



BELIEVERS CHAPEL

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The Sermons of S. Lewis Johnson

Systematic Theology

TRANSCRIPT

“Importunate Prayer: Is It Really Necessary?”

[Prayer] Father we are grateful to Thee for this privilege of approaching Thee. We thank Thee for the throne of grace. We acknowledge Lord as we have considered the great subject of prayer that we have been convicted of our prayerlessness, of our failure to appreciate the privilege that we have of bringing our petitions to Thee and having fellowships with Thee and having a part in cooperating with Thee as Thou doth carry out Thy plans and programs for the universe in which we live and among the people of whom we are part.

And we pray Lord that through our study and our reflection upon what Thou doth say concerning prayer, that prayer may have larger part of our experience as a Christian. And if it should please Thee Lord and by within thy will we pray that we each in this room may be useable and useful by Thee and by the accomplishment of great things in the name of our savior Jesus Christ. And so we pray as we consider again tonight the final study of prayer that the Spirit may teach us and build us up in thy faith. We commit the hour to Thee in Jesus name. Amen.

[Message] Tonight our subject as we conclude our study of prayer, the theology of prayer, is importunate prayer, is it necessary. And the passage that we're going to look at

is Luke chapter 18, verses 1 through 8. It is the parable of the unjust judge. Importunate Prayer, is it Necessary? Why must we pray the same prayers over and over again? Did not Jesus Christ himself inveigh against meaningless repetition when he gave the so-called Lord’s Prayer? And may we, by much prayer, force God to yield against his will to our desires? Importunate prayer then, is it necessary? Perhaps it would be wise -- there may be someone here who does not know the meaning of the term -- to define importunate prayer.

Now, if you studied Latin, you’ll remember that one of the first words that you learned in your study of Latin was the verb *porto*, which means to carry, and the noun *porta*, which means a door or a gate, and *portus* which means a port. Importunate prayer comes from the Latin adjective *importunous*, which means unfit, inconvenient. And generally speaking, our dictionaries define importunate prayer as persistent prayer, urgent prayer, annoyingly urgent and persistent is one other meaning. But we’re thinking particularly about persistent prayer, importunate prayer.

Sometimes in years past when I had parts in churches in which we had weekly prayer meetings, I would have people come to me who had become Christians just for a little while and they would say to me -- being very interested in spiritual things and having come to the meetings, and now attending every meeting of the church, Wednesday night meeting. They would come to me just because -- I guess -- I was the one they wanted to express their opinion to and they would say, “Dr. Johnson why is it the same people come to the prayer meeting on Wednesday night and the same persons pray, and they pray each the same prayer Wednesday after Wednesday?”

If you have ever attended a prayer meeting, that is regular prayer meeting, you undoubtedly have had occasion to think that question for yourself. Why is it that when the Christians gather, the same ones generally pray and if you’ve been there long enough, you’ll discover that they frequently repeat the same petitions over and over again. They use the same phrases. Why is that? And then occasionally those that ask me that

question would say, “It would seem to me that if you ask God once, well that’s enough and therefore, you do not have to keep praying the same thing over and over again.”

Elton Trueblood, who is a somewhat liberal man, but who has written a chapter on prayer, which has some interesting things in it, has said concerning importunate prayer, “When the medicine fails, take more of it.”

Now is that really the secret to successful praying, when the medicine fails take more of it? So if your prayers do not obtain an answer should you pray some more? Well there are two great sections on importunate prayer in the Gospel of Luke. One of them is in the eleventh chapter. It begins with the first verse and concludes with the thirteenth verse. And the other is in chapter 18.

Now we’re going to consider the second one simply for lack of time but the lesson that is found in Luke chapter 18 is the same lesson that is found Luke chapter 11, and if you have occasion when you go home tonight or during the remainder of the week, turn to Luke 11 and read that section as well, because our Lord will give the same principle lesson in those verses. But we’re going to turn to chapter 18 of the Gospel of Luke and read verses one through eight. “Now He was telling them a parable to show that at all times they ought to pray and not to lose heart, saying, ‘In a certain city there was a judge who did not fear God and did not respect man.’ There was a widow in that city, and she kept coming to him, saying, ‘Give me legal protection from my opponent.’ “For a while he was unwilling; but afterward he said to himself, ‘Even though I do not fear God nor respect man, yet because this widow bothers me, I will give her legal protection, otherwise by continually coming she will wear me out.’ And the Lord said, ‘Hear what the unrighteous judge said.’”

