

GOOD NEWS

Unlimited

A stylized dove logo in a golden-brown color, positioned to the right of the word 'Unlimited'. The dove is depicted in profile, facing right, with its wings spread. The background of the entire page is a photograph of autumn trees with vibrant yellow and red leaves.

November 2003

Perseverance in Prayer

CHRIST ALONE • GRACE ALONE • FAITH ALONE • SCRIPTURE ALONE

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EDITORIAL . . .

The best kind of prayer imitates the faith implicit in the prayers of Jesus. Christ was utterly confident of his father's love, but it is less well known, that he was equally certain of his father's love for all his disciples. *"Father you love them even as you have loved me"* (John 17:23).


Christian prayer thrives in the fertile thought that God is our father, and we are his children. *"When you pray, go into your room, close the door and pray to your father who is unseen. Then your father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you"* (Mathew 6:6). Parents have an uncanny ability to 'see' their children. When he was small, my son was ever so amazed, when his parents seemed to know what he was doing behind his closed bedroom door. It was as if we could see through the walls. God does not have to guess what we are doing. Nor does he have to guess what our needs are. In the little room that is our self-conscious life, we are never all on our own. God is there.

This magnificent, and enchanting idea, that God is a wise and wonderful dad who knows exactly how to answer the pleas of his children, lies behind Paul's statement about prayer in Romans 8:14-27.

The Spirit himself testifies with our spirit, that we are God's children. Now if we are children, then we are heirs—heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ (Romans 8:16:17).

Co-heirs with Christ! What a concept! It means that by everything that God has given to his Son, God has enriched us. All of God's love for Jesus; his fatherly concern, his compassion, his hopes, plans, and good intentions—all of these apply to us as well, because we are **co-heirs** with Christ.

The triumph of every one of our secret hopes; the elimination of all our private despairs, which are the content of so many of our prayers, has been supplied to us in Christ. Jesus' destiny; his victory and privilege before God is the answer to our prayers—writ large. *"For no matter how many promises God has made, they are yes in Christ"* (2 Corinthians 1:20). *"What shall we say in response to this? If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things?"* (Romans 8: 31+32).

Here is the highest reason why prayer is a valid human activity: God is the God of Jesus Christ. Only through Christ do we learn that God has answered the native yearning of every soul. 



Ron Allen

Christian prayer thrives in the fertile thought that God is our father, and we are his children. *"When you pray, go into your room, close the door and pray to your father who is unseen. Then your father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you"* (Mathew 6:6).

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Editor

Ron Allen

Associate Editor

Molly Brown

Printer

Auburn Oaks Printing, Auburn, CA

Graphic Designer

Debbie O'Brien

OVERSEAS ADDRESSES:

Australian office:

GNU, Unit 2,
54-60 Industry Drive
Tweed Heads 5th
NSW 2486, Australia

Canadian offices:

P.O. Box 537
Abbotsford, BC V2S 5Z5
Canada

222 Olive Avenue
Willowdale, ON M2N 4P6
Canada



To Always Pray, and Not Give Up 1

by Ron Allen

On a recent visit with my son and his three children, we talked a while about raising a family. During our conversation my son chose to remind me of some things he remembered from when he was small. “Dad,” he began, “Remember when you used to take me to the park or the beach, and I would ask you to buy me an ice-cream? You would say to me, ‘Yes, I’ll get you an ice-cream, but first you have to stand over there on that step, and call out in the loudest voice you can muster: *My dad is the greatest!*’”

I was naturally shocked, and questioned his memory. But he said it was true enough.

“What happened? Did you do it?” I asked.

“Yes,” he replied, but then you told me I had to “do it again—only louder this time.”

They gather like moths to a flame around people who appear to be important, but waste no time on others who seem to be ordinary.

I really had forgotten about that example of my parenting style. Imagine such a thing; making a small boy jump through hoops like that, just to get an ice-cream!

Permit me now, to mention something else from my own past. This has to do with my work. There was a time, when, in addition to pastoral work, I ran a small lawn and garden business. Sometimes I would be dressed in old gardening clothes; sometimes I would have on my ministerial garb.


Because of my lawn and garden work, I often had to call in at the hardware store to buy parts for my equipment. For the sake of convenience, some of my visits to the store were made when I was still dressed for pastoral work. Here’s what I noticed: When I went to the store with suit and tie on, it was much easier to be served. “Good afternoon, sir. What can we do for you today sir?” This was the kind of attention I attracted. But when I went to the store with my old clothes on

(with grass clippings, and prunings sticking to me), I had to aggressively seek out an attendant in order to get business done. I remember fuming to myself: “How shallow people are. They gather like moths to a flame around people who *appear* to be important, but waste no time on others who seem to be ordinary. I hope I am never such a ‘respector of persons.’ I hope I do not adjust my response to other people on the strength of mere self-interest.”

In the first eight verses of Luke’s 18th chapter, Jesus sets a scene in which God is represented by a shallow character that only responds well to people if there is something in it for him. This person is a corrupt and capricious judge. He “*neither feared God nor cared about men*” (Luke 18:2). The other character in Jesus’ story is a widow, who, despite the judge’s reputation for being unworthy of his office, keeps pleading with him to rid her of her oppressor, and grant her justice. For a time, the judge ignores her pleas. He does so because he can; because it suits him. Finally, because she does not desist, and because he finds her persistence irritating, he yields and grants her request.

