



THE RELENTLESS WIDOW

In overseeing the prayer-mail for the past decade, I've seen God answer all kinds of prayers – some big, some small. From medical emergencies to family crises, job interviews to outreach opportunities, people send in their requests, the church gets praying, and God answers.

But along with the answers we get some questions, too. Because yes, there are times when God seems to be listening. But if we're honest, there are times when it seems like He's not.

As if God doesn't care.

So what are we supposed to make of that? Does God answer some prayers, not others? Or sometimes, but not always? Or does He always answer, but sometimes it's "Yes", sometimes "No", sometimes "Not yet"? People will say, "We prayed, and God showed up!" So where was God the rest of the time? Others will say, "God will do what God will do." So what's the point of praying at all? Still others will say, "God can do anything!"

So why doesn't He?

All of this makes me suspect we might be looking at prayer the wrong way. Which brings us to today's Jesus-story:

The Mysterious Story of the Relentless Widow.

Luke 18:1-8

Most of Jesus' parables are illustrations of what the Kingdom of God is like. But not this one. This is an example of what Judaism calls a *Qal va-Homer* or 'Light and Heavy' argument, and it goes like this: if an imperfect judge is willing to listen to this woman who has no rights, how much more will a perfect God listen to the children He loves? (Matthew 7:9-11 says something similar.)

On saying that, the woman's plea *is* intended to teach us something. 4 things, in fact:

1) It's A Patient Plea. Notice: that's patient, not passive! Prayer is never just a resigned acceptance of whatever life dishes out. Equally, it's not this aggressive, 'I'm in charge of my destiny' approach to things, either. Prayer is an active engagement in what God is doing, all around us.

But sometimes, like the widow, we have to wait.

Why is that? It's a difficult question to answer. But I think part of it is that our story is not the only story. E.g. if we're praying that God will change a person's attitude or behaviour, well, God doesn't just take over a person's mind, against their will. God has to engineer the circumstances of a person's life; has to guide them in the direction He wants for them; and sometimes has to wrestle with a person's soul. All of which takes time.

And so, we have to learn patience (not a bad thing, either).

2) It's A Passionate Plea. We're not told the cause, but Jesus gives the impression this woman is giving her all to this – heart and soul. In fact, where the judge says "I'd better give her justice, before she wears me out", in Greek it reads "I'd better give her justice, before she gives me a shiner!" This is a gutsy lady – a 1st century kick-boxer – and she is making her feelings known!

This woman cares passionately – and it shows. And that's what prayer is – a brutal honesty. To quote Psalm 13: "Lord, how long will you hide your face from me?!" Or Psalm 22: "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?!" In fact, if you look at the Psalms, about half of them contain this kind of language: wrestling; questioning; crying out to God.

Yes, God is King, and yes, we should revere Him. But even so, God wants us to express ourselves! He wants to see a bit of emotion in us, a bit of fire in our bellies!

Not for His benefit, but for ours. Because *we* need it.

3) It's A Persistent Plea. "She kept coming to him", to the point where she drove the judge nuts! He sets out for work – there she is. He goes out for lunch – there she is again. He sets off for home – oh, no, there she is *again!* I.e. she wasn't giving up, even when it seemed pointless.

When you stop and think about it, persistence is a vital part of life (just ask the average athlete or musician). If you're going to have a good marriage, you've got to persist. If you're going to be a good parent, you've got to persist. If you're going to run a business or learn a skill or lead a ministry,

you've got to persist. And if you're going to have a strong relationship with God, you've got to persist.

In the Middle East, "No" is never the end of a matter, it's an invitation to haggle. Abraham did it (Genesis 18); Moses did it (Deuteronomy 9); Elijah did it (1 Kings 18). Is that what God is doing when He appears to go silent on us? Encouraging us to haggle, to persist?

Maybe so.

4) It's A Perfect Plea. And by that I don't mean a perfectly-crafted plea, like some of our prayers can be (especially if we've been Christians for a while). What I mean is a justified plea, a plea that should have been hard to ignore.

I.e. this was a prayer that God Himself would say 'Amen' to.

Sometimes we can be praying for the wrong thing, committed to the wrong cause, fighting the wrong battle. And instead of persuading God to see things *our* way, God has to persuade us to see things *His*. Think about it like this: imagine your kids were to decide they wanted ice-cream every mealtime. Would that be wise? (They might think so!). You'd have to be a big mean parent and say, "I don't think that's a good idea." And God's the same.

What if prayer is not so much about me changing *God's* mind, as God changing *mine*? Changing *me*?

The Moral Of The Story ...

So what's the moral of the story? Keep on praying. And in vs7-8, Jesus gives us the incentive: God is a just Judge, and one day, He's going to bring all suffering and heartache to an end. Which is all well and good, but what's the delay? After all, doesn't Jesus say that God will respond 'quickly'? 'Quickly' here doesn't mean immediate results, but it does suggest that God is already active; that God is already at work. In our world. And in us.

But He also ends the story with a question: "When the Son of Man comes, will He find faith on the earth?" That's an interesting question, isn't it? It's implying that 1) history is moving in a certain direction, and 2) prayer is more than just words, than a ritual, than a list. It's your faith, your life, your entire walk with God. It's listening, and reflecting, and asking, "What is God up to? What is God's will in this? And how can I be a part of it?"

I don't know why God says "Yes" to some prayers and "No" to others. I wish I did. But I do know that we can tap into God's purpose for us – if we're open to it. Like Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane.

So, what is on your heart, at this moment?

And even more importantly: what is on *His*?