Now I’m changing the “and” of the Authorized Version and the “now” of the version that I’m reading -- The New American Standard Bible -- to “but” for I think the adversity of sense is a little better than the transitional sense of “now” and better than the continuative sense of “and.” “(But) Now, will not God bring about justice for His elect

who cry to Him day and night, and will He delay long over them? ‘I tell you that He will bring about justice for them quickly. However, when the Son of Man comes, will He find faith on the earth?’”

Now we must ask ourselves the question before we look at our section tonight in detail, “What is the connection between the parable and the context?” Now if you’ll just go back in your New Testament a few verses in chapter 17, verse 20 of Luke, you will read these words, “Now having been questioned by the Pharisees as to when the kingdom of God was coming, He answered them and said, ‘The kingdom of God is not coming with signs to be observed; nor will they say, ‘Look, here it is!’ or, ‘There it is!’ For behold, the kingdom of God is in your midst.’” Now notice particularly verse 22, “And He said to the disciples,” notice, to the disciples “The days will come when you will long to see one of the days of the Son of Man, and you will not see it.” Notice verse 30, “It will be just the same on the day that the Son of Man is revealed.” That is it will be just as it was in the days of Noah.

So it is evident that our Lord is speaking to the disciples about his second coming to the earth and he is saying that before the second coming to the earth, conditions are going to be on the earth such as they were during the days when Noah was here before the flood came. There is going to be persecution. There is going to be distress of nations. There is going to be trial, and then we read in chapter 18, verse 1, “Now He was telling them a parable to show that at all times they ought to pray and not to lose heart.” Oh, I think that it is evident from this that the parable of prayer, which we have just read has to do with proper attitudes toward the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ the second time to the earth. That would seem to be evident from the context. So this is instruction for the disciples in the light of Jesus Christ’s second coming to inaugurate his kingdom.

Since that time will be a time of anxiety, the Bible speaks of it as a time of tribulation and particularly the last half of the seventieth week of Israel as a time of Great Tribulation, it is to be expected that they would be anxious and disturbed -- those who

are here on the earth at that time -- and our Lord’s words are designed to give them some encouragement, they, the disciples. All who are his disciples are to remember that they are God’s elect. That they will hear. That God will hear their cry when they utter their cry to him during the midst of that tribulation period. And that while the return of our Lord is uncertain, so far as its time is concerned, the prayer should be unremitting.

Now he was telling them a parable to show that at all times they ought to pray and not lose heart. Now my outline is very simple tonight. It is the preface to the parable. The parable propounded, and the point of the parable. Now there is one other thing that we must notice in verse 1 in the preface, which has to do with the connection. You have in your Authorized Version something like this, “Now he was telling them a parable to indicate that men ought always to pray and not to faint.”

Now you can see from the version I have read you, to show that at all times they ought to pray and not to lose hearts, that the term men is a deceptive term. The term “men” suggest that this is instruction of a general character; whereas, it is evident from the text that they ought to pray that it is a reference to the preceding context. And since in the preceding context in verse 22 of chapter 17 he had been speaking to the disciples, this then is a parable that is addressed to believers who are disciples of our Lord but who are here during the time of the tribulation before the coming kingdom of our Lord. So by application -- by interpretation then -- the parable refers to believers on earth at the time of the end.

By application -- and we will stress this tonight -- by application, it contains timeless principles. And I think it is fair to say that if our Lord should exhort the disciples who are on the earth at the end time, in the midst of the tribulation period, that they should be unremitting in their prayer in the midst of their trials. It is fair enough to say that this principle is a biblical principle and we can expect it to have application to us at any time in which we find ourselves in similar circumstances of trouble and tribulation.

Our tribulations may not be like the great tribulation, but they are troubles for us and this question of importunate prayer has application then to our own personal life.

If you have read chapter 18, you know that the first two sections of this chapter, both have to do with parables that Jesus gave, and both of them contain prayer information. For we have in a moment, the parable of the Pharisees and the publican. And it has been said by Bible teachers that the first parable, is a parable that points out the attitude of God to prayers. That is, that he will surely answer our prayers; whereas, the second parable, the parable of the Pharisees and the publican, is a parable that points out the attitude of man as he prayed. He should come humbly and submissively. Well whether that is the precise teaching of the two; it, nevertheless, does express the spiritual truth in the New Testament. And I don’t see any objection to saying that it is true to the situation here.

Now he was telling them a parable to show that at all times they ought to pray. When we say ought, we are referring to necessity. So our Lord is saying that there is a necessity to praying. It is not simply a duty that we should think that we have, but it is a necessity. It is a logical necessity. And since we belong to God and we are dependent upon him, it is a logical kind of necessity that makes sense to us.

Now, second, Roman II: The parable propounded.

