And he told them a parable to the effect that they ought always to pray and not lose heart. 2 He said, "In a certain city there was a judge who neither feared God nor respected man. 3 And there was a widow in that city who kept coming to him and saying, 'Give me justice against my adversary.' 4 For a while he refused, but afterward he said to himself, 'Though I neither fear God nor respect man, 5 yet because this widow keeps bothering me, I will give her justice, so that she will not beat me down by her continual coming.'" 6 And the Lord said, "Hear what the unrighteous judge says. 7 And will not God give justice to his elect, who cry to him day and night? Will he delay long over them? 8 I tell you, he will give justice to them speedily. Nevertheless, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?" (Luke 18:1-8 ESV)

Introduction

In a somewhat atypical way, Luke gives an explanatory comment about a parable of Jesus before he reports the parable itself and before he records the interpretation by Jesus. Here one thing is made clear, an application is emphasized within the complex of things to which our Lord directs us in a thought provoking way. Luke explains the “effect” (18.1) of the parable for disciples, that is, its meaning and application: they ought always to pray and not lose heart (18.1). To continue to pray, to pray always is put before us as a duty that is to endure through difficulties that might cause us to lose heart. The narrator’s method opens many doors of the mind by applying the parable before he gives it. The initial application is that by the parable we are about to hear, Jesus gives an encouragement regarding prayer. The encouragement is general and therefore applies wherever we need it as we walk with God and face a host of challenges to our faith. Thus, at the end, our Lord asks, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth? (18.8). So, we have a goal in our work in coming to the text, namely, to find this encouragement by thinking through the parable and about the meaning Jesus gives to it. I therefore have two points of outline: the presentation of the parable and the interpretation of the parable.

I. Presentation of the parable

How the Lord tells the story can be summarized by considering the main characters, the premise, and the plot.

A. The two main characters

The only characters of this narrative are a man and a woman, a judge and a widow. There was a judge (18.2) and there was a widow (18.3). The judge exercises authority in an unnamed city (a certain city). He is described as a man who neither feared God nor respected man (18.2). Evidently, this is precisely the kind of judge that you would not want on the bench while you make a claim to some injustice. This is just the opposite of what the OT called for in a judge: one who fears God and who can clearly and fairly discern the struggles of people being oppressed unjustly. For example, in Chronicles we read this word from a good King to the judges in Israel: Consider what you do, for you judge not for man but for the LORD. He is with you in giving judgment. 7 Now then, let the fear of the LORD be upon you. Be careful what you do, for there is no injustice with the LORD our God, or partiality or taking bribes (2 Chron 19.6-7). This man’s way of doing business as a judge did not conform to God’s standards of honesty and fairness in which the Lord expresses particular concern for the poor, orphans, and widows, especially, when vulnerable people are oppressed by those who have status and authority. The Lord God is a defender of widows: Father of the fatherless and protector of widows is God in his holy habitation (Ps 68.5). He cares for widows as a just judge: For the LORD your God is God of gods and Lord of lords, the great, the mighty, and the awesome God, who is not partial and takes no bribe. 18 He executes justice for the fatherless and the widow, and loves the sojourner, giving him food and clothing (Deut 10.17-18). Thus, the fact that the judge in
the parable had no respect for God or man indicates that this judge was hardhearted regarding the need for justice of those under social oppression. Of course, judges are not to rule by their emotions, but they ought not to be blind to the cries for justice by the oppressed. Immediately, then, we know that there is little hope for a good outcome for those who appear before him with righteous claims.

The other character that will have to deal with this judge is a widow: And there was a widow in that city (v. 3a). As such, she has no substantive leverage generally, but she is especially vulnerable in the law-court of a stony hearted and ungodly judge that is part of a system that adds oppression to the weak without concern for truth and justice.

B. The premise

The stage is set. We know enough to anticipate an encounter between these two characters. To be clear, the underlying premise of this courtroom drama is that there exists some unjust state of affairs of which the widow is a victim.

C. The plot

The plot of a narrative is its order of events. In this case, there are two events: the action of one character and the response of the other.

