STUDY GUIDE · 4 AUGUST 2026

Pray and Don't Lose Heart: Persevering Faith Between Two Advents

Prayer, Union with Christ, The Return of Christ

Christians live in a genuinely difficult in-between time — after Christ's first coming but before his return. Jesus knew this would be true of his disciples, and so in Luke 18:1–8 he gave them a parable with a precise, stated purpose: to teach them to pray always and not to lose heart. Too often the Parable of the Persistent Widow is treated as a standalone lesson about prayer in general. But Jesus placed it immediately after his sobering words about the days when his disciples would 'desire to see one of the days of the Son of Man' and would not see it (Luke 17:22). That context transforms everything. This study guide follows the parable through that context — exploring the hard work of waiting, the call to pray always, the encouragement not to lose heart, and finally the greatest reason of all to keep going: Jesus Christ himself.

Christians live in a genuinely difficult period — reconciled to God and indwelt by the Spirit, yet still surrounded by sin, suffering, and the schemes of the enemy. This context of 'waiting for the Son of Man' (Luke 17:22) is the backdrop Jesus himself provides for the parable, and taking it seriously transforms how we read it.

Waiting is hard at every stage of life — from a child unable to resist shaking the Christmas presents under the tree, to adults enduring the weight of waiting for medical test results,

immigration status, or the arrival of a child. But the sermon asks whether anything is more difficult than the waiting Christians experience between the two advents of Jesus. In Luke 17:22, Jesus himself prepares his disciples for it: 'The days are coming when you will desire to see one of the days of the Son of Man, and you will not see it.' These are the days we inhabit — and they are both wonderful and hard.

On one hand, these days between the comings of Christ are days of genuine grace. Believers have been reconciled to God, indwelt by the Holy Spirit, and gathered into the community of the church. On the other hand, the enemy still prowls around like a hungry lion (1 Peter 5:8). Indwelling sin still blinds our eyes to the glory of Jesus and hardens our hearts to his goodness. Suffering, death, and injustice still mark life in this world. In many parts of the globe, Christians in places like Nigeria face not just misunderstanding but persecution and death for their loyalty to Christ.

To be a Christian, as the sermon puts it, is to follow Jesus — who had no place to lay his head — and to take our place in the long line of righteous pilgrims: Abraham leaving for Canaan, Moses forsaking the treasures of Egypt, David crying out from the wilderness, and the apostles themselves. Like Odysseus, we are on a journey home, and we face terrors on every side. The difference, as we will see, is that unlike Odysseus, we have not been left to our own strength to get there.

- What kinds of waiting have you found most difficult in your own life, and why?
- The sermon describes the Christian life as a 'long obedience in the same direction' — a pilgrimage homeward. What enemies or pressures threaten to turn you back on that journey?
- How does knowing that Jesus gave this parable specifically to disciples waiting for his return change how you approach it?

- In what ways do you currently experience the tension between the goodness of life in Christ and the ongoing reality of suffering and sin?

The widow's persistent, repeated coming to the judge illustrates the first lesson Jesus wants his disciples to learn: pray always. The great obstacle is not lack of opportunity but our default tendency toward self-reliance and worry instead of prayer — an old problem that Gregory of Nyssa described 1,600 years ago and that still marks us today.

Jesus states the first purpose of the parable plainly in verse 1: his disciples 'ought always to pray and not lose heart.' The widow embodies this lesson. She comes repeatedly to the judge — again and again in verse 3, 'bothering' him by her continual coming in verse 5, crying out 'day and night' in verse 7. The Apostle Paul echoes the same imperative in 1 Thessalonians 5:17 with three stark words: 'Pray without ceasing.' The reason prayer is so necessary is precisely because living between the two advents is not something we can endure on our own strength. We have been given the extraordinary gift of access to the throne of the King of Kings — to enter as a child before their father and be welcomed, heard, and helped in our time of need.