Now the simple story that Jesus tells is a story that must have been orphaned occurring in the land of Palestine, for it was the story of a widow, apparently who had been taken advantage of by some influential man in the community who must have been a wealthy man, influential. So influential that the unjust judge, at first, was not going to execute justice in her behalf.

Now we have seen untold examples of that in the 20th Century and some recently in the city of Dallas, in which men of authority have taken advantage of others who did not have the intelligence or the position to contend with them. And apparently, this is the things that Jesus speaks about here for he says in verse 2, “There was in a certain city

there was a judge who did not fear God and did not respect man.” Now he calls him in verse 6 the unrighteous judge. And so this is a judge who is a corrupt judge. He does not care what people say about him. He is hard-boiled. He is superior and he is degenerate.

Now the second person who is described is the widow. And Jesus says, “There was a widow in that city, and she kept coming to him, saying, 'Give me legal protection from my opponent.’” Nothing is said about the tribunal. There is just one judge and from what we know of Palestinian customs it was probably then a money matter, possibly some debt that was owed her that she wished to collect or possibly it was an inheritance that belonged to her and that she was unable to lay her hands on because of legal reasons. But it was something similar as she realized that there was one person who was preventing her from obtaining her inheritance or her money, what was due her.

Now the minute that she brought to the attention of the judge the case, that person apparently filed suit against her, because he is called her adversary in a moment, her legal opponent. And so here we have a legal case of a widow, a poor widow, and on the other hand an influential man and the case is to be settled by an unjust judge. I say this is a situation that is just as modern as 1972. Her opponent, I say, was rich and influential. That seems to be evident because in verse 4 we read and “For a while he was unwilling,” and the expression is found in other contexts to indicate that a person did not dare to do something that he ought to have done. So for a while, he was unwilling. I say probably because of the influence, the wealth of her opponent. “But afterward he said to himself, 'Even though I do not fear God nor respect man, yet because this widow bothers me, I will give her legal protection, otherwise by continually coming she will wear me out.’”

The only weapon the poor woman has is the weapon of persistence but, as is so often the case, it is enough, as far as women are concerned. And so she bothered this man. She bothered him. She kept coming the text says, using the imperfect tense. She

kept coming over and over again. She had no way to get at this influential man except by the use of her tongue. And so she used it. And because Jesus said, finally this man was afraid that she would wear him out by her continual coming, he gives here the legal protection. The Greek text is very very vivid. I think that we could render it, “in order that she may not gradually wear me out completely by her continual coming.” So you get a picture of over and over again this woman appearing in the chambers of the judge and bringing her case before him, and probably he was trying to dodge her. And then in spite of the fact that the man was an influential man, he realized he must settle in her favor.

Now, then we come thirdly to the point of the parable, verses 6 through 8. Now this parable is clearly intended to give us guidance on prayer. And one of the things, of course, that is obvious, is that prayer must be persistent and it must be humble for we must recognize we’re coming to a superior. We must also come persistently. But let’s read our Lord’s application verse 6, “And the Lord said, ‘Hear what the unrighteous judge said.’” Now pay attention to what he said. He said, “I do not fear God nor respect man, yet because this widow bothers me, I will give her legal protection, otherwise by continually coming she will wear me out.” And the Lord said, giving you a chance to think about this, “Hear what the unrighteous judge said.”

Now, remember what he said verse 7, “(But) now will not God bring about justice for His elect who cry to Him day and night, and will He delay long over them? I tell you that He will bring about justice for them quickly.” Now let’s stop at that point because I think that is the first thing that we want to look at. I say that our Lord’s lesson here is obviously one of persistent and humble prayer. That’s on the surface. And it seems to me the lesson is taught plainly. That persistent prayer is valid prayer; however, there is more here than a lesson on how to pray. If that were so, if that were all that Jesus intended to teach us, that is we should pray persistently and we should pray humbly then

you might expect the woman in this parable to be the chief figure, but the woman is not the chief figure in the parable.

It becomes evident when we look at the beginning of verse 6 when, “The Lord said, ‘Hear what the unrighteous judge said.’” So you see the person who is important in the parable is not the woman, the widow. The one who is important in the parable is the unrighteous judge. So this should not be called the parable of the importunate widow. It should be called the parable of the unjust judge, as many commentators do call it.

Now, that is, I think, evident too when we do change that little “and” of verse 7 or the “now” in my text to “but.” Hear what the unrighteous judge said, “But shall not God?” In other words, what we read then here in the argumentation is a contrast between the unrighteous judge and God. And this is a main lesson that our Lord wishes to get over. Well let’s think about that for a moment. If it is true then that the chief person in our parable is the unrighteous judge and, on the other hand, he is to be likened to God, hear what the unrighteous judge said, “But God,” then what we have here is a parable of contrasts. He has not been comparing primarily or praying with the continual coming of the widow, though that is involved. What he is doing is contrasting the attitude of the unrighteous judge to the widow -- who comes persistently -- and the attitude of God to his elect who cry continually to him when they are in the midst of trouble.

