

Introduction: Keenly aware of the hard road on which His embattled church walks in this hostile world, Jesus is concerned that true believers “ought always to pray and not give up” (Luke 18:1). He knows how His faithful followers in this world will “long for the day of the Son of Man and not see it” (Luke 17:22). God’s patient timetable will seem to stretch out interminably. So the burning question becomes, “*when Christ returns, will He find faith on the earth?*” (Luke 18:8). Determined that the answer to that question will be a resounding “yes,” Christ tells a series of parables designed to encourage His church in the hard but essential work of prayer. We focus on the first of these parables this week, the parable of the persistent widow.

Mon/Tues: read Luke 18:1-8 and Revelation 6:9-11. The basic point of the parable of the persistent widow is stark and direct: God will not turn a deaf ear to the cries of His suffering church. He will, at just the right time, arise to vindicate His suffering people and judge their cruel foes. This ultimately points to the final day of judgment, when the cries of the suffering church will be finally answered – cries exemplified for us in Revelation 6:9-11:

When he opened the fifth seal, I saw under the altar the souls of those who had been slain for the word of God and for the witness they had borne. They cried out with a loud voice, “O Sovereign Lord, holy and true, how long before you will judge and avenge our blood on those who dwell on the earth?” Then they were each given a white robe and told to rest a little longer, until the number of their fellow servants and their brothers should be complete, who were to be killed as they themselves had been.

Meditate and Pray: Give thanks for the glorious comfort and vindication which belongs to the church on the Last Day! Then, every wrong will be righted, and every justified believer who by faith has washed his life in the blood of the Lamb will stand victorious with Him! It is hard to believe now, but there will be then, in addition to great joy in such a victory, a great contentment and satisfaction in our fully revealed knowledge that, “the Judge of all the earth” has indeed done all things righteously and well. No cries from the suffering believer will be heard anymore – “How long, Lord?” “Wake up Lord.” “Where are you, Lord?” – all such vexing questions of faith will be lovingly stilled forever! Sing about this great day in the words of this hymn # 545:

When this passing world is done,
when has sunk yon glaring sun,
when we stand with Christ in glory,
looking o'er life's finished story,
then, Lord, shall I fully know,
not till then, how much I owe.

When I hear the wicked call
on the rocks and hills to fall,
when I see them start and shrink
on the fiery deluge brink,
then, Lord, shall I fully know,
not till then, how much I owe.

When I stand before the throne,
dressed in beauty not my own,
when I see thee as thou art,
love thee with unsinning heart,
then, Lord, shall I fully know,
not till then, how much I owe.

When the praise of heav'n I hear,
loud as thunders to the ear,
loud as many waters' noise,
sweet as harp's melodious voice,
then, Lord, shall I fully know,
not till then, how much I owe.

Chosen not for good in me,
wakened up from wrath to flee,
hidden in the Savior's side,
by the Spirit sanctified,
teach me, Lord, on earth to show,
by my love, how much I owe.

Weds/Thurs: read Luke 17:20-37. The Pharisees hated Christ because the coming of Christ's kingdom was characterized by lowly service, self-denial and love for enemies. Whereas Christ was even willing to die, not only for the sheep of Israel, but even for despised Gentiles, Christ's foes would not accept His definition of the kingdom of God – but instead lusted for a kingdom that would come visibly and forcibly to defeat the Romans and to exalt them as the proud religious establishment in Israel. So they complain to Jesus that His ministry is deficient in not bringing to earth a visible kingdom of glory.

In answer to their ploy, Christ warns His true disciples not to listen to false messiahs who promise the coming of the kingdom of God “around the next corner.” He clearly teaches at the end of Luke 17 that when He returns on the Last Day – then and only then will the Kingdom of God come visibly. Meanwhile, the Kingdom *is already in their midst* by virtue of the Holy Spirit whom He sends to dwell among and in believers!

