

## THE CASE FOR PERSISTENCE IN PRAYER

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Perhaps the most unpopular concept with regard to prayer is that of persistent petition. Is it necessary to bring the same issue to God time after time? Many argue that the believer should not continually bring the same matter repeatedly before the Father. It is contended that one should bring a request to the Father once and then sit back in faith and wait until God chooses to grant the request. We are told that to continue to bring the same petition before the Father indicates a lack of faith. All of this might sound very logical, but it is not Biblical. Christ went out of his way to teach the crucial necessity of determined persistence in effective prayer. He not only taught it, he also practiced it.

### I. CHRIST PRACTICED PERSISTENCE

In the Garden of Gethsemane Christ literally practiced what he had previously taught.<sup>1</sup> All three gospel writers record the incident with only minor variations. Under extreme emotional and spiritual pressure, the kenotic Christ sought assistance via the medium of prayer. In three prayer retreats Christ clearly practiced persistence. All three writers indicate continuous action in describing Christ's praying. Mark and Luke use the imperfect to indicate that Christ "kept on praying" (Mark 14:35; Luke 22:41).<sup>2</sup> Matthew gets the same effect by using two present participles, "praying and saying" (Matt 26:39). These prayer sessions were far more lengthy than the recorded petitions.

Mark's account prefaces the actual request with a purpose clause in which he indicates the gist of Christ's praying:<sup>3</sup> "that if possible, the hour might pass from him."<sup>4</sup> M'Neile refers to it as "an agonized struggle . . . lasting for a considerable time."<sup>5</sup> This is further emphasized by the fact that Christ, after each prayer

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<sup>1</sup>Persistence in prayer was also practiced by Abraham (Gen 18:23-33), the Syro-Phoenician woman (Matt 15:22-28) and Paul (2 Cor 12:8).

<sup>2</sup>K. Wuest, *Mark in the Greek New Testament for the English Reader* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1955) 264.

<sup>3</sup>A. Bruce, "The Synoptic Gospels," in *The Expositor's Greek Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1951), 1. 439.

<sup>4</sup>Unless otherwise indicated, all Scriptural quotations will be from the NIV.

<sup>5</sup>A. M'Neile, *The Gospel According to St. Matthew: The Greek Text with Introductory Notes and Indices* (London: Macmillan, 1957) 390.

session, returned and found his three disciples asleep (Mark 14:37). Hence in the prayer retreats Christ obviously did not simply offer the petition found in the synoptics one time and then return to his disciples. This would hardly have allowed them time to have fallen asleep. Quite obviously in each of these prayer retreats the single petition the writers record represents the synopsis of an elongated prayer session revolving around the single issue, "Let this cup pass from me." In fact, all that is recorded concerning the third prayer session is that he prayed "saying the same thing again" (Matt 26:44). A more literal rendering would be: "He said the same words again." This no doubt means the same sentiment and substance as the previous prayers and gives an interesting commentary on Christ's earlier teaching about vain repetitions (Matt 6:7). It shows that it is not improper to bring the same request over and over again to the Lord. It might be said that a repetition of earnestness is to be distinguished from vain repetitions. In all probability Christ in the three prayer sessions voiced the same petition in varying ways.

## II. CHRIST TAUGHT PERSISTENCE

Jesus powerfully and clearly taught the necessity of dogged persistence in the moving parable of the unjust judge (Luke 18:1-8).<sup>6</sup> While it has and continues to be almost universally recognized that this parable teaches persistence, the consensus is certainly not absolute. Montefiore holds that instead of teaching impurity, its primary lesson is vengeance.<sup>7</sup> Arndt is of the opinion that its purpose is to help the followers of Christ not to grow weary because of the delay regarding Christ's second advent.<sup>8</sup> Bruce concludes that the parable was given as an incentive to pray in spite of delayed answer.<sup>9</sup>

It becomes evident that many of the interpretations that seem to differ from the general consensus differ chiefly in terminology or emphasis. Certainly most commentators both past and present realize that persistent, bold petition, and the Father's willingness to hearken to such, lies at the heart of the parable.<sup>10</sup> A natural reading of the parable certainly leads to such a conclusion. This is not to

<sup>6</sup>Traditionally Christians have generally interpreted the parable of the friend at midnight (Luke 11:5-8) as setting forth persistent asking, but in more recent times convincing evidence has been set forth repudiating any element of persistence in the parable. In light of the linguistic evidence relative to *anaideian* (Luke 5:8), it would appear that any defense of impurity from this parable would be tenuous at best. The case for prayer persistence is adequately supported in the NT and need not resort to tenuous passages. For a complete discussion see K. Bailey, *Poet and Peasant* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976) 119-141; A. Johnson, "Assurance for Man," *JETS* 22/2 (1979) 123-131.

