

WHAT TO DO WITH THE DARKNESS

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It's getting dark out. Most obviously, as the earth spins on its axis away from the face of the sun the days shorten and the light declines. As the quiet darkness of advent approaches we may also notice the grave wickedness that seems to pervade our world also darkens our days. When the vanishing light is cast upon injustice the temptation to lose heart can be great. Christ, the one who descended into the heart of darkness and "in every respect was tempted as we are" (Heb 4:15) nevertheless enjoined his disciples to "always to pray and not lose heart" (Lk 18:1). Ever the masterful storyteller, Jesus illustrated his command to his disciples through the parable of the persistent widow—a mundane tale, perhaps, but one with a surprising twist.

The parable presents the widow as the victim of injustice. Likely bereft of any male family members, she must go to court by herself—an uncommon practice in the Ancient Near East.¹ Her situation is dire: the trauma of suffering an injustice, the lack of community support in her pursuit of vindication, and on top

of it all, she must plead her case to apparently intransigent judge that "neither fear[s] God nor respect[s] man" (v.4). Armed only with her desperation, the widow "kept coming" (lit. "she came over and over again!"²) to the judge with her simple refrain: "give me justice against my adversary" (v.3). Initially intractable, the

"In a certain town there was a judge who neither feared God nor cared what people thought. And there was a widow in that town who kept coming to him with the plea, 'Grant me justice against my adversary.'

"For some time he refused. But finally he said to himself, 'Even though I don't fear God or care what people think, yet because this widow keeps bothering me, I will see that she gets justice, so that she won't eventually come and attack me!'"

And the Lord said, "Listen to what the unjust judge says. And will not God bring about justice for his chosen ones, who cry out to him day and night? Will he keep putting them off? I tell you, he will see that they get justice, and quickly. However, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on the earth?"

- Luke 18: 2-8

1. Kenneth Bailey, *Jesus Through Middle Eastern Eyes*, 264.

2. Cleon L. Rogers Jr. and Cleon L. Rogers III, *The New Linguistic and Exegetical Key to the Greek New Testament*, 155.

judge is unable to maintain his resolve and gives in to the consistent petitions of the widow. Motivated not by some newfound ethical paradigm (v.4), the judge delivers his verdict from a place of self-preservation. A literal rendering of the Greek in verse 5 suggests that the widow is so forceful in her search for justice that the judge likens it to receiving physical beating.³

To use an archaic phrase, the widow isn't very "lady-like"—yet this is exactly Jesus' point. Joel Green has noted that, when faced with the darkness of injustice, Jesus invited his disciples to emulate the radical behaviour of the widow. Summoning the courage of ten men, the warrior-widow towers above social conventions and cultural norms in the pursuit of justice. According to Green, the demand for justice "requires that one act outside the script provided by an unjust world."⁴

Indeed, the script suggested by the darkness in the world has nary a word written on its pages. Instead of action, prayer, or resistance, the absence of a command is itself a directive: be silent. Be complicit. Sit down. If we are painfully honest, we recognize that the darkness of injustice solicits cooperation from a resonant shadow that resides in our own hearts (1Jn 1:8). The light dims, the spirit flags. Maybe hope will not come. Perhaps the arm of the Lord is too short to save, after all.

Jesus recognized this response to injustice as the patent nonsense that it is. In Lk 18:7-8, he reasons from the lesser to the greater: if the unjust judge delivered justice, how much more will the judge of all the earth do right? The question, therefore, is not, will the light of Christ overcome the darkness; it will, and that soon (v.8). James Edwards observed that it is easy for us to put "God on trial" as we notice the encroaching darkness.⁵ "God, where were you when injustice befell us? Why have you not intervened?". Yet the conclusion of Jesus' parable turns this question on its head. Christ infallibly

declares that justice is coming (v. 8) and has come; a claim vindicated by his resurrection. And from his divine justification, Christ turns his terrible eye upon us and puts *us* on trial.⁶ Will the Son of Man find faith on earth? A faith like that of the widow?⁷ Christ seeks the faith that refuses to let injustice be the last word, that rejects the resigned sigh which suggests, "that's just the way the world is"; a faith that refuses to comply with the darkness and the script of injustice. A faith that is expressed through fervent, unflappable prayer and works of righteousness that bear witness to the return of the Son of Man.

Christ has transformed the darkness. Instead of a foreboding portent of the future, it is now a prelude to glory. Surely the ebullient joy that springs from Mary's song (Luke 1:46-48) finds its source in her own faith that God has heard her prayer and has intervened through the gift of his Son. The result of this knowledge is a transformed life for the express purpose of mediating the blessing of Christ to the world. God has given, and will continue to give, justice. What remains is the necessity of our widow-faith. Faith that serves as a conduit for divine justice; Faith that, amidst the darkness, rejoices to see the long-expected dawn just upon the horizon.

*My soul magnifies the Lord,
and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he has looked on
the humble estate of his servant. For behold, from now on all
generations will call me blessed;*
- Luke 1:46-48

3. The verb form of *hypōpiazō* in verse 5 may be used to express the action of blackening someone's eye. William Barclay, *The Gospel of Luke*, TNSDB, 263.
4. Joel Green, *Luke*, NICNT, 641.
5. James Edwards, *Luke*, PNTC, 501.
6. James Edwards, *Luke*, PNTC, 501.
7. James Edwards, *Luke*, PNTC, 501.

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