Meditate and Pray: What a glorious truth never to be forgotten: If you love Jesus, and believe He died for your sins, then you belong to Him! And *everyone* who belongs to Jesus has the Holy Spirit, as Romans 8:9 makes clear! You may not feel the Holy Spirit in you; nor are you to look for dramatic demonstrations of the Spirit's presence such as speaking in tongues. No, the Spirit dwells in you in order to fulfill Jesus' promises to you: “I will not leave you orphans. I will come to you.” (Romans 14:18). Sing about the indwelling of the Spirit of God in hymn # 335:

1 Gracious Spirit, dwell with me:
I myself would gracious be;
and with words that help and heal
would thy life in mine reveal;
and with actions bold and meek
would for Christ my Savior speak.

2 Truthful Spirit, dwell with me:
I myself would truthful be;
and with wisdom kind and clear
let Thy life in mine appear;
and with actions brotherly
speak my Lord's sincerity.

3 Mighty Spirit, dwell with me:
I myself would mighty be;
mighty so as to prevail,
where unaided man must fail;
ever by a mighty hope,
pressing on and bearing up.

4 Holy Spirit, dwell with me:
I myself would holy be;
separate from sin, I would
choose and cherish all things good,
and whatever I can be
give to him who gave me thee!

Friday: read Luke 17:24-18:8 and Luke 19: There is always danger in difficult days such as those in which the disciples lived after Jesus returned to Heaven. During the years A.D. 35- A.D. 70, the persecution of converted Jews and Gentile Christians increased in Israel as “last days” doomsday scenarios proliferated. As Jesus' warning in Luke 17:23 indicates, the temptation at the time was to listen to all sorts of false voices who said, “Look there! Look here! Now is the time to revolt against the Romans! Messiah's coming is just days away!” Because of such end-times obsessions, the forty years leading up to the destruction of Jerusalem in A.D. 70 were full of many false prophets in Israel, causing great tumult and fomenting revolution, as they promised the imminent coming of Messiah. Most sad of all: *in rejecting the Lord Jesus as the True Messiah*, because of His humble kingdom founded on suffering faith when they wanted a carnal kingdom to defeat the Romans, Israel became vulnerable to false messianic hopes.

The end result for all of Israel, in listening to these false, giddy voices promising a worldly Messiah, was that they flocked to Jerusalem, the holy city, in the years leading up to A.D. 70. Their thinking was, “God will not allow His holy city to be destroyed. When the Romans attack us *here*, then God will send Messiah to rescue us.” So the false teachers who came after Christ fanned the flames of fanatic doomsday disciples.

Thus the nation who had rejected Jesus Christ put their hopes in a physical Jerusalem on earth. They crowded into Jerusalem, so that when the Romans sent their general Titus against the holy city, almost all the Jews of that day who lived in the holy land were killed in the sacking and burning of Jerusalem. The historian Josephus said that the Romans ran out of wood on which to crucify the Jews who tried to escape the siege of Jerusalem. How terrible!

No wonder Jesus weeps over Jerusalem in Luke 19:41-44, predicting the very siege which took place a mere 30 plus years after His resurrection and ascension to God's right hand.

Meditate and Pray: Lord, please help us realize that, in order to be ready for your Second Coming, we don't need dramatic television preachers to scare us half to death. We don't need to fear being unready. Thank you that *you are the Good Shepherd* who knows each of your sheep and will not fail to find us when you come back to take us to Heaven. Thank you that you have promised "to prepare a place for us and to come back to take us to yourself" (John 14:1-3). Therefore, give us confidence and assurance in the days in which we live. Amen.

Sat/Sun: read Luke 21:20-24. How reassuring to see as we look back at history that Jesus kept His promise to preserve His church – even when Jerusalem was destroyed. We know this because in Luke 21:20 Jesus clearly warns His church that, "when they see Jerusalem surrounded by armies," then its predicted destruction is near. Taking Jesus at His Word, when the early church saw Israel flock to Jerusalem to take refuge from the Romans behind her walls, they *left the city* and the whole Christian church in Israel left and took refuge in Pella, in modern day Jordan. Historians record this as follows:

When the Roman legions destroyed Judaea and Jerusalem in A.D. 70, Josephus says that more than 1,100,000 Jews perished and nearly 100,000 were taken captive. In Rome's ancient forum, the Arch of Titus, which still stands, depicts Jewish captives in chains and Roman soldiers carrying the seven-branched temple candlestick on their shoulders. Yet, while the Jews suffered starvation, slaughter, and capture, their fellow Christians in Jerusalem escaped.