Now it should be then evident to us that this parable is a parable addressed to people who are going to be in trial and tribulation. And it is designed to encourage them to assure them that they do have the certain promise of an answer from God. So the argument then is not of comparison, it is the argument of contrast. It is to use the Latin argumentative term, *[indistinct]*, or from the lesser to the greater. So from the lesser illustration of the judge, the unrighteous judge who responds to a persistent woman coming, we are to go to the greater and think of God and realize how in contrast to the unrighteous judge he responds to those who are his elect who come continually to him. So the point then is not simply importunity of prayer, but the point is certainty in

obtaining answers to our prayer through importunate prayer. Let’s think of the contrast now in what are to point this out more clearly. In the first place, let’s think about the contrast of the judge and God. The judge is called an unjust judge.

Now if the unjust judge responds to persistent coming how much more will a just God respond to those who right to come to him. That’s the first contrast. The second contrast is if an unjust judge will respond to an unknown widow who comes to him, a widow of whom it is easy to take advantage. If a judge should respond to an unknown widow, how much more will God respond to his elect ones whom he has known from the beginnings of the foundations of eternity. So you can see again the contrast is there. Now, there we are again with that word elect.

Now some of you are not here and I’m just going to repeat this because I thought it was good. And I like to repeat it. Some of you heard me say I was in Pampa, Texas, well I was in Borger actually, and some people from Pampa came to the meeting. And when I got back to Dallas, one of the young men wrote me a letter. And he said something about the fact that he had enjoyed the meetings and particularly the message on God’s work in behalf of men.

And since I had spoken on election there, he said you may be interested in a quotation from Huckleberry Finn chapter 18, which I read just this week. And this is the quotation if you haven’t read it. I think it’s good, “next Sunday, Huck says, we all went to church about three mile everybody a horseback. The men took their guns along, so did Buck and kept them between their knees or stood them handy against the wall. The Shepardsons done the same. It was pretty ornery preaching all about brotherly love and such like tiresomeness. But everybody said it was a good sermon and they all talked it over going home, and had such a powerful lot to say about faith and good works and free grace and pre-fore or destination, and I don’t know what all, that it did seem to me one of the roughest Sunday’s I had run across yet.” [Laughter]

So when we come to that word elect, we’re talking about that doctrine of pre-fore or destination. [Laughter] It is election. So if the unjust judge will pay attention to an unknown widow who comes with her requests, which are displeasing to him, how much more will the just God respond to the cries of his elect whom he has known from the beginning of the foundations of the earth.

Now notice another thing. We read in verse 3, “There was a widow in that city, and she kept coming to him, saying, and she was just saying, “Give me legal protection from my opponent. Deliver me from his charges against me and satisfy my claims.”

Now, notice verse 7, “Now, will not God bring about justice for His elect who cry.” Now the word here is not saying, but who cry; who cry out of a deep sense of need. And so the contrast is again there. If an unjust judge will respond to an unknown widow who comes simply with a request to him, how much more will not the just God respond to the cries of his elect. That’s the third contrast. The fourth contrast is -- I think we have a contrast here -- I’m not sure because this woman is very persistent and it’s very hard to out persist a woman. And I do read here that she came, and she kept coming. We read in verse 5, “lest by continually coming,” and verse 3, “and she kept coming to him, saying, ‘Give me legal protection,’” but at the same time in verse 7 we read, “(but) now, will not God bring about justice for His elect who cry to Him day and night.”

So I think there is some contrast here. If we have an unjust judge who responds to an unknown widow’s request, which she persistently makes day after day, how much more will not the just God respond to the cries of his elect whom he has known from the foundation of the world when they cry out to him not only day by day, but day by day and night by night?

Now the fifth contrast. In the case of the unjust judge, he acknowledges that it was something that he did not wish to do. He was unwilling to do it. He was apparently disturbed by the position of the man who had come as her opponent at law. And he was unwilling to do anything about it. And finally, he just acknowledges that the only reason

he does something is because the woman has become a personal inconvenience to him. On the other hand, God is a God who rejoices in doing things for his elect. He has already determined the things he is going to do for them. So if we go back again and think about our contrast, if an unjust judge will respond to the request of an unknown widow who comes day by day and will respond because of personal inconvenience, how much more will not a God respond when that is precisely what he wishes to do to respond to the request of the saints whose prayers he himself has initiated.

