

## CHAPTER XVI

### *The Love of God (II)*

#### THE GOD WHO ANSWERS PRAYER

##### THE PARABLE OF THE FRIEND AT MIDNIGHT

"And he said unto them, Which of you shall have a friend, and shall go unto him at midnight, and say to him, Friend, lend me three loaves; for a friend of mine is come to me from a journey, and I have nothing to set before him; and he from within shall answer and say, Trouble me not: the door is now shut, and my children are with me in bed; I cannot rise and give thee? I say unto you, Though he will not rise and give him because he is his friend, yet because of his importunity he will arise and give him as many as he needeth. And I say unto you, Ask, and it shall be given you; seek, and ye shall find; knock, and it shall be opened unto you. For every one that asketh receiveth; and he that seeketh findeth; and to him that knocketh it shall be opened. And of which of you that is a father shall his son ask a loaf, and he give him a stone? or a fish, and he for a fish give him a serpent? Or if he shall ask an egg, will he give him a scorpion? If ye then, being evil, know how to give good gifts unto your children, how much more shall your heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to them that ask him?"

(*Luke* 11: 5-13)

##### THE PARABLE OF THE IMPORTUNATE WIDOW

"And he spake a parable unto them to the end that they ought always to pray, and not to faint; saying, There was in a city a judge, who feared not God, and regarded not man: and there was a widow in that city; and she came oft unto him, saying, Avenge me of mine adversary. And he would not for a while; but afterward he said within himself, Though I fear not God, nor regard man; yet because this widow troubleth me, I will avenge her, lest she wear me out by her continual coming. And the Lord said, Hear what the unrighteous judge saith. And shall not God avenge his elect, that cry to him day and night, and yet he is long-suffering over them? I say unto you, that he will avenge them speedily. Nevertheless, when the Son of man cometh, shall he find faith on the earth?"

(*Luke* 18: 1-8)

## CHAPTER XVI

#### THE GOD WHO ANSWERS PRAYER

##### *The Parable of the Friend at Midnight* *The Parable of the Importunate Widow*

These two stories are so strikingly similar in purpose that they might almost be termed twin parables. Though they are separated in Luke's gospel and assigned to different occasions, it seems probable that they were originally spoken in uninterrupted sequence. The one story reiterates the truth of the other, but with significant changes of emphasis—a fact which holds of other twin parables.<sup>1</sup> The colors of the one story are gay; of the other wellnigh black. The one has traits of whimsical good humor, almost of comedy; the other is saved from unrelieved tragedy only by a happy issue. The one stresses a genial teaching, with a sterner truth for shadow; the other stresses the hard fact, but has the brighter truth for a "bow in the cloud." Both stories are transcripts of life.

A man, travelling by dark to escape the glare and heat of the Palestinian sun, came at midnight to the home of a friend. His coming was unexpected; his friend had no food to offer him. But the simplest hospitality required that a host should break bread with his guest before they retired to rest. He was embarrassed. What could he do? He hurried to his neighbor's cottage and knocked on the door. "Who's there?" asked a gruff, half-sleepy voice. "Friend," answered the would-be host, "let me have three loaves; for a friend of mine has just come to my house after a journey, and I have nothing for him to eat."<sup>2</sup> There was no prefix, "Friend," to the impatient retort: "Don't bother me! The door is fastened, and my children

<sup>1</sup> *E.g.*, the twin parables of the Treasure and the Pearl (see p. 26), and the Uncompleted Tower and the Rash King's Warfare (see p. 77), and others.  
<sup>2</sup> Quoted with one slight change from Goodspeed's "The New Testament—an American Translation." "Lend" means rather "allow the use of," a sense in which we sometimes employ the word.

and I have gone to bed;<sup>3</sup> I cannot get up and give you any." Who would wish to be jerked out of sound sleep, and made to grope round the room and fumble with the latch? The children would wake and begin to cry, and who knows how long it would take to quiet them? We can almost hear the muttered comment: "To come knocking at a man's door at this hour of the night! Give him bread? Not I! If he got what he deserved . . . !" But the petitioner was not so easily gainsaid. Shamelessly<sup>4</sup> he ignored the refusal, and began again to bang on the door. Soon the banging threatened to wake the neighborhood. No chance to sleep with such a racket! There was the shuffle of feet in the cottage, a fumbling with the latch, a hand thrust through the partly opened door: "Here! Take your bread, and be off!" Surely Jesus' eyes twinkled as He said: "I say unto you, though he will not rise and give unto him because he is his friend (!), yet because of his shamelessness he will arise and give him anything he asks for." The story is told to the life! Perhaps it came from life. Perhaps Jesus was one of those children in bed on a memorable night in Nazareth. Perhaps He had listened with eyes wide-open in the darkness, while Joseph held gruff converse with a neighbor banging on their cottage door.