And yet, as the sermon honestly observes, our first response to the challenges of the Christian life is so often not prayer but self-reliance and worry. This is not a new problem. Writing sixteen hundred years ago, Gregory of Nyssa described it with striking clarity: 'He considers engagement with God a harm compared to the work before him... For whoever practices a craft thinks God's alliance is useless and unprofitable for one's current business. He therefore forsakes prayer, putting all hope in his own hands and forgetting him who has given us hands.' Whether the ancient craftsman or the modern Vancouverite stuck in rush-hour traffic with an anxious mind, the pattern is the same: we press on with our worry rather than turning to the One who can actually help.

The practical invitation of the passage is direct: the next time anxiety strikes, stop right then and pray. 'Lord, have mercy. Lord, give me wisdom. Lord, help me get through this.' God gave us the anxious response as a signal — not to be held on to as an end in itself, but to be brought immediately before him. The same practice extends outward: when a friend shares a struggle, whether a believer or not yet a Christian, we can stop and pray with them. As the sermon notes, even a simple 'Can I pray for you?' is a form of witness — a gospel-shaped act that invites someone into the reality of a God who hears.

- When a problem or anxiety arises, what is your first instinct — prayer, self-reliance, or worry?
- Gregory of Nyssa wrote that people 'consider engagement with God a harm compared to the work before them.' Where do you recognise that pattern in your own life?
- The sermon suggests stopping immediately when anxiety strikes and praying right then. What practical habit or prompt could help you do that this week?
- How might praying for non-Christian friends when they share their struggles be a form of witness and evangelism?
- What answered prayers might we be missing simply because we do not pray?

The second lesson Jesus draws from the parable is a 'lesser to greater' argument at two levels: if even an unjust judge who neither feared God nor respected people eventually granted justice to a nameless widow, how much more will our perfectly righteous, loving God give justice to his own chosen ('elect') people? Believers are not nameless widows — they are precious and chosen, and that identity is the ground of their courage.

The judge in the parable is not merely flawed — he is twice-over bad. In verse 4, Jesus has him confess it in his own words: 'I neither fear God nor respect man.' He fails both great commandments. He is the last person a helpless widow should expect anything from. And yet, because she keeps bothering him — because of her continual coming — even he grants her justice. This is the hinge of the parable's second lesson. Jesus is making a lesser-to-greater argument: if even this unrighteous judge answers, how much more will our perfectly righteous God give justice to those who cry to him day and night? As Psalm 145:14–20 fills out the picture: 'The Lord upholds all who are falling and raises up all who are bowed down... The Lord is near to all who call on him, to all who call on him in truth. He fulfills the desire of those who fear him; he also hears their cry and saves them.' This is not the judge of the parable. This is our God.

But the lesser-to-greater argument runs at a second level too, and it may be the more personal one. The judge helps a woman who is nothing to him — nameless, powerless, with no claim on his attention. But we are not nameless widows before our God. Verse 7 uses a word that carries enormous weight in scripture: God's 'elect.' Elect means chosen — chosen in love, chosen with purpose, chosen as a treasured possession. The Heidelberg Catechism's first question captures it: 'What is your only comfort in life and death? That I belong to Jesus Christ.' If even the unjust judge helped someone who meant nothing to him, will not God — who has chosen us, who calls us his own — help and protect and preserve every precious person he has claimed for himself?

This is the ground of our courage. The question is not whether God will be faithful — Psalm 145 settles that. The question Jesus presses at the end of verse 8 is the harder one: 'When the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?' God's faithfulness is certain. Our perseverance is what must be tended, and that is precisely why Jesus has given us this parable.

- Jesus deliberately picks a bad judge and a powerless widow. What point is he making by choosing these extremes?
- The sermon explains the 'lesser to greater' argument operates at two levels — the judge's character and the widow's status. How does each level add to your confidence in prayer?
- How does Psalm 145:14–20 expand your picture of the God you are praying to?
- The Heidelberg Catechism asks, 'What is your only comfort in life and death?' How does knowing you are God's 'elect' — chosen and precious — change the way you approach suffering and waiting?
- The parable ends with a warning: 'When the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?' What does genuine persevering faith look like in practice for you right now?