<sup>7</sup>C. Montefiore, *The Synoptic Gospels* (London: Macmillan, 1909), 2. 1018; J. Creed, *The Gospel According to Luke* (London: Macmillan, 1950) 286.

<sup>8</sup>W. Arndt, *The Bible Commentary: The Gospel According to St. Luke* (St. Louis: Concordia, 1956) 377.

<sup>9</sup>Bruce, "Synoptic," 1. 596.

<sup>10</sup>*TDNT*, 3. 619; K. Bailey, *Through Peasant Eyes* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980) 137; A. Plummer, *Luke* (New York: Scribners, 1913) 411; I. H. Marshall, *The Gospel of Luke* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978) 669; R. Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Luke's Gospel* (Columbus: Wartburg, 1946) 625; *et al.*

deny the existence of other subsidiary truths that may indeed be profitably drawn from the parable.

It seems to this writer that quite often the interpretations that deviate arise out of a mistaken concept of importunity and its function in Christian prayer. To be sure, the idea of importunity presents certain philosophical and/or theological problems, but one should not deny the obvious.

Christ in a departure from his normal procedure declares explicitly the reason for giving the parable before he gave it. The words "to show" indicate not merely the duty but the necessity of persistence in prayer.<sup>11</sup> The word "always," in light of the parable, should be understood as praying continually or persistently in spite of the temptation to give up because of delayed answer.<sup>12</sup> This is exactly what the widow did in regard to her request. Thus prayer persistence is clearly stated initially at the very outset. The parable illustrates and then applies the principle on the basis of a biographical progression.

The illustrative portion centers around two characters, a certain judge and a needy widow. The corruption of the judge is vividly set forth by the double characterization that he "neither feared God nor cared about men." This is intended to point up the impossibility of anyone ever receiving consideration from such a person.

The petitioner in the parable is a very unlikely person to prevail before such a judge. In the mind of the audience, a "widow" typified an utterly helpless individual.<sup>13</sup> The widow has but one weapon, and she uses it most effectively: persistent petition. Her action is set forth with the imperfect "kept coming." Thus not a single appearance before the judge is envisioned, but a repeated, continual coming. This imperfect is made even more graphic by the corresponding imperfect in v 4, where the judge's response was that "he refused." Thus the woman kept coming and the judge kept refusing.<sup>14</sup>

Eventually the woman's persistence prevailed, as seen by the *dia to* with the infinitive *parechein*. It was solely the woman's persistence and nothing else that caused the judge to grant the request.<sup>15</sup> The purpose clause furnishes an interesting insight into the reasoning in the mind of the judge: "so that she won't eventually wear me out with her coming." The present tenses "coming" and "wear me out" further enhance the case for the power of persistent petition.

Having illustrated the effective power of persistent prayer, the Lord applies the truth to the audience. The Lord uses the vivid present "says" (*KJV*) to center the significance of the parable around the statement of the judge.<sup>16</sup> The major

<sup>11</sup>Plummer, *Luke* 411.

<sup>12</sup>Marshall, *Luke* 671; Bruce, "Synoptic," 1. 596.

<sup>13</sup>Plummer, *Luke* 412; Marshall, *Luke* 672; Bailey, *Peasant* 133.

<sup>14</sup>Plummer, *Luke* 412.

<sup>15</sup>Lenski, *Interpretation* 894.

<sup>16</sup>*Ibid.*

lesson to be learned is contained in the statement of the judge, who in effect had said, "Though I'm still a ruthless judge, I have decided to grant this woman's petition because by her continual coming she is driving me out of my mind!" The judge freely acknowledges by the statement that the request was granted because of the pressure of the woman's persistence.

Next, the Lord attempts to bring out what he considered significant (v 7). The words "And . . . God" receive emphasis by being placed before the interrogative "not." The conjunction *de* is a mild adversative, placing God in contrast with the judge. Thus Christ is emphasizing a contrast between God and the judge.<sup>17</sup> All that the judge is, God is not. All that the Lord is, the judge is not. The judge had no care for God or man. God, on the other hand, is exactly the opposite. The judge was selfish; our God is loving. The judge was unjust; our God is just.