The other picture is painted in sepia. It concerns a venal judge such as was all too common in that eastern world. He feared neither God nor man. As for God, he laughed at Him and accompanied double-dealing with blasphemy. As for man, what cared he for public opinion? To such a judge there came a widow pleading her wrongs. The Bible's repeated reference<sup>5</sup> to widows is proof enough that their fate was frequently pitiable. Many were browbeaten or cheated out of their scanty ownings. Jesus' flaming wrath against the scribes who "devoured widows' houses, and for a pretence made long prayers,"<sup>6</sup> points to a form of rapacity that had become a

<sup>3</sup> By "bed" we are to understand the wide, low divan or platform, which was the family's sleeping-quarters and which occupied a considerable portion of the room in a lowly Palestinian home. There was good reason why Jesus should paint humble homes lovingly!

<sup>4</sup> "Shamelessly" is the meaning of the Greek word.

<sup>5</sup> See Isaiah 1: 23, Job 22: 9, Malachi 3: 5 among Old Testament references.

<sup>6</sup> Mark 12: 40-44. It is to be noted that the widow's plea was that she might be "avenged," not "revenged." We are not told the exact nature of her persecution.

public scandal. His tender tribute to the widow woman who gave her whole meager living as a Temple gift is another instance of His solicitude for widowhood. Perhaps that solicitude also grew in Nazareth soil. There is a firmly rooted legend that Joseph died while Jesus was young, leaving to Mary the care of the hungry brood. Perhaps the beginning of the public ministry of Jesus waited not only for the due preparation of His own spirit, but also for the fulfillment of His duty as a breadwinner for the family. Perhaps Mary was the "widow" of this parable. It is at least a permissible conjecture. There were only three ways of dealing with such a judge as is described; he could be bribed, bullied, or besought until he surrendered. The widow had no wealth with which to bribe him, and no power with which to threaten. She could only plead with the persistence of despair. So she pleaded even against hope. She entreated the judge at his tribunal. She waylaid him as he went home. Wherever he might go, there she would be, waiting to pour her intolerable tale of woe upon him. He could not escape her. At last, for his own comfort (he knew no law but his own gain) he did as she asked; it was the only way to be rid of her: "Though I fear not God, nor regard man; yet because this widow troubleth<sup>7</sup> me, I will avenge her, lest she wear me out by her continual coming."

What is the genial teaching which, we have asserted, is dominant in the story of the Friend at Midnight? It is the *a fortiori* plea which is summarized in that regulative word of Jesus: "If ye then, being evil, know how to give good gifts unto your children, how much more shall your Father who is

<sup>7</sup> The Greek word is derived from *upoopion*, meaning "the part under the eyes." Hence the import is "to hit under the eyes," i.e., "to make black and blue," i.e., "to annoy exceedingly." The same word occurs in I Corinthians 9: 27. Bruce, *op. cit.*, p. 161, urges that the word must be given its literal meaning in the story. The judge foresaw that the widow, if she were denied much longer, would become a raging fury and might strike him. He affected to be afraid of her fists. But this interpretation seems to place both the widow and the judge "out of character." In an interesting article on this parable in the *Expository Times* (June, 1927), Dr. A. J. Robertson suggests that the judge was not so black a villain as he wished others and himself to believe. "Though I fear not God nor regard man" was a display of bombast. The woman discerned the core of goodness in him and therefore persisted. But such an interpretation does not seem to accord with the explicit statement of v. 2, nor with the treatment accorded to widows in that age. The parable is given only in outline, and imagination must fill in what is lacking. Dr. Robertson's imaginative delineation of the judge is fully allowable, but such facts as are available seem to favor a sterner portrayal. The latter also appears to accord better with the didactic purpose of the story. The article in question is masterly in description and stimulating in interpretation.

in heaven give good things to them that ask him?" What is the sterner teaching which is shadow to that light? It is the implication that God cannot be found save by persistent plea—"because of his importunity." In the story of the Importunate Widow these emphases are transposed. The sterner teaching is in the bold center of the picture (prayer's persistence must be like the entreaty of a widow-woman before a cruel judge), while the genial assurance is the bright background.