And finally, or sixth, if an unjust judge will yield to importunity, how much more will not God respond to his promises, which he has given in the word of God and to -- as I say -- the inwrought grace of the Holy Spirit that caused his elect to cry unto him in the first place. It should be obvious to us that every spiritual activity that is pleasing to God has been wrought within us by the Holy Spirit. For example, Paul says, “Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling lest there be any question at all about who is responsible for this work.” He adds, “For it is God who worketh in you both the will and to do of his good pleasure.” In other words, your responsibility is to work out the salvation that God has wrought in you. The text is, of course, addressed to Christians, but you must not think for one moment that you are doing that work; for it is God who works in your will to make you willing and then gives you the enablement to do it.

As I’ve said before, when a man responds to the gospel invitation and out of his will accepts Jesus Christ as his Savior, the reason that he responds in his will is because God has already jiggled his willer. [Laughter] Because if he had not jiggled his willer, he would never will to respond to the Gospel of Jesus Christ. He would will to reject that gospel and the same thing is true of the Christian man. His will needs constant jiggling and it is the Holy Spirit’s indwelling in his sanctifying ministry, which jiggles our will so that we respond. People often think -- you know -- that they gain things because they prayed. I want to say something about that in a moment. So I won’t anticipate what I’m saying but when we get to it, you think about it in the light of what I’m saying here.

Finally, there is one other contrast. I think we have a contrast of an indifferent delay on the part of the unjust judge. A delay that he wished, and over against that we have the claim that God is going to answer the cries of his elect speedily. Verse 4, and, “For a while he was unwilling; but afterward he said to himself” verse 7, “(shall) will not God bring about justice for His elect who cry to Him day and night, and will He delay long over them? ‘I tell you that He will bring about justice for them (speedily) quickly.’”

Now, this, of course, is a contrast from the divine viewpoint. We have an indifferent delay on the part of the judge. If a judge, an unjust judge, even though he delays will find a response, how much more will not God respond, who promises that he will come quickly to meet all of our needs. Now I say this is from the divine standpoint and we must not think that when we read a text like this that we can expect God, the moment that we enter into difficulty, to come that very next moment with that which delivers us from our difficulty.

Now we’re thinking about quickly from the divine standpoint. We have, for example, a promise from the Book of Revelation, “I come quickly but our Lord has not come quickly from the human standpoint.” Nineteen hundred years have elapsed and he has not come yet. That’s not quickly. But then we’re looking at it from the human standpoint. If we were to look at it from the divine standpoint, well it would be another matter. I think we are thinking about the standpoint of 2 Peter chapter 3 when remember Peter, after having said that they’re going to come mockers in the last days who make fun of the promise of the coming of our Lord.

Now they’re going to say ever since the fathers fell asleep everything continues just as it was from the beginning of creation. Peter says these people who say that the promise of the second coming is not a valid promise, they’ve forgotten a couple of things. The first thing they’ve forgotten is that God did intervene once in the past in the flood, and it’s not true to say all things continue as they have been from the beginning of the creation. The flood came in the past. God intervened then. And furthermore, the Bible

promises that there is going to be a great conflagration of fire so that God is going to intervene in the future. And it is simply untrue to say that God does not intervene in human history and everything proceeds according to natural law.

But then in order to stress the fact that he’s speaking from the divine standpoint, he says to the men to whom he writes his epistle, “But do not let this one fact escape your notice, beloved, that with the Lord one day is as a thousand years and a thousand years is one day.” And so the promise of the second coming is a promise that was made day before yesterday in the thought of God, two thousand years ago. One day with the Lord is as a thousand years and a thousand years is one day. The Lord is not small about his promise as some counts learn this, but is patient toward you not wishing any to perish but for all to come to repentance. And so the reason that there has been delay is because God is gathering all of his elect from the human race.

Now, we must not think, by the way, he is saying here that everybody is going to be saved. He says the Lord is not slow about his promises, some count slowness, but his patience towards you, you believers not wishing for any of, that is, of you to perish but that all, that is all of you, should have opportunity to come to repentance. And so the reason we have had a two thousand year delay, a nineteen hundred year delay is in order that Jesus’ prayer, “Father release them for they know not what they do, let them go for they know not what they do,” may be answered and that prayer has been answered down through the years. And as a result of that prayer, a Paul has come to Christ. Others came to Christ. And Augustine came to Christ. A Luther came to Christ. A Calvin came to Christ, and countless others. And you can add your name to that. That’s why the second coming has not taken place.