It is this judge’s delayed, reluctant, and self-serving answering of the desperate widow that Jesus uses to teach something very important about God. “*Listen to what the unjust judge says*” (Luke 18:6). What the unjust judge ‘says’ is, that God will certainly answer the cries of those who continue to pray to him.

In a world in which men and women with competing interests jostle, bully, deceive and pester, faun on one another, and ignore each other in an environment of chronic unfairness, there are nevertheless examples of individuals who will heed the incessant claims of the powerless—even if only on the principle that the squeekiest hinge gets the oil.

The corrupt judge is one such person, and so, in Jesus’ story, he becomes a sign pointing to a God who hears the cries of the oppressed, and who will respond to their repeated, persistent, clamorous, and desperate prayers. “*I tell you, he will see that they get justice, and quickly*” (Luke 18:8). 

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To Always Pray, and Not Give Up ²

by Ron Allen

If a corrupt judge can represent God, let us now turn to what represents us in Jesus' parable—a woman, and she is a widow.

In the society of the day, widows were among the weakest of the weak. A woman's social security was totally conditioned upon her connection to a man. Having once lost the protection of a man, a woman was exposed to whatever injustices might be perpetrated against her by unprincipled males. She was a negligible figure; easily brushed aside by a judge wishing to grant his favors elsewhere.

It is one of these vulnerable, readily assailable, endangered creatures; seen here begging for help from an unscrupulous public official, that has God's full attention. The widow stands for the church. She epitomizes the believing community in all ages, who have no friends, no influence, no weapons—nought save faith in God, and their prayers. God is on the side of those who pray. The parable assures us of at least that much. God is the friend of the weak, whose trust is in him.


This parable speaks to the question of prayer's effectiveness, and who it is that has the most influence in the world. Who really runs planet earth? Is it the giants of industry; the board room boys in their dark suits, whose disproportionate hold on the world's wealth gives them enormous power over the lives of millions of workers and consumers? Is it the lawmakers, and government executives who make many speeches, and pass many laws—are they the real movers and shakers? Is it the media moguls, who foster desire, initiate fads, drum up prejudice, create and destroy moralities at a whim? What about the rulers of cyberspace, whose technologies are transforming the world before our very eyes; are they our true lords? And then there are the commanders of armies and navies, who with the flick of a finger can unleash hell from their squadrons on land, sea, and air—what about them? Do they control destiny?

Jesus' answer is no! Those closest to the center of power are the 'weak hands and the feeble knees' who cry out to God day and night—those who pray.

Jesus shows that things are not as they seem. Remember that other widow; the one that dropped two mites into the temple treasury? Jesus said that her gift was greater than all the gold ostentatiously delivered there by the rich and famous. In other words, she carried more weight with God than others who claimed it. On the same principle, those who have the most influence in this world are not those with their hands on the traditional levers of power, but those who pray.

My wife's parents are retired business people. They pay another retired man to help them keep their books in order. This helper is quite eccentric. Because my parents-in-law have

a measure of wealth, he, by dint of association, overestimates his importance. The family has learned that the said gentleman has on several occasions sought favors from business, by introducing himself as Mr. And Mrs. So and So's "accountant and business consultant." While the family sometimes asks his opinion on matters, they routinely ignore his counsel, and choose against his advice—much to his annoyance. To a superficial observer he may seem to have some importance, but the fact is, the family couldn't care less what he thinks. Instead, they consult their daughter who has no training at all in business affairs.

This is our Father's world. As his children through faith in Christ, it is we who have access to the seat of government. Others who strut and posture on the world stage—tyrants, terrorists and powerbrokers; villains such as war, famine, disease, injustice and death—are, all of them, pretenders. Theirs is only a 'walk-on' part. They are props and extras in a drama directed by God. The frail widow has the director's ear. She is the true world power. God hears her. She has a voice in world affairs. 

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To Always Pray, and Not Give Up 3

by Ron Allen

The corrupt judge does *eventually* what she craves, but his justice is not quickly forthcoming. It is an obscure justice by which means Jesus gives us a hint that his story is pointing to the hidden or delayed justice of God.

God does not grant the wish of every prayer right away, but this does not mean he is corrupt. The corrupt judge delays because he doesn't care. God's delays are the delays of wisdom and utter goodness.

My prayers gush from my ignorance and impatience. To correctly interpret my life, and its best needs, I would need to view it in entirety from start to finish. This I am unable to do. In addition, I would need to be able to see it in its true relation

to all the other people in the world, and in relation to the entire history of the race. This is beyond me, therefore, "*I do not know what I ought to pray for*" (Romans 8:26). I make false estimates, false diagnoses, and flawed interpretations. Only an infinite intellect with the capacity to balance my urgent appeals for immediate redress with the good that he intends for all his other children too, can be entrusted with the answer to our prayers. It is in love that God does not immediately answer my prayers. The parable insists that God is good. Even a heartless judge will respond to a petitioner who will not give up. How much more God, whose love is infinite and entire? 