How were the Christians spared?

About thirty-seven years before the destruction, Jesus had foretold the terrible events that would follow his death. He warned his followers to immediately flee Jerusalem when the signs he predicted occurred. The Christian community carefully watched for the signs and followed the Savior's warning.

The Lord first identified the situation leading up to destruction: Many would deceive the people by saying that they were prophets or even Christ himself. The disciples would be delivered up and afflicted, hated of all nations. Betrayal and iniquity would abound, and the love of many would turn cold. (Matt. 24:10-12)

The Lord then pointed to signs that would alert believers to flee: "When ye shall see Jerusalem compassed with armies, then know that the desolation thereof is nigh." (Luke 21:20.)

(George A. Horton)

Meditate and Pray: What a remarkable proof in history that Jesus Christ will never allow His church to be destroyed! The Christians heeded Christ's words in Luke 21:20 and also His timely warning in Matthew 24:16-18, where He told His disciples in Judea to "flee into the mountains." They did so, fleeing to the city of Pella and thus were spared destruction by the Romans army. Sing about Christ's preserving of His church in all days of evil and darkness, using hymn # 347:

1 The church's one foundation
is Jesus Christ, her Lord;
she is his new creation
by water and the Word:
from heav'n he came and sought her
to be his holy bride;
with his own blood he bought her,
and for her life he died.

2 Elect from ev'ry nation,
yet one o'er all the earth,
her charter of salvation
one Lord, one faith, one birth;
one holy name she blesses,
partakes one holy food,
and to one hope she presses,
with ev'ry grace endued.

3 Though with a scornful wonder
men see her sore oppressed,
by schisms rent asunder,
by heresies distressed,
yet saints their watch are keeping,
their cry goes up, "How long?"
And soon the night of weeping
shall be the morn of song.

4 The church shall never perish!
Her dear Lord to defend,
to guide, sustain, and cherish,
is with her to the end;
though there be those that hate her,
and false sons in her pale,
against or foe or traitor
she ever shall prevail.

5 'Mid toil and tribulation,
and tumult of her war,
she waits the consummation
of peace forevermore;
till with the vision glorious
her longing eyes are blest,
and the great church victorious
shall be the church at rest.

For Further Reflection: Because of Christ's active protection of His church on earth, as He shepherds and guards us even down here until the day of His return, we must not be afraid to serve Him wherever He has placed us. There is no place too desolate, too wicked, too hard, too difficult for the church to claim as its place in Jesus' name. Every square inch already belongs to King Jesus.

The writer George MacDonald has a beautiful illustration of this in describing the ruins of an old church above the Atlantic ocean on England's shore, which he and a friend named Percivale have just discovered and are exploring:

What a waste, bare churchyard it was! ...Not a tree stood in that churchyard. Rank grass was the sole covering of the soil heaved up with the dead beneath. The ancient church stood in the midst, with its low, strong, square tower, and its long narrow nave, the ridge bowed with age, like the back of a horse worn out in the service of man, and its little homely chancel, like a small cottage that had leaned up against its end for shelter from the western blasts. It was locked and we could not enter. But of all world-worn, sad-looking churches, that one was of the dreariest I had ever beheld. Surely it needed the Gospel of the resurrection fervently preached therein, to keep it from sinking to the dust with dismay and weariness.

"Returning to the other side" (writes MacDonald), "I found Percivale seated on the churchyard wall, next to the sea. "That church is oppressive," said Percivale. "It looks like a great sepulchre, a place built only for the dead - the Church of the Dead."

(MacDonald responds) "It is only because it partakes with the living, suffers with them the buffetings of life, outlasts them, but shows, like the shield of the Red-Cross knight, the 'old dints of deep wounds.'" "Still," answers Percivale, "is it not a dreary place to choose for a church to stand in?"

(MacDonald) "The church must stand everywhere. There is no region into which it must not, ought not, enter. If it refuses any earthly spot, it is shrinking from its calling. This one stands high-uplifted, looking out over the waters as a sign of the haven from all storms, the rest in God."