesus is asking, will anybody be believers? Or will the world be overrun by corruption? If you flip back one page into chapter 17 of Luke, Jesus had been asked a question about the coming of the kingdom of God. And he answered at some length about how his return would happen when the world was not looking for it.

And Jesus said, “**Just as it was in the days of Noah, so will it be in the days of the Son of Man.**” (Luke 17:26) If you go back to Genesis chapter 6 and read about the days of Noah, it says that in Noah's day the earth was filled with violence and man had corrupted his way. That's very much a picture of today's world, isn't it? But that's what it was like in Noah's day as well.

The earth was filled with violence and man had corrupted his way. And when God warned Noah that he was going to judge the world with a great flood, Noah began to preach that and no one was interested. They carried on living just as they pleased. They just said, bah humbug. And they carried on.

So Jesus was talking about the last days before he returns as a time of great spiritual decline. “**When the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?**” Will the only church left be the lukewarm Laodicean church that Jesus said he would spit out of his mouth? Certainly does sound like an ominously bleak question from Jesus, doesn't it?

But the more I've thought about this and read this passage, the more I believe we've perhaps misunderstood Jesus' question. Because will you note that it comes at the end of this parable that Jesus told about the persistent widow? He spoke to the Pharisees about the coming of the Son of Man and then he turned and gave a parable. It's recorded for us and it's the end of the parable that we have the question.

Very often Jesus told parables that had a sudden twist at the very end. We call it the sting in the tail of Jesus' parables. This question seems to be the sting in the tail of the parable that we've just read.

And what's most interesting is the Greek construction of the question that Jesus asks at the end. If you read Jesus' words in the original Greek language that Luke was writing in, the word faith there, the word pistis in Greek, actually has with it the definite article. And what that means is that it's not

faith but it's **the** faith. Which scholars admit is an unusual grammar in this context. So you could translate it like this. Listen very carefully.

“When the Son of Man comes, will he find THIS faith on earth?” When the Son of Man comes, will he really find this faith in the earth? Ah! What faith? It can only refer to one thing. The faith of the persistent widow in the story. Therefore Jesus' question may not be a commentary on whether people will still be believing in him at all. That would be a strange thought when you consider that the end of chapter 17 Jesus talks about his coming and he says that true believers will be raptured away.

And in another place he promised that he would build his church and the very gates of hell would not prevail against it. So we really need to take a look at the faith of this widow to understand what kind of faith Jesus is looking for in the last days church. Because think about this. Jesus is speaking here about the times that we are living in.

The signs of his coming are all around about us in a way that no previous generation has ever witnessed. So if we are the generation that ought like no other generation to be looking for the coming of the Lord, then this is a question that Jesus asks very particularly of us. In fact, this question has more to do with us than the very people that he spoke to on that day when he asked the question.

Can we answer yes to this great question that Jesus asks of our generation? Let's look at the kind of faith Jesus is talking about and measure ourselves against it. I believe we can express it in several ways this evening starting with this.

But here's the first thing. We're talking about praying faith. Praying faith.

1. PRAYING FAITH

If you look at verse 1 of our reading, Luke tells us exactly what Jesus' point was when he was telling the story about this persistent widow. Verse 1 **“And he told them a parable to the effect that they ought always to pray and not lose heart.” (Luke 18:1)** So it's a story about prayer.

Let's dig into this parable because if you don't understand something about this parable you will mess it up, and lots of people mess this parable up, and the problem is you'll also really damage your theology if you mess up this story. So let's look at it for a minute. Here's what you need to recognize about the parable of the persistent widow that we just read.

It is built on a contrast, not a comparison. If you don't get that, you'll miss the whole point. It's built on a contrast, not a comparison. We all instinctively understand that the judge in the story is meant to make us think of God. God is being contrasted with the judge in this story. And the poor widow, that's us, right? We all get that I think. But if you read this as a comparison story, then God comes off as a mean-spirited, disinterested judge who only answers prayers if you nag him enough that he gets tired of hearing it.

And maybe that's why so many Christians have the idea that prayer is about twisting God's arm until we get what we want. That he really doesn't want to answer us, and most of the time he doesn't answer us, but if we keep going on and on and on in prayer long enough, then eventually he'll have had enough and he'll say, “oh go away,” and he'll give us what we want. That runs in stark contrast to what Jesus said when he said, “When you pray, don't pray vain repetitions.”

And yet this is the idea that many Christians have. That is not at all what Jesus was teaching. Notice that Jesus calls the judge in the story an unjust judge. Is God unjust? No! God is the God of perfect justice, isn't he?