AS GOOD AS DONE . . .

by John Flavel

Does God perform all things for you? Then seek God for all by prayer, and never undertake any design without him. Certainly, if he does not perform it for you, you can never have what you desire or labor for; and then he has designed to perform this or that mercy for you, yet for these things he will be enquired of that he may do it for you (Ezekiel 36:37).

I reckon that business as good as done, that mercy as good though it were in hand,

**Does God
perform all
things for you?
Then seek God for
all by prayer, and
never undertake
any design
without him.**

that trouble as good as over, for the doing, enjoying, or removal of which we have engaged God for prayer.

It is our folly to engage this instrument and that, for us, to attempt this way and that to achieve our end, and all the while forget him upon whose pleasure all instruments and means entirely depend. That which begins not with prayer, seldom ends with comfort.

"The way of man is not in himself" (Jeremiah 10:23).

- - *The Mystery of Providence.* John Flavel, p. 183.



To Always Pray, and Not Give Up ⁴

by Ron Allen

Why should we believe that God is love; that our prayers are always heard by a God who loves us absolutely? Because God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son. We will not understand the enigma of the corrupt judge and the frail widow unless we view it in light of what God has revealed of himself through the Christ of Calvary.

The passage we are focusing on (Luke 18:1-8), lies within a framework of references to Calvary and the coming of the kingdom of God. Chapter 17:20-37 pictures the great day when the Son of man will be revealed. The parable of the two worshipers (18:9-14), refers to judgment day when God will recognize the humble and resist the proud. Chapter 18:29-30 speaks of those who have been faithful to God at great cost, and who will receive eternal life in the kingdom to come. The next verses (18:31-34) have Jesus telling the disciples that the great day of the Son of man is about to be fulfilled. Then he describes what that will mean for the Son of man. He will be handed over to the Gentiles who will spit on him, flog him, and kill him.

In the story of the persistent widow, the punch-line joins with the theme of the surrounding verses. Having described a desperate widow who will not give up her prayers, Jesus poses the question: *“When the Son of man comes, will he find faith on the earth?”* (18:8). When the kingdom comes; when the Son of man is revealed; in the day of judgment, will there be any who still believe? Will there be any who have not given up praying?

The lesson Jesus has for us is that we ought to live our lives with the last moment of history in mind. That last moment is


already indicated to us in the dramatic events of Jesus’ death and resurrection. The crisis of the cross mirrors the condition of all who put their trust in God. Jesus prays without ceasing, but it does not seem as if God is listening. He is torn by a feeling that God has deserted him.

Do you suppose that God is not listening to your prayers? Do you feel pressed to the breaking point because of God’s silence? Are you like a widow ignored? If you think this pictures you, do not fail to include yourself in the entire picture. The Son of man is mocked, spat on, killed—but after three days, he rises. After three days; after the delay, the humble will be exalted, and the proud brought low. God will bring about justice for his chosen ones.

When the Son of man comes, will he find faith on the earth? In Jesus’ view, to ask, “Is there a God who hears my prayer?,” is the wrong question. The more appropriate question is: Is there anyone who will persevere in prayer? This question takes the love and justice of God for granted. Either the universe is at its core, cold and indifferent, and the little good we see is a freak intruder, or the universe is at heart, just and kind, and the evil an intruder that will be banished. If the latter is true, then it makes sense not to give up praying, because the abiding reality is: truth not error, light not darkness, and joy not sorrow.

“We fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen; for what is seen is temporal, but what is unseen is eternal”
(2 Corinthians 4:17).

“Weeping may remain for a night but rejoicing comes in the morning” (Psalm 30:5).

If anyone ever deserved to be treated with dignity and have his prayers answered, Jesus did. But he ended his days strung up on a cross. What if he had used his last breaths to warn the rest of us not to make the same mistake of trusting in God, as he had? What if he had panted out the words: “Look at me and see what happens to those who pray; this is how God treats those who trust him?” Had Jesus spoken so, there would have been plenty who would have been persuaded. But he did not. Instead, his last utterances were prayers. *“Father, into your hands I commit my spirit”* (Luke 23:46). And that spirit—the spirit of Christ that refused to give up trust in God, and prayer to him—is the spirit that has survived the grave, and which ever lives to adorn our lives with purpose, hope, and joy. When the Son of man comes, may this faith be found in us. 

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REASONS FOR PERSISTENCE

by Sister Gertrude

Anxiety Converted into Prayer.

It is often necessary for us to repeat our petitions to God over and over again. Why is this? There are three chief reasons.

When we are in some urgent need or anxiety, our minds are full of worry and anguish. But if we can keep on turning to God in faith and hope, and tell him about our trouble, all that anxiety and distress of mind is, by degrees, converted into prayer. Gradually our minds become calm. They become less absorbed in our trouble and more concentrated on the goodness, wisdom, and power of God. Thus, we are in a far better position to receive his answer when it comes. We do not repeat our requests in order to persuade him to hear us, but in order to quicken our faith and trust. Our Lord suggests this in the words that end the story of the persistent widow: “*When the son of man comes, will he find faith on the earth?*” (Luke 18:8). The widow could not trust that judge, so she had to wear him down with her ceaseless asking. But we can trust our Father absolutely.

The Refinement of Desire.