Consider, then, that recurrent theme in the message of Jesus—His argument from our little to God's great, from our bad to God's good. Repeatedly He made His appeal to the fineness of human motive: "'Which man of you' would not do this? Surely God will do as much, and more!" That appeal is basic in the Christian conception of God. Jesus was not a scholastic carefully framing philosophic definitions of the Godhead. He was an artist painting on the glowing canvas of His parables unforgettable pictures to quicken our dull spirits to a sense of the Divine. There is a chapter of the New Testament<sup>8</sup> which begins in prosy definition: "Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, a conviction of things not seen." Then, as if in the realization that truth cannot be imprisoned in a pedant's cage of labored words, the writer throws away his schoolman's stylus and returns to brush and canvas. He paints portraits and adventure in arresting line and color—"By faith Abel." . . . "By faith Enoch." . . . "By faith Abraham"; and soon the prosy definition flames with meaning! Jesus was an artist. In the last resort a definition is a symbol, since words are a symbol. Then why not choose the better symbol of picture or story? A definition is a prison, but a story (if it is told as Jesus could tell it) is a sunrise.

We cannot communicate any conviction, least of all our conviction about God, except through the medium of symbols. When we speak of God as "Law," we are choosing a legal system as our sign for Him. It is not a happy figure, for the laws we know best are created and maintained by human mind and purpose; it becomes convincing only when we think of *His* living mind and purpose behind *His* laws. When we speak of

<sup>8</sup> Hebrews 11.

"the mechanism of the Universe" we are choosing a symbol more unworthy than "law"; for a machine is inert, and derives all its virtue from the inventiveness of man. This symbol becomes intelligible only when we postulate the inventiveness of God. Inevitably we think of God under the guise of *human* signs. Our care must be to choose our divinest human symbols. The savage mutilates himself with knives because His God is a savage; He is guided, not by reason and love, but by caprice; His sudden cruel whims must be mollified by blood. The Attilas of mankind dream of a God of battles, Who "wears riding-boots and a helmet"; and the bloody sack of cities is the dark issue of that hateful creed. The Humanism of Jesus began with the premise that it is psychologically impossible for a man to worship anything less than the best in himself. He construed the Divine in terms of the ideally human: "If ye then, being *evil*, know. . . ." Let the taunt of "anthropomorphism" be flung at such a faith, and the sufficient answer will be: "Of course it is anthropomorphic. Do you expect a human to fly beyond the bounds of his humanity? But, being *anthropomorphic*, it at least compares God with the best in human life, and not with a law or a machine. If it were *mechanomorphic* or *nomomorphic* the gibe would be just."<sup>9</sup>

In the story of the Friend at Midnight, Jesus makes specific appeal to the ideally human as a proper symbol for our understanding of God. Behind that appeal He places the weight of His own authority: "I say unto you."<sup>10</sup> "The flat stones of the lakeshore" (He says in effect) "resemble our Jewish bread; but a true father would not deceive his son by offering him stones for bread. He would not give him a serpent knowing that it might easily be mistaken for a fish. He would not place a scorpion<sup>11</sup> in his hand in pretence of giving him an egg. He would not be cruel or treacherous with his own children. If ye, being evil, know how to give good gifts, *how much more* shall your heavenly Father . . ." The reluctance of the neigh-

<sup>9</sup> A similar argument is brilliantly stated in Canon B. H. Streeter's "Reality," Chapter I, in the section entitled "The Power of Metaphor."

<sup>10</sup> The "I say unto you" in v. 8 is not emphatic (*lego umin*); it makes appeal only to the reasonableness of the situation. But in v. 9 it is emphatic (*kai ego lego umin*); Jesus is adding the weight of His personal authority.