Look at what it says here, verse 6, 7 and 8. In verse 6, **And the Lord said, "Hear what the unrighteous judge says. [7] And will not God give justice to his elect, who cry to him day and night? Will he delay long over them? [8] I tell you, he will give justice to them speedily." (Luke 18:6 – 8a)**

Jesus is not comparing God to that worldly judge. He's contrasting him. That God is not like that. He's the God who loves to answer the cry of his own children. Notice how Jesus owns those people. They are God's own. He loves them as his own. He's not disinterested at all. There may be very good reasons in the wisdom of God, in the understanding of God, why sometimes delays his answer to prayer.

And indeed, if our prayers are not wise prayers, if they will do us harm in the end, God may lovingly say no. But verse 8 tells us that as soon as God can, he will avenge them speedily. And so the whole point of the parable is, don't neglect to pray. Don't stop praying. Pray because your Father wants to answer your prayers. God loves to answer your prayers. Or as Martin Luther put it, "Prayer is not overcoming God's reluctance, but rather it is laying hold of God's willingness." God is willing to answer prayer.

Once you understand Jesus' teaching correctly, you realize why people ought to pray and not lose heart because praying faith is dependence on God's goodness. You're counting on this, that God is a good judge, that God is a loving father, that God is the one who loves to reward those who diligently seek him. And God will answer.

We know that God is good and therefore we seek him. Is that the kind of faith that characterizes your Christian walk in these last days? That's what Jesus asks. "Nevertheless, will the Son of Man find this faith on earth when he comes?"

Are you continually depending on the goodness of God and crying out to him? We can be certain of his heart towards us and his readiness to answer. So the first thing about this faith, it is praying faith and that's right in the story. Secondly, occupying faith.

2. OCCUPYING FAITH

Occupying faith. The darker the days get, the more we need to hear this message. It came home to me so powerfully this past week as I was reading, just in my daily quiet time, I was reading the book of Jeremiah.

Turn over in your Bible if you have it there to Jeremiah chapter 29. And I just want to quickly talk about this chapter and give you a little of the backstory to it so that you understand what it's all about. Jeremiah chapter 29.

Many of the Jewish people at this point in history had been carried off from Jerusalem into captivity in Babylon. This is after that great ransacking of the city of Jerusalem and the captivity of many of the Jewish people. That was the direct result of their sin, of their disobedience and particularly their idolatry.

You remember that for centuries, God's prophets had warned the people that if you continue to disobey God and follow the idols of the nations around about you then God will give you over to your enemies and you will be carried off into exile. He said it again and again and yet the history of the people was that for decade after decade after decade they went off and followed strange gods, led by their kings. Have you read the books of Kings and Chronicles?

Those kings in Israel and Judah, there weren't very many good ones. They were mostly kings who fell into idolatry and they led the people astray. And God had warned them that they would be carried off into exile if that continued. And so, as good as his word, God allowed them to be overrun by the Babylonians and they were carried off to Babylon.

Now when they got there to Babylon, there were certain false Jewish prophets among the people there in Babylon, who were speaking to them and they were saying this, "Don't worry about it. God loves you. You really are the apple of his eye and so you don't have to worry. This captivity is not going to last long. It's all a big mistake. What's going to happen is you'll find that God won't be able to tolerate this. He'll bring you out of Babylon within a year or two. You'll be back in Jerusalem more prosperous than ever." That's what these prophets were saying.

Word of that, came back to Jerusalem where Jeremiah, the weeping prophet, the true prophet of God was still residing in the ruins of Jerusalem and when Jeremiah heard what these prophets were telling the people in exile he wrote them a letter. Listen to the letter.

Jeremiah 29 starting at verse 4. **"Thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel, to all the exiles whom I have sent into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon: [5] Build houses and live in them; plant gardens and eat their produce. [6] Take wives and have sons and daughters; take wives for your sons, and give your daughters in marriage, that they may bear sons and daughters; multiply there, and do not decrease. [7] But seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the Lord on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare. [8] For thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel: Do not let your prophets and your diviners who are among you deceive you, and do not listen to the dreams that they dream, [9] for it is a lie that they are prophesying to you in my name; I did not send them, declares the Lord."**
(Jeremiah 29:4 – 9)

Here's this letter from Jeremiah, the true prophet of God, back to these people in exile just starting to derive some hope from these prophecies, "Oh we're going home soon," he says "not on your life."

And Jeremiah says later in the letter you're going to be there 70 years, so build houses, get yourself settled, let your children dwell safely, you're going to be there for a while. God had set the time of the exile as 70 years. It turned out that this 70 years that the Israelites were in Babylon was a very productive time in God's purposes for a number of reasons.

Firstly do you know that it once and for all rid them of idolatry? For hundreds of years they'd had this problem where they kept getting drawn in to the worship of false gods from the nations around them. After the Babylonian captivity when the Jews returned there is no record of any idolatry ever recurring in that nation, they served the one true and living God.

Secondly without this Babylonian captivity, we wouldn't have one of the most important books in the Bible which is the book of Daniel, which outlines all of human history to come and leads us right to God's purposes in the very last days. Daniel wrote in Babylon as part of that exile.