A second reason is this: We may be praying for something for which we have no strong or persistent desire. It may be for some spiritual benefit such as power to overcome sin, grace to do God's will whatever it may be, or to endure some suffering. Our whole heart is not in our prayer, as it is when we pray for deliverance from trouble. Saint Augustine says that at one time in his life he prayed, “Lord, give me chastity, but not yet.” But if we go on praying persistently for these spiritual gifts because we know they are things that God wants us to have, then in time our own desire for them will become stronger and more steady. In this way our heart will be prepared to receive God's gifts.

In Order That We Grow.

Or again, we may feel that it is a duty to pray for some special person or some good cause, such as the evangelization of the world, or the unity of the church. Yet we do not always feel a strong interest in these persons and causes. Then, unless we pray for them regularly and repeatedly, we shall soon find that they slip out of our minds for months or even years. So we shall be failing in our Christian duty of intercession.

All these reasons make it clear that we do not repeat our petitions in order to induce God to give us what we want. Jesus expressly warns us against thinking that we will be heard for our many words (Matthew 6:7). But we repeat our prayers often in order that we may grow in faith and holiness, and in love to God and man. God sometimes delays his answer until he sees signs of such growth. He knows that it is useless to give his gifts before we are ready to receive them. He chooses the right time.

This applies also to those for whom we pray. Sometimes we pray for years for the conversion of some particular person to Christ, or for the turning of someone from sin, or healing from sickness for someone. The prayer does not seem to have been answered. That is, no doubt, because the person is not ready to receive God's gift. What is certain is that God is never ceasing to work on his heart to draw him to himself. He is answering our prayer. “Thou wilt prepare their heart, thou wilt cause thine ear to hear” (Psalm 10:17 R.V.). But he does not force his gifts on anyone, and it may be long before the hearts of those for whom we pray are sufficiently prepared.

-Sister Gertrude. *Christian Prayer*, pp. 28+29. 

The Wedding Banquet

by Kathy Rogol

*Come to the wedding banquet!
I hear the angel call.
The great King will be married,
The feast is made for all.*

*Everyone is welcome there,
The doors are open wide.
All who will may sit and dine,
No one will be denied.*

*Just one thing each guest must do,
To make his place secure:
Be robed in heaven's garment,
Christ's righteous life so pure.*

*It cost the Groom much indeed,
He joined the human race.
To live without sin for us,
Then died to take our place.*

*By faith make his life your own,
Accept the gift of grace.
Fight sin, and abide in him,
Make sure you save your place.*

UNANSWERED PRAYERS

by Samuel Chadwick

The Problem Stated.

Are all the sincere, earnest prayers of believing people granted? The answer of experience is, No! I have seen a distracted mother cling to the corpse of her child, refusing to believe it was dead. She had prayed. God had promised. He heard, always heard. How could her child die? When at last the truth has forced itself upon her protesting mind, the distress deepens at the thought that God has not heard. There are many such days of desperate faith. Is God angry, as in the case of David (2 Samuel 12:14-23), even though there be no such cause? Can it be that he is indifferent? Can it be that he does not know? Has he forgotten? Is it any use to pray? It was with such thoughts as these in mind that I turned to my Bible, and in the book I found the answer in three representative cases.

Deuteronomy 3:23-35, where Moses prayed that he might go over into Canaan. 1 Kings 29:4, Elijah's prayer that he might die. 2 Corinthians 12:8+9, in which Paul prayed for the removal of affliction.

These three men occupy a prominent place in Scripture, and yet each was denied his request. Their prayers are fairly representative, and cover the ground of the problem. Let us examine them in their order.

The Prayer of Moses.

Moses prayed that he might be allowed to complete his work. He had undertaken it at God's command. For forty years he had led a murmuring and ungrateful people through the wilderness. What is more natural than that he should desire to see his life work completed? Besides, in all human judgment, he could not be spared. He would be needed in Canaan even more than in the wilderness. There were enemies to be driven out, the constitution to be established, and the people to be settled. If he should leave them now the work of forty years would fall to pieces. No wonder he prayed that he might go over. In spite of a nation's entreaty, regardless of his record, and notwithstanding his earnest pleading, he died; died with his work unfinished; died when he seemed to be most needed. Is it not often so?

How often it happens that the prayers of good men seem to fail! Plans over which they have prayed collapse. Competitors prevail. Misfortune overwhelms. Ill health disables. Death calls, and the work of years is left unfinished. Death at such times seems almost spiteful in its cruelty.... David wanted to build a house for God. His heart was set on it. God praised him for wanting to do it, but he forbade him (1 Chronicles 22:8). So is many a heart set with a yearning that prays, and aches for a work that is withheld.

Juniper Tree Prayers.

Elijah was mighty in prayer. God answered all his prayers but one, and that was the prayer that he might die. He was under the juniper tree, suffering from mental and physical reaction. Yesterday had been a great day. He had stood alone as God's champion: strong, defiant, and triumphant. The next day, at the threat of a woman, he fled. His nerves were unstrung. Fear, despondency, and despair took hold of him. In the fret and frenzy of depression he prayed that he might die.

The disease is still with us, and is so multiplied that there are not enough juniper trees to go round. What a mercy that God does not always take us at our word. Juniper trees make poor sanctuaries.

Paul.