<sup>11</sup> When its limbs are closed about it, a scorpion resembles an egg.

bor in the story is therefore not a picture of God's reluctance so much as an incident designed to heighten a contrast. An earthly friend may need to be aroused from sleep, but "He that keepeth Israel shall neither slumber nor sleep."<sup>12</sup> An earthly friend may be reluctant and grudging, but "He that spared not his own Son . . . how shall he not also with him freely give us all things?"<sup>13</sup> By such an argument that epitaph said to have been placed on the tombstone of an early Norseman buried in Scotland<sup>14</sup> is not blasphemous, but distinctly fine:

"Here lie I, Martin Elginbrodde:  
Hae mercy o' my soul, Lord God;  
As I wad do were I Lord God,  
And ye were Martin Elginbrodde."

The best in human life, purified, intensified, and magnified, is essentially of the nature of God's life. A vast universe of Divine mystery abides, and into it we cannot penetrate. He far transcends our highest imagining. Yet!—the drop of water of our human goodness is of the same constitution as the ocean of His goodness. Our human light is broken, but it is of the same nature as the Eternal Splendor. Christianity is on impregnable ground when it says adoringly of Jesus: "He that hath seen Thee hath seen the Father."

Yet this story has its shadow with its sun. Jesus hints that God, despite all tokens of His love, will not be moved except by an importunate cry. He will not answer save to a persistent quest. A man must come, even as the Friend at Midnight came, in the sense of urgent need. He must seek as unremittingly; he must knock to the point of presumption and seeming shamelessness. This truth becomes dominant in the story of the Unjust Judge. Jesus spent long hours in prayer. In the nighttime He sought the lonely mountain side and there wrestled with God. That power and peace came to Him through such vigils is attested by the disciples' plea: "Lord, teach us to pray." It is probable that He spoke many parables of prayer, for prayer was the atmosphere in which He walked.

<sup>12</sup> Psalm 121: 3.

<sup>13</sup> Romans 8: 32.

<sup>14</sup> Quoted from George Macdonald by R. J. Campbell in his "The War and the Soul."

But only two of these parables remain, and it is an immensely significant fact that both stress (the one with lighter, and the other with heavier emphasis) the need for patience and persistence. In the story of the Importunate Widow that teaching is in sharp focus: "And he spake a parable unto them" (says Luke) "to the end that men *must* pray<sup>15</sup> and not grow weary in praying." There is little reason to doubt that the gospelist has stated the purpose of the story.

It is clear that Jesus regarded prayer as the simple outpouring of human need. It may take many forms—thanksgiving, confession, adoration, or intercession;<sup>16</sup> but all these forms are but variants of the cry of human poverty. Thanksgiving is the cry of need—the acknowledgment that the cry has been heard, and the need supplied. Confession is the cry of need—rags and filthiness seeing a Throne and bemoaning with piteous entreaties: "Woe is me! for mine eyes have seen the King." Adoration is the cry of need—awe-filled wonder and praise for the All-Fair, the All-Holy, the All-Loving Whose "greatness flows around our incompleteness." Intercession is the cry of need—love feeling the need of others and pleading for them! Prayer is not a mere form prescribed for those who would be religious, nor a magic shibboleth whose recital will bestow any blessing we may chance to covet. It is a movement of our spirits to God's Spirit, as inevitable as a tide swinging to the rhythm of the moon. It is the instinctive cry of human need. It will not come to God with ill-becoming or irreverent speech, but it will abhor the niceties of the stylist. At its most intense it will resemble the clamor of the Friend at Midnight, or the importunate plea of the Widow before the cruel Judge.

The implication of the stories is plain: Prayer must become a tireless beseeching, before God can richly reward it. Human experience will at times afflict us with the fear that heaven is empty or unfeeling, that the only answer to our prayers is the answer of an echo. God will *appear* at times as One Who must be aroused from slumber, and Who then gives only grudgingly of His abundance. He will appear as unheeding and cruel as a heartless judge. Thus Jesus confronts us with what

<sup>15</sup> This is the emphatic meaning of the word.