So we’re talking about divine reckoning of time, and so when he says I tell you he will bring about justice for them speedily, he refers to time in that sense. Well then I think you can see that this becomes then a tremendous, a tremendous promise of God’s answered prayer. The text then stresses not importunity in prayer. The text stresses

certainty in receiving an answer to our prayer. So if an unjust judge would do that for an unknown widow, how much more will God do for us who are his elect, who cry out to him.

Now Christians, I don’t see how you can have a better promise of answer to prayer than that. Why this is God saying, just as surely as he can say, “I am certainly going to answer your prayer. Now my answer will come in my time but they will be answered.”

Now he asks one final question, however, “When the Son of man comes, will he find faith on the earth?” Now if you have a Bible with a marginal note, you will notice that the term faith is literally “The Faith,” *tam pistus*. Now the question is what does the “The” refer to? Is he saying when the son of man comes will he find “The Faith” on the earth? Is he suggesting that there is going to be apostasy and consequently there is a question about there being on the earth at the time of his Second Advent “The Faith?” That’s possible. And surely the Bible teaches that there is to be a tremendous decline in “The Faith,” in the doctrines of the word of God before the Second Advent of Jesus Christ. But when we study the Bible, I think in depth, we do discover that there are those on the earth who do hold to the faith when our Lord comes, for he comes to deliver them. I doubt that that is the meaning though that is not far from the truth of the future.

Or this could mean when the Son of man comes, will he find belief in Christ? That is, personal belief in Christ. Well, again, the answer from the study of the Bible is yes, he will find faith in Christ. And since the particle that introduces this question is a particle that introduces -- expresses anxiety or impatience, I again doubt that’s what he is referring to.

I think that what he means when he says, “When the Son of man come shall he find The Faith on the earth,” he is saying, “The faith that I’ve just been talking about, the faith that perseveres, importunate prayer, faith on the part of those who are on the earth during the tribulation who cried day and night unto God and expect him to deliver them

from the tribulation.” That’s the question that seems to be an issue. And our Lord expresses anxiety -- expresses anxiously that question.

Now it seems to me that in the context of the preceding section, we have the answer to this sorrowful query because in verse 26 of chapter 17 we read, “And just as it happened in the days of Noah, so it will be also in the days of the Son of Man.” So that what we are -- I think -- taught here is that while there will be people on the earth who are genuine believers they are going to be believers just like you and me. That is they’re going to be fainting one day and praying the next and the next day they’re going to be fainting again, for you see those are the two alternatives. It’s either to pray or to lose heart.

And so our Lord’s question then, “Shall the son of man when he comes find faith on the earth?” Well the answer is he probably will not find a great deal of persistent believing faith of the Jewish remnant and the converts during this time. They will be probably failing Christians just like you and I, are for they have the same old nature. So then the faith is the faith to cry in the midst of troubles and trials persistently, importunately, to God with the deep sense of assurance in our hearts that he is certainly going to answer our prayer.

Now that parable then makes good sense. I want now to say in conclusion, what can we say in answer to our opening questions? Should we pray the same old prayer over and over again? Now, first of all, we should pray constantly. We should pray perseveringly about different things as we have need. That should be obvious to us. The texts of the Bible from beginning to end point out a believers life is to be characterized by prayer in the midst of all the situations of life.

Paul says, just to give one brief text, “pray without ceasing.” That adverb was used, as you may have heard, as a hacking cough. And so to pray without ceasing does not mean to constantly to have on your lips or in your heart a prayer, but it means at frequent intervals like a hacking cough. So a Christian is to be a praying man. It is one

of the marks of Christianity. Remember, it was said about Paul that the way you can pick out this new convert is, “Behold he prayeth.” But should we pray persistently about the same thing?

Now if we’ve had either a yes or a no response, the answer seems clear to me. Should we pray persistently about the same thing if God has not given a yes or a no answer? Well I cannot say anything but say yes. We should pray persistently about the same thing if we have no assurance of an answer, yes or no. Now let me give you some illustrations in the Bible. Now, these, I think, are decisive illustrations. Paul prayed about his thorn in the flesh how many times? How many? Three times. Well we all know that. We’ve read about that. For this infirmity, he said, “I besought the Lord thrice.”

Now if we’re not to repeat a prayer, then he should of just said once but he said thrice. So he prayed once; he didn’t get an answer. He prayed twice; he still didn’t get any sense of an answer, yes or no. So he prayed thrice and then God gave him an answer. God said I am going to glorify myself in your weakness. If people are going to see how powerful I am because of what I am able to do through you in the midst of your weakness, so Paul said, “Now I most gladly glorify God in the midst of my infirmities. I rejoice in them because in my weakness God’s strength is seen.”