The thorn was a physical affliction, and because Paul regarded it as a hindrance he prayed for its removal. It was not removed, though he besought the Lord thrice. He had to learn that affliction may be God's messenger, as well as the messenger of Satan.

The Answer to Unanswered Prayers.

When a request is refused, it is as truly answered as when it is granted. Refusal may be the only answer possible for love, wisdom, and truth. A child may cry for a razor, and full-grown people may cry for things equally unsuitable, unsafe, and unwise. Many have lived to thank God for resisting their agonized entreaties.

God never refuses without reason. He knows the past in which there may be reasons for present disqualification. Forgiven sin may still disable. There are vessels that break on the wheel, and though another may be made, the original is impossible. Diseases may be healed, but a lost limb cannot be restored. The Lord knows the future as well as the past. The immediate may imperil the future. The eagerness for a mess of pottage may cause the loss of the inheritance.

"No" is never God's last word. If the prayer seems unanswered it is because it is lost in the glory of the answer when it comes. God may refuse the route because he knows a better one. He took Moses into Canaan by a better way, and in better company. He took Elijah to heaven by a much more wonderful way than that of the grave. Paul never had any use for juniper trees, and to him God said, "My grace is sufficient for you," and he taught him to glory in affliction and adversity.

In glory we will find that our prayers have been interpreted according to the infinite wisdom and eternal love of God our father, who bids us pray. 

God never refuses without reason. He knows the past in which there may be reasons for present disqualification.

ON PATIENCE

by Charles Haddon Spurgeon

Patience is better than wisdom: an ounce of patience is worth a pound of brains. All men praise patience, but few enough can practice it. It is a medicine that is good for all diseases, and therefore every old woman recommends it. But it is not every garden that grows the herbs to make it with...

...If a soldier fights no better than a ploughboy, off with his red coat. We expect more fruit from an apple tree than from a thorn, and we have a right to do so. The disciples of a patient Savior should be patient themselves. 'Grin and bear it' is the old fashioned advice, but 'sing and bear it' is a great deal better...

...Impatient people water their miseries and hoe up their comforts; sorrows are visitors that come without invitation, but complaining minds send a wagon to bring their troubles home in. Many people are born crying, live complaining, and die disappointed. They chew the bitter pill, which they would not even know to be bitter if they had the sense to swallow it whole in a cup of patience and water. They think every other man's burden to be light, and their own feathers to be heavy as lead. No one's toes are so often trodden on by the black ox as theirs. The snow falls thickest around their door, and the hail rattles hardest on their window. Many would be well off if they could but think so...

...To be poor is not always pleasant, but worse things than that happen at sea. Small shows are apt to pinch, but not if you have a small foot. If we have little means it will be well if we have little desires. Poverty is no shame, but being discontented with it is. In some things the poor are better off than the rich. For if a poor man has to seek meat for his stomach, he is more likely to get what he is after than the rich man who seeks a stomach for his meat...

...When troubles come it is of no use to fly in the face of God by hard thoughts of providence; that is kicking against the pricks and hurting your feet. The trees bow in the wind and so must we. Every time the sheep bleats it loses a mouthful, and every time we complain we miss a blessing. ...If one door should be shut, God will open another; if the peas do not yield well, the beans may. There's a bright side to all things, and a good God everywhere. Somewhere or other, in the worst flood of trouble, there always is a dry spot for contentment to get its foot on, and if there were not it would learn to swim.

Friends, let us take to patience and water gruel, as the old folks used to tell us, rather than catch the miserables, and give others the disease by wickedly finding fault with God. The best remedy for affliction is submitting to providence. What can't be cured must be endured. If we cannot get bacon, let us bless God that there are still some cabbages in the garden. *Must* is a hard nut to crack, but it has a sweet kernel. "All things work together for good to them that love God." Whatever falls from the skies is sooner or later good for the land...

...We cannot by nature like trouble any more than a mouse can fall in love with a cat, and yet Paul, by grace came to glory in tribulations also. Losses and crosses are heavy to bear, but when our hearts are right with God, it is wonderful how easy the yoke becomes. We must needs go to glory by way of a weeping cross; and as we were never promised that we should ride to heaven in a feather bed, we must not be disappointed when we see the road to be rough, as our fathers found it before us. All's well that ends well; and, therefore, let us plough the heaviest soil with our eyes on the sheaves of harvest, and learn to sing at our labor while others murmur.

— C.H. Spurgeon. *John Ploughman's Talks*. pp. 35-38.

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WHY?

WHY?

by Desmond Ford

Two Questions.

If you are like me, here are two questions which insist on crowding into your mind: Why do most people ignore the gospel when it has so much to offer; and how is it that the majority of people seem quite untroubled by the fact that they are guilty before God, and soon to face him in the judgment?

The Parable of the Great Banquet.

The answer to these questions is clearly set forth in scripture, but those answers may not have registered upon us. For example, consider the story of the great banquet to which the best people were invited but refused to come.

When one of those with him at the table heard this, he said to Jesus, "Blessed is the man who will eat at the feast in the kingdom of God."

Jesus replied: "A certain man was preparing a great banquet and invited many guests. At the time of the banquet he sent his servant to tell those who had been invited, 'Come, for everything is now ready.'

"But they all alike began to make excuses. The first said, 'I have just bought a field, and I must go and see it. Please excuse me.'