<sup>16</sup> See H. E. Fosdick's "The Meaning of Prayer," p. 123.

has been called "the indifference of God to anything less than the best there is in man—the determination of Heaven not to hear what we are not determined that Heaven shall hear."<sup>17</sup>

The history of religious experience affords ample proof that great prayer is marked by importunity. Jacob wrestled with his "angel" until he had wrested from him a new nature: "I will not let thee go except thou bless me."<sup>18</sup> The followers of Jesus tarried in supplication<sup>19</sup> before the Pentecostal fire descended on them. Paul besought the Lord thrice that He would remove his "thorn in the flesh," before he at length received, not the removal of his tribulation, but that "sufficient grace" which made the burden seem light.<sup>20</sup> Did not Jesus Himself pray until "His sweat became as it were great drops of blood falling down upon the ground"?<sup>21</sup> The strong souls of mankind have been under necessity of proving to God that their prayer was the plea of their all-controlling desire.<sup>22</sup>

Jesus does not explain this seeming cruelty in the Divine method. His words are an index to living rather than a rationale or a metaphysic. He believed and taught that only by obedience can we enter into the secrets of the kingdom. Why does the advance of Divine favor resemble our human march—sudden progress after periods of apparent stagnation? Why are the answers of God to our prayers like the works of human genius—a flash of light following dark days of fruitless travail? Why is His coming like the wheel of the seasons—a sudden burst of green after winter's dreary months? Jesus gives no reply save by implication and by scattered hints. We dimly

<sup>17</sup> An illuminating sentence from a brief comment on this parable by Robert Collyer in the "Expositor," First Series, Vol. VIII, p. 319.

<sup>18</sup> Genesis 32: 26.

<sup>19</sup> Bruce is correct in saying that both parables represent "delay experiences," but unconvincing in his contention that the first concerns individual sanctification, and the second concerns the "public fortunes" of the kingdom. His assertion about the "public" scope of the second parable is built on the flimsy ground that the "judge" is a public servant! (See Bruce, *op. cit.*, pp. 145, 148.) Trench makes the better suggestion, *op. cit.*, p. 330, that the first story concerns prayer for a man's own self and the second a prayer for a man's neighbors. But it is not necessary to draw these distinctions. Both stories seem to concern prayer in any or all its forms. Trench, *op. cit.*, pp. 331 *seq.*, recounts the various allegorizings to which the story of the Friend at Midnight has been subjected. His interest in these allegorizings detracts from the value of his interpretation.

<sup>20</sup> II Corinthians 12: 7.

<sup>21</sup> Luke 22: 4.

<sup>22</sup> H. E. Fosdick's "The Meaning of Prayer," Chapter VIII, forms (though without direct reference) a splendid commentary on the Parable of the Importunate Widow.

discern that the delays of Heaven are for our sake. While we plead with importunity our patience is perfected, our humility deepened, our purposes clarified and purged of dross. While the door is closed we learn "to desire earnestly the best gifts."<sup>23</sup>

This truth shines clear, whatever else may remain uncertain: Our prayers must be freed of insincerity and the trivial spirit before heaven's bounty is unlocked. A plea for pardon cannot be perfunctory; it must beat with bruised hands before the door is opened! A prayer of intercession is not honored of God if its compassion is choked or thin; it must besiege God in the fullness of its love! There is no grace bestowed upon a cheap devotion. Equally in our prayers and in our conduct God hates the blasphemy of the get-rich-quick; we must earn our reward in honest toil of spirit and hand. Those who win the reward do not begrudge the toil. The haven has little joy for those who have not breasted stormy seas.

"Prayer is the *soul's sincere desire*,  
Uttered or unexpressed—  
The motion of a hidden fire  
That kindles in the breast."<sup>24</sup>

"It is no affair of hasty words at the fag-end of a day, no form observed in deference to custom, no sop to conscience to ease us from the sense of religious obligations unfulfilled. Prayer is the central and determining force of a man's life."<sup>25</sup>

Such prayer will discover the "bow in the cloud." It will prove the truth of the argument from our "broken lights" to heaven's perfect day.<sup>26</sup> If a heartless judge will avenge a widow because of her importunity, will not the kind God avenge His own children? Such is the assurance given unto those who in the persistence of felt need knock at heaven's door. It is given on the authority of Jesus. It rests for sure support upon the integrity and compassion of His soul.

<sup>23</sup> I Corinthians 12: 31.

<sup>24</sup> James Montgomery, "What Is Prayer?"

<sup>25</sup> H. E. Fosdick's "The Meaning of Prayer," p. 149.

<sup>26</sup> However we may interpret the difficult verses in Luke 18: 6-8, this truth holds. Even if these verses were an addition by the early Church to be attributed to apocalyptic expectation (and that theory has not sure proof) they are true to the genius of His message, and they complete the parallel with the other story.