While a basic contrast exists between God and the judge, at one point there is a similarity between the activity of the judge and the activity of our God, and that is the fact of delayed response. God, like the judge, does at times delay responding to the cries of his children. The assurance that God will indeed bring about justice is given to those "who cry . . . day and night." The present participle emphasizes the durative nature of the crying. The persistence of this crying is further enhanced by the words "day and night." Thus justice is promised by God in response to persistent crying in prayer.<sup>18</sup> This certainly implies that God, like the judge, does at times delay responding to the cries of his elect.

The final clause of v 7 has been labeled a *crux interpretum*.<sup>19</sup> What is meant by the words "though he bear long with them" (*KJV*)? How do they relate to the promise of sure justice given in the first clause? I tend to concur with Lenski when he insists that one cause for this confusion is that some attempt a wrong contrast when the judge's delay is contrasted (supposedly) with the fact that God does not delay at all.<sup>20</sup> Therefore these words are translated in ways that could imply that God will not delay.<sup>21</sup> But this is not true historically or Biblically. It can be shown from Biblical history that God does not always answer the cries of his people immediately. As we have already seen, the promise of God's deliverance is to those who are continually crying day and night.

The contrast between God and the judge is not in the fact of delay but rather the reason for the delay. The judge delayed out of selfish indifference, but this is never why God delays—hence the contrast. Whenever God delays it is the tarrying of love. God's delay is always part of the "all things" that God is causing to work together for good (Rom 8:28).

Marshall has an exhaustive discussion of this clause, wherein he sets forth no

<sup>17</sup>Marshall, *Luke* 670; Lenski, *Interpretation* 118; *et al.*

<sup>18</sup>Hendricksen, *New Testament Commentary: Luke* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1978) 817.

<sup>19</sup>Marshall, *Luke* 674.

<sup>20</sup>Lenski, *Interpretation* 896.

<sup>21</sup>*Good News Bible; RSV; NIV; Phillips; NASB; et al.*

less than nine possible renderings.<sup>22</sup> He concludes by stating: "The elect cry to God day and night, but he puts their patience to the test by not answering them immediately (Jeremias, *Parables*, 155), or they call to him night and day even though (it seems as if) he is dilatory towards them (H. Riesefeld)."<sup>23</sup> Whenever God delays (or seems to do so), it is in order to perfect his children's faith, or because his purpose is not ripe. During the period of delay God's elect are to persistently cry out to him just like the widow in the parable.

The answer to the hypothetical question as to whether God will bring about justice for his chosen ones is rendered absolutely certain by the emphatic use of the double negative.<sup>24</sup> This affirmative answer becomes even more apparent with the next statement: "I tell you, he will see that they get justice, and quickly." Clearly, persistent prayer will get results. The future active indicative leaves no doubt about that.

The expression "quickly" has appeared to some to contradict the concept of delayed response. But such need not necessarily be the case. The word *tachei* is a dative singular noun that finds its root in the adjective *tachys*, meaning "quick, swift, speedy."<sup>25</sup> An adverbial form of the same word is used in Rev 22:20 where Christ promises: "Yes, I am coming soon." Yet it has now been almost two thousand years, and Christ still has not come. When he does come, however, he will not be dilatory. He will swiftly descend from heaven, destroy his enemies and set up his kingdom. "It is interesting to observe with what speed the various eschatological events will take place."<sup>26</sup> So it is with the prayerful crying of his elect. Though there appears to be a delay, yet when the time arrives for God to answer he will do it with swiftness and dispatch.

Thus our Lord taught persistence as a vital part of effective prayer. Believers are to occupy themselves with precise, earnest and, above all, persistent petition. They are to realize that though God seems to delay at times, he never does so out of selfish indifference. Persistent prayer will ultimately succeed. God will avenge his elect.

### III. CHRIST COMMANDED PERSISTENCE

Following the parable of the importunate friend (Luke 11:5-8), Christ proceeded to categorically command persistence. In Luke 11:9-10<sup>27</sup> there is an ex-

<sup>22</sup>Marshall, *Luke* 674-675.

<sup>23</sup>Marshall, *Luke* 675.