Now if that illustration does not convince you, it is the prayer of an apostle who knows a great deal more about prayer than I do, think of our Lord in Gethsemane. Now our Lord prayed three prayers in Gethsemane. The first prayer he prayed and then he prayed a second prayer which was slightly different. If you’ll turn to Matthew chapter 26, you will notice the slight difference. I don’t have time to speak about the difference in this study because we’re not studying the agony in Gethsemane but I think you can notice the difference at least. Here we read in verse 39, “My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from Me; yet not as I will, but as You will.” And then verse 42, “My Father, if this cannot pass away unless I drink it, Your will be done.” Now you will notice that there is difference in the wording of these petitions. And I think a significant edition, a change.

But now notice verse 44, “And He left them again, and went away and prayed a third time, saying the same thing once more.” Again.

Now our Lord prayed and he received apparently some type of an answer from his first petition but not a complete answer. So he prayed again in a negative way but he did not receive any answer. And consequently because he did not receive any answer, he felt free again, guided by the Holy Spirit, the same words again. That seems to me evident from this, that it is not contrary to the will of God to pray the same thing over again providing we don not have an answer.

Now, if we pray and God gives us an answer, and then we go back and pray the same prayer again because we want a different answer, that’s another matter. Well the second thing then, “Why should we pray importunately? Why should we pray over and over again?” Now, in answering this, let’s try to keep a few things in mind. I say in answering this -- I’m not sure I will answer this because I’m not sure if I understand enough to answer that question -- but I think by just pointing out a few things we can eliminate some possible misconceptions from our mind. Let’s remember from our studies that our prayers will not change the decretive will of God.

Now if God has determined a certain thing to come to pass, you can pray until eternity comes and it will not come to pass that is, if your prayer is contrary to his will. I also think, and I want to be careful when I say this, and I say, think, because I’m not sure about this. I do not think we should expect wholesale violation of natural law. Now there are violations of natural law in the word of God. We have the resurrection of Jesus Christ. We have other miracles. We even have the sun standing still, but we should not expect wholesale violation of natural law.

It would seem to me in the light of the fact that we cannot change the decretive will of God or we do not ordinarily see violation of natural law, that we should be very careful that our prayers should always be guarded by the little clause, “If it should be Thy will.” In other words, if I were to tear a page out of my Bible here and I just prayed, “Oh

God put that page back together again,” I should not normally expect that to happen. Have you ever seen it happen? Or if I should pray, “Lord I think I should like to see the sun rise in the west tomorrow instead of in the east,” we should not expect that prayer to be answered. Or if I should say, “I think I would like to be in Australia an hour from now, and then in Texas in my bed at ten o’clock,” we should not expect that to be answered.

If I should say, “Oh Lord I am sick of daytime, let there be no dawn tomorrow at all,” we should not expect that to happen. Or if I should say, “Now that I am thirty-nine years of age -- I’m very sensitive about my age. I do not want anyone to know that I am fifty-six. [Laughter] But if I should say -- oh Lord now I think I would like to begin over again tomorrow I would like to be twenty-one,” we should not expect that prayer to be answered.

Now what I’m saying and trying to make it just as foolish as I can is that we should not normally expect our prayers to violate natural law; although, we acknowledge that such may take place. We, however, do not live in the age of miracles for a particular reason. Now, that reason is, of course, that God has spoken in his word and he is going to interfere with natural law again, but when he interferes with natural law again it will be to introduce judgment in this world. So it’s a good thing not to pray for God to intervene today. But our prayers will not change at all his decretive will.

Now another thing we need to keep in mind is this, which we have tried to point out, our prayers may be the means of accomplishing his decretive will. In other words, he has decreed certain things to come to pass, but he has also decreed that they come to pass through means of prayer. Now that is why men are to pray. We talked about that when we talked about prayer and the decrees. We cannot say that since God has determined that everything is going to come to pass, why pray; it’s going to come to pass.

Well, let me say this, my dear friend. It will come to pass whether you pray or not if you take that out of people. But in God’s infinite eternal counsel, he had already taken

care of your willfulness, and he had determined that someone else pray and bring that to pass. But nevertheless, he has determined, not only the end, but he has determined the means and that is why men pray. P. T. Forsythe once said, “This is close to the truth but not quite the truth. It is the will of God that we should bend his will to ours through prayer.” Now I think he should have said instead of bend his will, accomplish his will through our prayers.

Now another thing, it is evident that God expects us to cry to him persistently. This parable amid others, teaches that. But we must distinguish vain repetition from importunate prayer. Vain repetition is just a repeating of many words. It is the use of prayer as if it were a kind of fetish, as if it were some kind of prayer ornament or chains. Like it was some kind of medal, like a St. Christopher’s medal. Now that kind of vain repetition is worthless before God if it is just words. You know many of us say our prayers but when we say our prayers we’re not really praying. There’s a great difference between saying your prayers and praying, as everyone knows. Now when we talk about prayer, we’re talking about something, which we enter with our spirit.