"Another said, 'I have just bought five yoke of oxen, and I'm on my way to try them out. Please excuse me.'

"Still another said, 'I just got married, so I can't come.' (Luke 14:15-20)."

A sanctimonious Pharisee expresses the pious sentiment that all who feast in heaven one day will be blessed. But Jesus tells a story saying that foolish humanity in general will not avail themselves of that blessing. The story is more than strange; for who in real life would behave as these characters do—refuse a free feast offered graciously by a great king? A contrast is painted which is mystifying. People are enamoured of the second best, and despise the best.

Alexander Maclaren, when preaching in this passage, commented:

...There is a kind of law, according to which, the more valuable a thing is, the less men care to have it.... The attraction of an object is in inverse

Why do most people ignore the gospel when it has so much to offer; and how is it that the majority of people seem quite untroubled by the fact that they are guilty before God, and soon to face him in the judgment?

ratio to its worth. Small things, transitory things, material things, everybody grasps at; and the number of graspers decreases as you go up the scale in preciousness, until, when you reach the highest of all, there are the fewest that want them.

Maclaren proceeded to illustrate his point by saying that while truth is better than wealth, most prefer the latter; and though goodness is better than truth, the same strange propensity exists.

An Epidemic of Insanity.


So, Jesus has warned us in advance that we who offer the most precious thing in the world must not be surprised if most people reject it. While the forgiveness of sins, the imputation of the merits of Christ,

the verdict of the last judgment, the bestowal of eternal life, the coming of the Spirit of Christ to dwell in the heart, our Lord's perpetual strengthening presence on life's pilgrimage, and a host of other blessings become instantaneously ours the moment we believe, yet most refuse to believe.

The reason for this anomaly lies in the first of Christian doctrines: the fallen state of man, his depravity. "An epidemic of insanity sits upon the world." So be not surprised when most ignore your offer of heaven's best, and neither must you be discouraged, for as the rest of Christ's story tells, those with a sense of need, will accept. (See Luke 14: 21-23)

Two Kinds of Peace.

Our second question is related to the first. Why do multitudes appear to be content, despite the fact that they are under the condemnation of God? (See John 3:17, 18, 36). The answer is illustrated in the Bible's account of two sleepers—Jonah the runaway, asleep in the ship which he has chosen for his flight from God, and which is about to be overtaken by a great storm; and Christ, asleep in the fishing vessel on Galilee during a tempest.

The peace of most people is like that of Jonah—they do not know that they teeter on the edge of a precipice. They will soon be overtaken by undreamed of calamity and judgment. But the peace of the believer is like that of Christ—the peace of a good conscience, because they are right with God, and because of the awareness that they are in the loving hand of the Almighty. 

The Gospel and the Spirit

9

Proclamation and Persecution

Acts 16:11 - 17:9

by Rodney Nelson

Why Conflict?

One of the profound questions individuals have asked is how the proclamation of the gospel message can be a cause for conflict? Why are people offended by the gospel? The New Testament is not preoccupied with answering these questions. The book of Acts is not concerned with apologizing for the gospel. Rather, it records the conflict that was often provoked by the gospel message, and by those who proclaimed it.

In our enlightened and tolerant age, the gospel is not to be seen as a message of conflict. Yet, the reality is that the gospel is no less controversial now than it was in the apostle's time. The conflict has remained though the scenario has changed, often dramatically.

In Acts, conflict over the gospel is usually caused when the message indicts or offends someone. The offense of the gospel is often overlooked today. It was unavoidable in Acts. Jesus promised no easy street for those early believers, especially his apostles. In various scenarios and occasions, the reader of Acts witnesses conflict in the form of persecution and virulent attacks toward those who believed in "the way." Acts 16:11-17:9 records three such occasions where conflict led to persecution for entirely different reasons, though the results were the same.

A Tale of Two Women.

Occasions for proclaiming the gospel are often presented to us without our seeking it. Also presented to us are opportunities that present a cause/effect relationship that we cannot foresee. Both of these occasions came to Paul and his party while they were seeking a place of prayer on the Sabbath. The first time saw a quiet encounter with a group of women near a river outside Philippi (Acts 16:13). One woman was Lydia, a businesswoman from Thyatira, dealing in purple linens. "The Lord opened her heart to respond to Paul's message" (16:14).

The second occasion was far more complicated. Paul's group went again to the same location for prayer, where they met another 'business' woman. This woman profited, however, from the occult (16:16). Whereas Lydia listened with a receptive heart, this woman followed Paul's group for days shouting, "These men are servants of the most high God, who are telling you the way to be saved" (16:17). This woman did not pursue to possess the gospel even though she recognized Paul and his party as preachers of the gospel. Why? Because of the spirit that possessed her. Paul, not wanting the kind of attention that her loud declarations were calling to them, became annoyed. He turned to the Spirit that inhabited her and told it to depart. At which point it did.

The girl was a slave of owners that made money from her

"gift." They seized Paul and Silas, bringing them to the *agora* (marketplace) where all public discourse was held in Greek cities. As Jews, Paul and Silas were falsely accused of "advocating customs" unlawful for Roman citizens to practice (16:21). What followed was an opportunity to spread the gospel. It came at a cost—a severe flogging and beating. Upon imprisonment, Paul and Silas were "praying and singing hymns to God." (16:25) Suddenly, an earthquake shook open the prison doors, and all prisoners' shackles and chains came loose.