<sup>24</sup>Plummer, *Luke* 413; Marshall, *Luke* 672.

<sup>25</sup>W. Arndt and F. Gingrich (eds.), *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* (Chicago: University Press, 1952) 807.

<sup>26</sup>Hendricksen, *Luke* 817.

<sup>27</sup>The same command is given by our Lord and recorded in Matt 7:7-8. For a discussion of the relationship between the two passages see Marshall, *Luke* 466. The fact that these words are repeated indicates their importance in the mind of the Holy Spirit as he inspired the writing of Scripture.

hortation to perseverance in prayer that many feel to be based on the previous parable.<sup>28</sup>

The *kai* beginning v 9 is usually overlooked. Lenski contends that this particular *kai* "places something else of the same kind on top of a thing."<sup>29</sup> In addition to the parable, Jesus now adds his own specific commands.<sup>30</sup> The *kagō* then is in the sense of "I also say." The *egō* is emphatic by virtue of being expressed. The "you" is emphatic by position. The three admonitions "ask," "seek" and "knock" are voiced in present imperatives. The normal usage of the present tense is durative, and there seems to be no valid reason not to allow the normal sense to be taken here.<sup>31</sup> The Lord's use of the present imperative becomes even more striking when it is realized that Christ overwhelmingly used aorist imperatives when teaching or practicing prayer.<sup>32</sup>

Clearly, his selection of the present imperative here indicates his desire to emphasize persistent prayer. Therefore these imperatives should be translated: "Keep on asking . . . keep on seeking . . . keep on knocking" (Williams translation).<sup>33</sup> Edersheim is of the opinion that by these admonitions our Lord universalizes the principle of prayer persistence.<sup>34</sup> Just as surely as Christ commanded his disciples to love one another (John 13:31) and preach the gospel (Mark 16:15), he also commanded them to persistently pray.

#### IV. CLARIFICATION OF PERSISTENT PRAYER

Persistence of petition must never be confused with vain repetitions. As we have seen, Christ taught the former but condemned the latter (Matt 6:7-8). His prohibition was never against the repetition of a petition as such. Indeed, Christ's almost verbal repetition of his request to the Father in Gethsemane reveals that vain repetitions do not outlaw a persistent repetition of the same request on the part of an earnest petitioner. It is not the repetition as such that is forbidden, but the fallacious concept that God will be heard by much speaking—that the act of repetition itself is efficacious. The Pharisees used such methodology in Christ's day. A rabbinic maxim states, "Everyone that multiplies prayer

<sup>28</sup>Some feel that there is no relationship between the parable of vv 5-8 and the admonitions of vv 9-10. But even so, they almost invariably acknowledge that in these verses Christ is urging prayer persistence in the strongest possible language; see Bailey, *Poet* 135; J. Jeremias, *The Parables of Jesus* (London: Scribners, 1963) 159.

<sup>29</sup>Lenski, *Interpretation* 626; H. Alford, *The Greek Testament* (Chicago: Moody, 1958), 1. 550; Marshall, *Luke* 466.

<sup>30</sup>Plummer, *Luke* 229; Bruce, "Synoptic," 1. 548.

<sup>31</sup>Jeremias, *Parables* 159; Hendricksen, *Luke* 612; Bailey, *Poet* 135; *et al.*

<sup>32</sup>See C. C. Mitchell, *Praying Jesus' Way* (Old Tappan: Revell, 1977).

<sup>33</sup>See also in the margin of the *NASB*.

<sup>34</sup>A. Edersheim, *The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1943), 2. 241.

is heard."<sup>35</sup> It is the mechanical repetition of a formula as if it were a magical charm that is forbidden by Christ. Persistence in petition is vastly different. It is prompted by the very burden of the heart; it is driven by the force of an almost overpowering sense of urgency that continues to cry out day after day to the Father—even as Christ did in the Garden of Gethsemane.