Thirdly while that 70 years was underway, God was working out great movements in the nations of the world. You had the rise of the Babylonian empire but then the rise of the Medo-Persian empire and it was all as Daniel began to lay it out what God was doing in human history.

And fourthly and very importantly, just as God had demonstrated his patience towards his people, he showed his heart of long-suffering mercy for centuries when they were going after false gods. The Babylonian captivity demonstrated that God's patience has an end and that is a message for the whole world that God will not wait forever and there will be unstoppable judgment.

Now Babylon in the Bible is a type of the world and the world's governing system. We, according to the book of Revelation, we are living in Babylon. It's the whole world, we're living in the world, we're living in Babylon and we like the people of Israel in Babylon are waiting for the final restoration, the kingdom of God.

God has given us a life to live for him until Jesus returns. The daylight truly is fading but until the very end, until the last tick of the clock, we are his ambassadors to Babylon. We are the salt and the light that this world needs. Do you have occupying faith in these last days? What is that?

It is the commitment to God's purposes. A commitment to God's purposes, not our purposes. Sometimes God's purposes might mean inconvenient and uncomfortable things but his purposes matter supremely to his people.

Things are not out of God's control no matter what you see on the six o'clock news. Everything is moving steadily towards God's final end and every day that the Lord delays his coming is because of his grace and mercy as he adds people to his kingdom. Peter tells us that, 2nd Peter chapter 3 verses 9 and 10, **“The Lord is not slow to fulfill his promise as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance. [10] But the day of the Lord will come like a thief” (2 Peter 3:9 – 10a)**

We have work to do which brings us to the third thing, going faith.

3. GOING FAITH

Going faith. We have praying faith, occupying faith, going faith. What does a soldier do in battle if the commander is absent? The answer is they obey the last order they were given. If they've been told nothing else they stay and do the thing they were last told to do.

Jesus' last command must be our first priority and what was that command? Matthew 28 verses 19 and 20 tells us...go. **“Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, [20] teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age.” (Matthew 28:19 – 20)**

God has commissioned the church, God has commissioned every Christian to go into all the world and share the gospel. Now think about that for a moment. We are not omnipresent. Only God is omnipresent. So we can't be in all the world all the time, although the church collectively is. But this command must be answered wherever we are.

And sometimes we'll have the opportunity to be somewhere else, because your company will send you somewhere on a work trip, or you'll be on vacation, or the church will offer a missions trip. And we

are to go to those people with the good news of Jesus. And some of us may get the call to relocate all of our lives to some foreign place as Global Workers.

And every Christian owes it to their King to say, "is that what you want from me?" And if He tells us to go to those people, then we must go to them. Do you have this kind of faith in these last days? Whether it's Newmarket or somewhere else, do you have this faith which is engagement in God's mission? Engagement in God's mission. It's not the call for a chosen few, it's for all who bear the name of Jesus.

Do you have this kind of faith in these last days? We can answer yes to the great question of Jesus. We have that opportunity in our lives to answer yes when Jesus asks, when the Son of Man comes, will He really find this faith on earth? Will He find this faith? Will He find praying faith? Will He find His people depending on His goodness, calling upon Him continually? Will He find occupying faith that we recognize we're on a mission? We're only here as travelers and strangers through Babylon. Our home is somewhere else.

Will He find that going faith that has us looking for every opportunity that we can find to share the good news of Jesus, sometimes personally, sometimes through a representative that we send? But will He find going faith in the hearts of people? Will He find it in your heart?

God will never call you to do something that you can accomplish in your own ability. He will always have you out of the boat, trusting him. So it should require faith, does it? When the son of man comes, will he find this faith in the earth? Can you answer yes today?

George W. Truett was the pastor of the very famous, large, influential First Baptist Church in Dallas, Texas. One night, George Truett was invited to dinner at the home of a wealthy man in his congregation. And after they had had dinner together, the man led Pastor Truett out to a place where they could look out and get a view of the whole surrounding area.

And the man pointed to oil wells, punctuating the landscape. And he boasted, he said, "25 years ago, I had nothing. Now, as far as you can see, it's all mine."

Looking in the opposite direction at fields of grain, he said, "That's all mine." Turning toward huge herds of cattle, he said, "They're all mine." And then pointing to the west and a beautiful forest, he said, "That's mine as well."

He paused, expecting Dr. Truett to compliment him on his great success. But instead, Pastor Truett placed one hand on the man's shoulder, and he pointed upwards toward heaven. And he said, "how much do you have in that direction?" The man hung his head, he said, "I never thought of that."

And I ask you to think of that today. It's my great honor to invite you again into partnership with God, to work for the Lord where you are, to work for the Lord in Newmarket, to take every opportunity to have going faith to the people around us, but also be a worldview Christian to pray and to go to the ends of the earth. And when the King returns, he will find this faith on earth.

And he will say, "Well done, good and faithful servants." Let's pray.