Thinking that all his prisoners had escaped, the jailer was about to thrust his own sword into himself when Paul yelled assurance that all were still present. The jailer went from almost taking his own life to falling at Paul and Silas' feet. Why did he do this? He had been listening to both men pray and sing to the Lord despite the injuries suffered from the flogging. Taking them from their cell he asked, "Men, what must I do to be saved?"

Having received his answer, he took Paul and Silas to his house where the gospel was presented to his family. The jailer washed their wounds and the entire family was baptized.

God Designs Opportunities.

There are times when we can present the gospel without planning to. Difficult circumstances may befall us that provide occasion for witnessing our faith. In the case of Paul and Silas, it was not in their original plan to be falsely accused, beaten and flogged, and then imprisoned with painful wounds. But the occasion that presented itself gave them an opportunity to lead their jailer and his family to Christ. No one but God could have scripted this. However, Paul and Silas seized the moment because they were not preoccupied with their own misery. They felt no self-pity in suffering for their faith.

Jewish Offense.

After leaving Philippi, Paul and Silas came to Thessalonica where they went immediately to a Jewish synagogue to preach to Jews and to Gentile converts to Judaism. After preaching, and reasoning from the Scriptures for three straight weeks, some Jews, and many Gentile women came to believe in Christ. Jealousy among the Jewish establishment resulted in a conspiracy with some unsavoury characters to create a mob situation in the city. They went to the house of Jason (presumably Paul and Silas' host), to capture them and bring them before the people. However, Paul and Silas were not there, so they brought Jason and other Christians to face charges.

As in Philippi, the charges focused on impropriety toward

Continued on next page

Roman authority. Attention was drawn to a potential treason toward Caesar (17:7). The dubious character of the Jewish charges betrayed their motives to destroy every vestige of Christianity, and to consolidate power in the synagogue and the community.

Peaceful and Offensive.

The presentation of the gospel by Paul and Silas was always peaceful. They never sought to draw attention to themselves, or to destabilize any community they entered. The message did that! The gospel challenged the Jewish establishment to be accountable to their traditions and to the Scriptures (17:2-11). Often the reaction to the challenge of the gospel was based on the change(s) the message itself would bring to the community. The tension between money and the gospel arose several times in Acts. When profit is denied to demonic activities, because of the gospel, the response is to destroy the gospel and those who proclaim it.


Acts records how the gospel changes people and culture. The gospel is offensive to the culture, because it demands that people make changes in their lives. If it were a message that only changed one's outlook on life, that would be no major concern. If it were a message about ideas, and not a person, there would be no concern. But it is exactly because the gospel demands a response to a person's claim on one's life that it becomes offensive. The status quo is insufficient for fulfilment and duty. When one's worldview revolves around the message of Jesus Christ, it not only changes the worldview, it changes why one lives. The gospel is more than another ideology; it is the message of, and for, life.

Resistance to the gospel in Acts, almost always follows the proclamation of it. The Jews would never have resisted the gospel had it not asked to be accepted by them as the fulfilment of everything they had believed from the Torah. Had it not been for pride in their inheritance and heritage, Israel might have accepted Messiah. In response to the gospel, Jews would usually co-opt the Gentile population to persecute the gospel messengers.

Gentiles resisted the gospel for other reasons. Unlike the Jews, there was no covenantal heritage for them. Gentiles resisted the gospel when it challenged their religious pluralism and tolerance of other beliefs. The gospel conflicted with their belief structure when it condemned their gods, and claimed to be the only path to God. Gentiles often rejected the gospel due to its philosophical underpinnings, especially the claim that Jesus was physically resurrected (17:32).

Conflict Today.

Today, gospel believers face opposition from a pluralistic culture. The difference from Acts is that today's culture only pretends to be religious. Religion has been largely relegated to a private endeavour. Public expression of religious belief other than Christian, is valued, not for its truth, but for its tolerance and plurality. Individual fulfilment in religion is fine, but any claim to exclusive truth and application of truth is not tolerated. At this point, the gospel comes in conflict with today's culture.

The gospel challenges, condemns, and gives hope to a society that does not understand what it needs. This has never changed. Christians face conflict when they unapologetically live out the claims of the gospel. 

NEWS BITS . . .

Struggle for Israel's Soul.

JERUSALEM— Under a blazing afternoon sun, a rag-tag assortment of single mothers and children sit at the entrances to white canvas tents lining the sidewalk in front of Israel's Finance Ministry, locked in symbolic struggle with the well-paid bureaucrats across the street for what, to many, is a struggle for the soul of Israel. Their demonstration, which has embarrassed the Israeli government and captured the imagination of the Israeli public and media, was inspired by the pilgrimage of one woman—43-year-old-Vicki Knafo—to Jerusalem.

In early July, Knafo, a single mother of three children, set out on foot from her home in a remote region of the Negev Desert, for Israel's government headquarters to protest a drastic series of government cuts in parent welfare allowances that threatened to leave her destitute. Her demonstration—and the public response to it—has brought into relief the dramatic erosion of many of the moral and economic values present at the founding of Israel.

-Religion News Service.