## V. RATIONALE OF PERSISTENT PRAYER

The fact that importunate prayer was actually taught and practiced by Christ is rather obvious, but the rationale behind prayer persistence is, to say the least, somewhat baffling.<sup>36</sup> Christ never actually taught why a time gap should often be expected between petition and delivery of the answer, nor did he ever elucidate why persistent prayer to a God already vitally interested in the welfare of the petitioner was desirable. Therefore, in seeking possible answers to such questions one must move from the domain of Biblical theology into systematic or speculative theology. Christ did, however, make it abundantly clear that perseverance in prayer was never advocated to wear God out or cause him in exasperation to grant a request. God is not like the awakened friend or the unjust judge. God is willing to aid those of his children who call upon him. Importunity in prayer should never be to change God. God does not need to be changed. God cannot possibly become more willing. However, when the solution to a problem is sought, at least two basic truths must be kept in mind: (1) The one who knows the answer must be willing to give it, and (2) the one who is seeking the answer must be able to receive it. Christianity assumes the first to be self-evident; hence in some manner persistence must be utilized by the Father to accomplish positive benefits to the petitioner. "Importunity is one of the instructors in God's training school for Christian culture."<sup>37</sup> In short, God does not become more willing to answer the prayer of the supplicant because of his perseverance, but the petitioner may become more capable of receiving the answer than he was when he first began to pray. Man is not static. His capacity to understand and profit by an answer to prayer changes. Thus importunity can be viewed as a means of enlarging man's capacity to receive what God desires to give. Prayer is not to make God more like man, but to make man more like God.

The same thing could be said for gaining information from the Scriptures. Why does God demand diligent study (2 Tim 2:15)? Why does God not give us a complete mastery of the truths of Scripture at the moment of conversion? God certainly is capable of doing that, but he does not do so. Obviously, then, God is using diligent study as a pedagogical tool in the furtherance of our sanctification. Just as God accomplishes some things in our lives by diligent study, he accomplishes other things by the discipline of persistent asking.

<sup>35</sup>Cited by J. Thomson, *The Praying Christ* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1959) 19.

<sup>36</sup>For a more complete discussion of the theological problems incumbent on petitionary prayer and prayer persistence see A. D. Belden, *The Practice of Prayer* (New York: Harper, 1954) 27-35; *The Christian Doctrine of Prayer* (ed. J. Hastings; New York; Scribner's, 1915) 372 ff.

<sup>37</sup>W. Biederwolf, *How Can God Answer Prayer?* (Chicago: Winona, 1906) 221.

Perseverance can often have the effect of clarifying and segregating in our minds deep-seated desire from fleeting whim. A petition persistently voiced over an elongated period of time is not likely to be a whim. It is only when one strongly desires a thing that he will ask earnestly and persistently. Perhaps there are many things we think we would like God to do in our church, but how badly do we want them? Persistent petition is the proof. Only those needs we desperately desire will we be willing to labor persistently over month after month. This is the type of effective importunate petition voiced by John Knox: "Lord, give me Scotland or I die."

Persistence in prayer inevitably purifies. It obviously purifies the petitions, for with repeated expression, desires are either confirmed or condemned and choice is matured. But persistence likewise purifies the petitioner. A habit of daily presentation before God of one's most secret desires can only lead to a purification of soul. Constant importunate prayer can serve to strengthen desire, to prepare the soul to a point where it can fully appreciate and rightly utilize the desired petition. "Asking for things capacitates the person to receive them."<sup>38</sup>

To pray Biblically requires an exercise of faith. Faith, like a muscle, is strengthened by exercise. Therefore persistence in prayer would seem to be a very practical method of "keeping in shape" spiritually, of firming up a flabby faith.

Without the demand for persistence in effective praying, I am quite sure Christians would tend to become complacent. If all we had to do was ask the Father for something once and then sit back and wait until the request was granted, our humanness, ever prone to independence, would inevitably lead us in the direction of self-sufficiency. But by God's conditioning our prayer success on importunate asking, it tends to make us aware of our dependence on him.

Finally, it should be recognized that an importunate struggle is essential in NT praying (Col 4:2, 12). We may not fully understand the why of importunity, but it is clearly a Biblical prayer principle. P. T. Forsyth appropriately comments:

Lose the importunity of prayer, reduce it to soliloquy, or even to colloquy, with God, lose the real conflict of will and will, lose the habit of wrestling and the hope of prevailing with God, make it mere walking with God in friendly talk; and, precious as it is, yet you tend to lose the reality of prayer at last. In principle you make it mere conversation instead of the soul's great action. You lose the food of character, the renewal of will. You may have beautiful prayers—but as ineffectual as beauty so often is, and as fleeting.<sup>39</sup>

<sup>38</sup>P. T. Forsyth, *The Soul of Prayer* (London: Independent Press, 1949) 218.

<sup>39</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 219.