1. The first act (action)

   The first act is by the widow. She presents herself before this wicked judge coming with a wrong that needs to be righted, and she says, Give me justice against my adversary (18.3). Notably, this is not a one shot deal for the Lord as storyteller reports that she kept coming to him with this petition. She will not let the matter lie dormant; she has a good cause, and this man is the official in charge who has the authority to relieve her from unfair oppression. From her own lips and from the storyteller’s comment, we get a glimpse of the situation, and a taste of the intensity of the relationship between these two people. She keeps coming to him with a petition that is pointed and righteous.

2. The second act (action)

   The second act is by the judge. First he refuses her request as we expect (18.4a), but then in the literary device of soliloquy, we hear him talking to himself with a measure of exasperation about this widow: 4 For a while he refused, but afterward he said to himself, 'Though I neither fear God nor respect man, 5 yet because this widow keeps bothering me, I will give her justice, so that she will not beat me down by her continual coming." (18.4-5). Although part of his response confirms his character as godless and heartless, it has the effect of placing emphasis on the widow’s strength as a person who is vulnerable but hardly weak. She may be in a weak position, but she is not a weak person. Her persistence is bothersome, wears the judge down, and even “beats him into a corner.” Thus, when she is about to land the knock out punch, he gives in to her petition for justice, and says to himself: I will give her justice. She is relentless and he relents. The story ends without providing us with what was specifically granted or with any further account of the lives of the judge and the widow. At this point, enough is on the table for Jesus to interpret the parable and make His point.

II. The interpretation of the parable

Before guiding us into the meaning of the parable, Jesus begins with a call to focus by saying: Hear what the unrighteous judge says (18.6). Listen up, He says, hear, and apply the words of the wicked judge. He definitely gets our attention and causes to wonder why He directs us to the judge instead of the widow. If you or I were telling this story, we would most likely direct our listeners to the widow, to hear what the widow says and does. Well, we get there by listening carefully to what the judge says. On one hand, he says, I will give her justice. Jesus wants us to
hear the unrighteous judge promise justice. On the other hand, he explains why he will do so, which is because of what she says and does: because, he says, she bothers me so persistently!

With this call to attentiveness and focus, Jesus then presents some questions for us to consider thoughtfully and to ponder strenuously. We have to wrestle even though He answers the first two questions and we have to stretch our minds because He leaves the third unanswered: 

7 And will not God give justice to his elect, who cry to him day and night? Will he delay long over them? I tell you, he will give justice to them speedily. Nevertheless, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth? (18.7-8). Clearly, the shape of the account is precisely what the Holy Spirit intended for our benefit. Again, truth must be sought to be found; it is hidden like buried treasure.

1. The first answered question

And will not God give justice to his elect, who cry to him day and night? (18.7a)

The initial question is an fortiori (a much more argument). The holy God is juxtaposed with the unholy judge, the forsaken widow is comparable to God’s elect. Election is a matter of love and loving care, so, in contrast to the helpless widow, God’s elect have His love set upon them from eternity to eternity.

Now the argument takes shape: therefore, if an unjust judge replies to a helpless widow by granting the requests for which she petitioned him continually, how much more will the holy God and righteous judge of all people, grant the requests for justice continually brought before Him by the people He helps with electing love.

Thus, the answer is stated in verse 8: I tell you, he will give justice to them speedily. In truth, God’s elect do not deserve any of His benefits. They ought to receive the justice of eternal punishment for breaking His holy law. However, because Jesus endured the punishment of His elect as their substitute in suffering (Isa 53.5, he was pierced for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with his wounds we are healed). As we state in the song, “O the deep, deep,” Jesus intercedes for His elect: “O the deep, deep love of Jesus, spread His praise from shore to shore; how he loveth, ever loveth, changes never, never more; how he watches over His loved ones, died to call them all His own. How for them He interceedeth, watching over them from the throne.” Therefore, not one of His elect will fail to arrive safely through a just judgment and to vindication, no less, in the glory of heaven.