Evangelical Stereotypes.

COLORADO SPRINGS—Ted Haggard, the new president of the National Association of Evangelicals, says that most evangelical Christians are humble, kindly and godly folks, but that's not how they are always perceived. "For many people, the stereotypical image of an evangelical is a very serious old man with an expensive suit who is against whatever is happening that day," said Haggard, a relaxed and smiling 47-year old who could easily pass for 37.

Haggard admits that enhancing the image of evangelicals, those theologically conservative Christians who are often socially and politically conservative to boot, will be a big challenge. But he rarely thinks small. New Life Church, the independent charismatic congregation he founded in his Colorado Springs basement in 1985, now has 9,200 members and plans to break ground on a 12,000 seat worship center next year. The church is also home to the World Prayer Center, a support base for missionary activities, and the Association of Life-Giving Churches, a network of some 250 mostly Pentecostal and charismatic congregations.

—Religion News Service.

TO and FRO with the Editor

Question:

RE: Love Thy Neighbor. My neighbors are crazy. Since they moved here they have tried to poison my dog, made false reports to the police about us, and I can go on and on. Can I ask the Lord to fight this battle for me? How can I reconcile this with his command to love my neighbor as myself?

M. B.

Answer:

I sympathize with your predicament. I too have lived beside some very difficult people. Here's what I have learned: Never yet have I seen a problem with a neighbor solved by treating him unkind. Jesus' Golden Rule remains the best sense yet on the matter, despite the difficulties in implementing it. The best way to get rid of an enemy is to befriend him.

On another level, if your neighbor is creating an unsafe environment for you and your family to live in, then love for members of your own family may require you to seek help from law enforcement. Bear in mind, however, that contacting the police about your neighbor, may make him/her even harder to live with. Yes, you need to ask the Lord to help you fight this battle. May God give you his wisdom, and his love, as you strive to live in peace with all men.

Question:

How can my church hold the view that Jesus entered into holiest of all in the mid-nineteenth century, when the book of Hebrews teaches that, at the time of its writing, Jesus stood THEN in the presence of God as our high priest?

Answer:

It is true that the letter to the Hebrews teaches that Jesus, from the time of his ascension, was a complete religious leader, who had faithfully and sublimely finalized the spiritual quest of humankind—once for all. This is why the author begins his presentation with this stirring announcement: *"In the past God spoke to our forefathers through the prophets at many times and in various ways, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son..."*(Hebrews 1:1+2).

Prior to Jesus, all religious systems, and all priesthoods fell short of their goal. *"...The gifts and sacrifices being offered could not clear the conscience of the worshiper"*(Hebrews 9:9). In contrast, the priestly work of Christ was conclusive. *"...But now he has appeared once for all at the end of the ages to do away with sin by the sacrifice of himself"*(Hebrews 9:26).

Christ's triumph over the sin problem was comprehensive. He was *"crowned with glory and honor because he suffered death"* (Hebrews 2:9). His entry into God's presence was unrestricted, unlimited, and unqualified. This momentous truth has been the ground of Christian assurance for two thousand years, and to it, the pastor to the Hebrews appeals, as the greatest of all reasons why Christians should persevere, and not give up.

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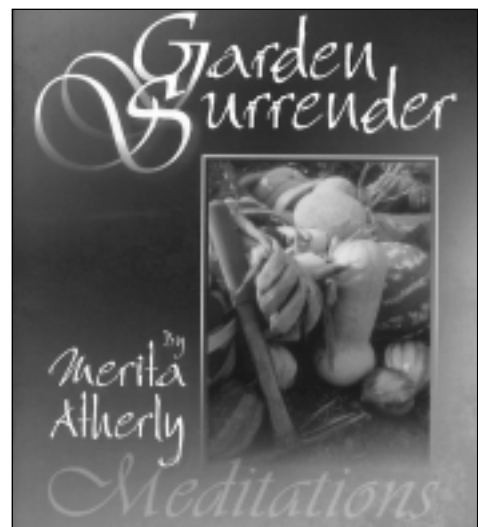
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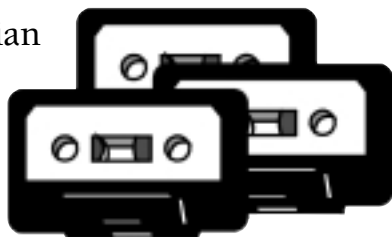
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WILL YOU WILL?

Nearly two million people die in the USA every year without leaving a will. Approximately 600,000 of these are evangelical Christians. In the majority of cases, they were good Christian stewards in life. But they made no provision to continue their stewardship after death. They left their lifetime savings for court distribution. While alive, they would never have sanctioned the decisions on distribution made by the court.

None of us will die any sooner for making legal provision for the final allocation of our goods. These are goods God has loaned us. Legal provision should not be delayed for even a day, especially now, when the making of a will can be both simple and inexpensive.

If you have not already done so, will you pray and act on this matter of a will, or a living trust? Will you remember the work of the gospel, that others may come to share the eternal life in which you now rejoice? It is within your power to make provision that some find the treasure to which our Lord referred (Matthew 13:44). That gospel treasure illuminates the shadows of death, points to the everlasting gates of pearl, and reveals a welcoming savior (1 Thessalonians 4:13-18).

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