Now another thing, the coming of God’s answer, whether a yes or a no ends the need for importunate prayer. In other words, we persist until we have an answer but when the answer comes then we stop praying. Why do we have importunate prayer then? We do have the need for persistent prayer? Well, it should be obvious to you, I think. The need for persistent prayer rises out of the fact that God’s answer is not only yes or no, but wait. And so his appeal for persistent prayer is an appeal that arises out of the fact that he delays answers to our prayers.

Now I’m going to translate verse 7 in a slightly different way because I think that it reveals to us a truth. Now, in verse 7 of Luke chapter 18 that last clause which I have in my text is “and will he deal long over them.” I am convinced. I don’t have time to go into the exigencies of the Greek text, of course, but I am convinced that that clause should be rendered. This is not original with me. This is not some odd idea, some queer, weird

view that I have; for my views are always sound and certain and commend themselves to any open minded intelligent person, of course. No, this is not an original idea with me but it is the opinion excellent commentators of Greek text that that last clause should be translated even if he puts their patience to the test. So let me translate verse 7, “will not God bring about justice for His elect who cry to Him day and night,” even if he puts their patience to the test.

Now that explains the need for importunate prayer. It is the putting of our patience to the test. That’s why God wants us to pray persistently. Now then that brings us then to the statement that the explanation of importunate prayer then finally rests in what God’s delays do for us. And I’m just going to state them before our time is up. What do God’s delays do for us?

Well, in the first place, they are the seed of discipline. The reason that God does not give us a quick answer to prayer is because he wishes our faith to grow. And consequently he disciplines us by his delays in his answers. Further, God’s delays deepen the channel of our religious nature. You know even beasts have a form of reason but only man worships. And prayer is the means by which we are lifted submissively into the practical relationship of a son with a father. The spirit of the man who prays becomes the means by which he enters into a fellowship with his father.

And if I were simply to pray with a request, which I leave with God, forget all about it, and then live my life without constant dependence upon him, in effect, I am at the one point acknowledging he is the Father and I’m the son; but at the next moment I’ve become somewhat sovereign again. And so God desires that we lean upon him not just for that one petition but frequently lean upon him for a lengthy period of time. It is the deepening of our spiritual nature as we worship God.

And then, finally, importunate prayer affords occasion for rising above our experiences, our emotions, our physical trials; for as we continue in prayer and when we continue in prayer, we are continuing in the presence of the Lord; we’re lifted up above

our trials, up above our problems, up above our experiences, up above our emotions, which one day are hot and the next day cold. One day we are seeking God; the next day we are indifferent. One day we are happy; the next day we are unhappy.

But as we persist in prayer, there comes a stability into our lives, which become habitual and is the means of deepening spiritually. So then, remember, answers are not rich from the reluctant God by importunity. Promises, and to date the praying, and those promises are promises of God’s sovereign will. Prayer is not the means by which we get something which God doesn’t want to give us. Prayer is the means, whereby, we obtain what he has predetermined that we should have. And that prayer itself is initiated by God. So it’s not the cause. It’s merely the antecedent, condition and the means by which a predetermined benefit is given. And importunate prayer is his discipline.

Now I have a number of illustrations, but there is one illustration I just want to remind you of as I close. Do you remember the other night I made reference to Elijah praying after he was on the mountain, and had won his victory the prophets of Baal; and do you remember what he said to Ahab? He said Ahab, “There’s going to be rain. You know why because God has given it in a promise.” What did he do? Well, he went up in the mountain and he prayed. Why pray? Why the promise had been given. No need to pray. No just the opposite. You see the reason he prayed is because he knew he was going to get the answer. It was God’s predetermination that stirred him to pray. And so because God had predetermined what was going to happen and had told Elijah about it, then he got down on his face and communed with God and thus cooperated with him in the coming of the rain.

Now that is what God desires that we do with the promises of the word of God. The power of persistent prayer to command the energy of the Almighty, to remove mountains, to conduct the affairs of the kingdom at comparatively little expense is one of the greatest powers that man could have. You know you don’t have to beg for money to accomplish things for God if you are willing to attempt to accomplish them in prayer.

“Importunate Prayer: Is It Really Necessary?” by S. Lewis Johnson
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Next Tuesday night I think we are having a meeting. I will be speaking on the mystery of man or the crises of identity. Let’s bow in prayer.

[Prayer] Father we thank Thee for the privilege of prayer and oh God, teach us to pray. For Jesus’ sake. Amen.