Beyond the parable's argument from God's character, believers have an even greater encouragement: Jesus Christ himself. He prayed with loud cries and tears in his suffering, was heard by the Father, and was vindicated through resurrection. Because believers are united to Christ, his pattern of suffering → prayer → vindication is their pattern too, and his resurrection is the firstfruits of their own.

God's character, as revealed in the parable and confirmed in Psalm 145, is already a powerful reason not to lose heart. But the sermon presses us toward an even greater encouragement: Jesus Christ himself. Hebrews 5:7–10 describes him in language that should stop us in our tracks — 'In

the days of his flesh, Jesus offered up prayers and supplications with loud cries and tears to him who was able to save him from death. And he was heard because of his reverence.' Jesus did not simply teach his disciples to pray in suffering; he prayed in suffering, just as we do. At Gethsemane he cried out, 'Father, if you are willing, remove this cup from me — yet not my will, but yours be done.' And throughout his earthly life, he continually withdrew to be alone with the Father.

What is more, the Father heard him. Though Jesus learned obedience through what he suffered, God used those very sufferings to perfect him as the source of eternal salvation. Not even the sufferings of the Son were wasted — they were worked for good, for his eternal glory, and for our rescue. And ultimately, every tear Jesus shed, every injustice he endured, every cry he lifted to the Father was answered in the resurrection. Neither Satan nor sin nor death nor those who betrayed him had the last word. God vindicated him by raising him on the third day and seating him high above every earthly throne.

This is where union with Christ becomes the most practical and the most glorious truth in the Christian life. We pray as those who are following in the footsteps of our Master. His destination is our destination; his resurrection is only the firstfruits of the resurrection of all God's people (Romans 8:28–30). And the day is coming — and will surely come — when the trumpet sounds and the promise of Revelation 11:15 is proclaimed: 'The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ, and he shall reign forever and ever.' The sermon closes with these words, which capture the entire arc of the parable and of the Christian life: 'There is a waiting, but the time of the end will come, and all will be well, and all will be well, and all manner of things will be well.'

- How does seeing Jesus pray 'with loud cries and tears' (Hebrews 5:7) change the way you feel about bringing your own desperate prayers to God?

- The sermon says God used even Jesus' sufferings to perfect him as Saviour. How does that truth speak to your own experiences of unanswered or painfully answered prayer?
- What does it mean practically that believers are 'united to Christ' — that his destination is our destination and his resurrection is the firstfruits of ours?
- How does the vision of Revelation 11:15 — the kingdom of the world becoming the kingdom of Christ — give you courage to keep praying and enduring today?
- Where do you most need to 'fix your eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of faith' (Hebrews 12:2) right now in your life?

Conclusion

The Parable of the Persistent Widow is, at its heart, a parable about the character of God and the calling of his people. The widow keeps coming to a judge who neither fears God nor respects people — and even he gives justice. How much more, then, will our perfectly righteous, loving God give justice to his own elect, his chosen and treasured possession, who cry to him day and night? The lesser-to-greater logic of Jesus is meant to be felt in the bones: God is not the unrighteous judge, and we are not nameless widows. We are chosen. We are precious. We are heard.

For those not yet in Christ, the parable carries an urgent word: the righteous Judge is coming, and the most important thing any person can do is get on the right side of that justice by turning to Jesus in faith and repentance before that day arrives. For those who are in Christ, the call is equally clear — the same call Jesus has been making throughout this parable. Pray always. Do not lose heart. Fix your eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of faith, who for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of God. His pattern of suffering, prayer, and vindication is our pattern. His resurrection is the guarantee of ours. And the kingdom that is coming is already his. So keep going — pray without ceasing, refuse to lose heart,

and hold fast until justice arrives and all manner of things will be well.

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