2. The second answered, will he [God] delay long over them?

This is a challenging question because the answer that Jesus gives seems to run contrary to the question. Initially, the implied answer is an affirmation, “Yes, there will be a long delay.” Then we have the answer in the complete statement of verse 8: I tell you, he will give justice to them speedily. How are we to square the notion of speed with the obvious fact of long delay? One way to understand the idea of “quickly” is by prophetic perspective in which the promised justice is now being granted already in foretaste of the fulness yet to come. So, some commentators reason that justice comes like the kingdom, now in part in anticipation of that which is delayed and yet to come. However, speedily (quickly, KJV) does not equate with immediately in the unfolding of God’s plan. It means “swiftly, all at once and thus before one can be aware and make preparations” (Payne, Imminent Appearing, 86). The idea then is that of decisiveness and suddenness. When God acts in the bestowal of justice for His elect, judgment will fall swiftly like it did in the days of Noah and Lot. There was eating, drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, grinding, farming, roof repairing, and building then “out of the blue” they were swept away by flood and fire. So, although there is long delay in the righting of all wrongs, we are reminded again to be ready for when the time comes for God to act, His action will be swift and decisive. Then the Son of Man will be revealed in all His glory.

3. The third, but unanswered question
When the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth? (18.8b).

What does the question imply, especially, in context of the unfolding of the days of the Son of man toward the final day? Are we supposed to make some kind of calculation about the degrees of belief versus unbelief at the time of the end? If so, in view would be the suffering of believers in the face of expanding wickedness such that except for God’s intervention even the elect would be deceived. However, in keeping with the preceding point about suddenness, the idea must be more like the sudden and unknown character of the coming of the Son of Man in His day. Thus, we are back to the idea of daily relevance with every day as “that day” in principle because each new day carries with it the question, “Is it the crowning day, is today, glad day?”

The question then boils down to a call to faith today for as long as it remains today: he appoints a certain day, “Today,” saying through David so long afterward, in the words already quoted, “Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts” (Heb 4.7). The call to hear and submit yourself to God from the heart goes out to listening ears today, every day, as long as it is called “today” (Heb 4.12-13).

Conclusion

When He comes will you have faith in your walk here on earth? How do you prepare for such a day? You prepare like a person working on a housetop or farming in a field. You prepare by doing your work in life faithfully knowing this may be the day of days, the final “today.” Thus, you live in the world and pray: you pray for daily bread, but you seek it for the glory of God by the doing of His will in the coming of the kingdom (according to the Lord’s Prayer). This parable broadens the horizon of prayer to understand its place in the days of the Son of Man as time marches on as usual (buying, selling, building) with justice delayed.

So, in the courtroom setting on the day of the Son of Man, no charge can be made to stick against God’s elect because of the work of God in Christ: And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose. 29 For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn among many brothers. 30 And those whom he predestined he also called, and those whom he called he also justified, and those whom he justified he also glorified. 31 What then shall we say to these things? If God is for us, who can be against us? 32 He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things? 33 Who shall bring any charge against God’s elect? It is God who justifies. 34 Who is to condemn? Christ Jesus is the one who died-- more than that, who was raised-- who is at the right hand of God, who indeed is interceding for us. 35 Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or danger, or sword? 36 As it is written, “For your sake we are being killed all the day long; we are regarded as sheep to be slaughtered.” 37 No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. 38 For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, 39 nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord (Rom 8.28-39). This is the word of the righteous judge that says, I will give justice to my elect who chooses to be wearied by our prayers and to answer them not according to appearances but according to His wise and holy will.

May we fall down before the majesty and holiness of God with the acknowledgment of our sins; may the Holy Spirit enable us to persevere in prayer with the strength of the widow of this parable; may He encourage us in knowing that though justice is delayed, the Lord of heaven and earth will come suddenly and then the days of the Son of Man will become His day of glory; may we be assured and encouraged by the fact that His revealing will be the day when He will grant us justice in His open acknowledgment that we belong to Him for the comforts of heaven forever; to the glory of the triune God, amen.