
Knock Three Times

by: *Ronald L. Dart*

I'm not much into numerology, and I think E. W. Bullinger's list of the significance of numbers is somewhat fanciful. That said, there is something I've wondered about for rather a long time. It has to do with Paul's "thorn in the flesh." In his letter to the Corinthians, he described an incident when he was caught up into heaven and heard things no man could repeat. Then he said this: "And lest I should be exalted above measure through the abundance of the revelations, there was given to me a thorn in the flesh, the messenger of Satan to buffet me, lest I should be exalted above measure. For this thing *I besought the Lord thrice*, that it might depart from me. And he said unto me, my grace is sufficient for thee: for my strength is made perfect in weakness. Most gladly therefore will I rather glory in my infirmities, that the power of Christ may rest upon me" (2 Corinthians 12:7-9).

More than one person has asked me what Paul meant when he said he had besought the Lord three times. People wonder, why only three? Or why three at all? Does it mean he went into a season of prayer and fasting three times? Or just three short prayers, one after another? I think these questions arise in part because of a misunderstanding of something Jesus said. He offered a parable one day to the end that men "ought always to pray, and not to faint" (Luke 18:1). "There was in a city a judge, which feared not God, neither regarded man: And there was a widow in that city; and she came 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 troubles me, I will avenge her, lest by her continual coming she weary me. And the Lord said, Hear what the unjust judge saith. And shall not God avenge his own elect, which cry day and night unto him, though he bears long with them?" (vv. 2-7).

The NIV renders "not to faint" as "not give up." This is a common understanding of the verse and implies ongoing prayers to infinity on any given request. But the Greek word *ekkakeo* is closer to the King James "to faint." Literally, it means "to be weak." Thus, Jesus is not suggesting prayer to infinity on an issue like Paul's, but prayer that is not weak or faint—prayer that comes *boldly* to the throne of grace.

Then there is this. God is not the unjust judge of the parable. He doesn't answer prayer because we have wearied him nor to merely get rid of us. The parable is saying that, if this is what *even an unjust judge does*, wouldn't we expect better treatment from God?

Another parable, in which a man comes to his friend in the middle of the night to borrow bread, is often cited as an example of persistence in prayer. The idea is that he will keep banging on the

door until his friend gets up and gives him what he wants. Jesus said: "I tell you, though he will not get up and give him the bread because he is his friend, yet because of the man's *boldness* he will get up and give him as much as he needs. So, I say to you: Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you (Luke 11:8-9 NIV).

This time, the NIV has it right. It is not the man's persistence that is credited with getting results, but his *boldness*.

While I was thinking about this, I recalled that Jesus went away from the disciples in the Garden of Gethsemane and prayed, not once but three times. Matthew sets the scene for us. Jesus and the disciples went across the brook Kidron to Gethsemane. Jesus stops, leaves most of the men, taking only Peter, James, and John further into the Garden. Then he posts the three men to watch and goes deeper into the Garden and prays. The only way we know what he said in prayer (he was alone) is because he told the disciples later. Here is all we know of this prayer: "O my Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me: nevertheless, not as I will, but as thou wilt" (Matthew 26:39).

Then, Matthew tells us, he returned to the three watchmen and found them asleep. Having awakened them, he returned to his place of prayer, and this is what we know of his later words: "O my Father, if this cup may not pass away from me, except I drink it, thy will be done" (v. 42).

When Jesus returned to the disciples and found them asleep again, he did not wake them, but went away and "prayed the third time, *saying the same words*" (v. 44). Some versions inexplicably depart from the clear statement of the original. But the KJV and NRSV are right. According to Matthew, Jesus said the *same words* in the third prayer.

These three prayers of Jesus' are excruciatingly short. And quite close together. Because Jesus, on his rebuke of the disciples for falling asleep, said, "What, could ye not watch with me one hour?" Some have assumed that he prayed for an hour. It is doubtful that we have to take the "one hour" literally, or that Jesus said nothing else in his prayer. That said, it is entirely possible that Jesus was deep in thought for some of the time he was gone and that the recorded words are the whole prayer. At least those words are all we have from Matthew.

Mark adds a little. The scene is the same, but Jesus' words are a little different: "And he said, Abba, Father, all things are possible unto thee; take away this cup from me: nevertheless, not what I will, but what thou wilt" (Mark 14:36 KJV). Mark is characteristically more compact, giving only the words of the first prayer, but mentioning the three times that Jesus prayed, once again noting that he prayed using "the same words" (v. 38).

If we had only Luke's account, we would assume Jesus prayed only twice, but Luke also records the words: "Father, if thou be willing, remove this cup from me: nevertheless, not my will, but thine, be done" (Luke 22:42).

Luke adds that when Jesus went away another time, he prayed so earnestly that "his sweat was as it were great drops of blood falling down to the ground" (v. 44).

Finally, John does not speak of Jesus' prayer, but only of the surrounding events.

So, we are left with the fact that Jesus prayed three times about the same thing, and the prayers were remarkably short, intense, and pointedly said very close to the same thing. You can almost see a progression in Jesus as he asks for this to go away, but in the process, he works his way through it in prayer and comes to see what he must do.

If I take this event alongside Paul's description of what God did with him, I would think that Paul specifically asked God for relief from this on three occasions, and then came to realize (or the Lord literally spoke to him), that his thorn in the flesh was for the purpose he described.

I can't say that I have found a divine formula for prayer, but there may be a principle lurking in the background. I might have dismissed the idea, but then I remembered another important story from the Book of Acts.

There was a Roman Centurion, the commander of the Italian regiment, who was what the Jews called "a God fearer," a non-Jew who believed in the God of the Jews and practiced the faith as far as he could. His entire household were believers, and he was one who prayed regularly and, doubtless, at the appointed times. It was at one of those times, the ninth hour of the day (about three in the afternoon) that an angel appeared to him and called him by name. His message was simple: "Your prayers and gifts to the poor have come up as a memorial offering before God. Now send men to Joppa to bring back a man named Simon who is called Peter. He is staying with Simon the tanner; whose house is by the sea" (Acts 10:4-6 NIV).

Cornelius could not have imagined what God had in store for him, but being a military man, he knew how to follow orders. He called in two servants and a soldier from his staff who was also a serious believer. Cornelius told the three men what had happened and sent them to Joppa.

Now the scene shifts to Peter who, at his own hour of prayer, has gone up on the roof for solitude and to pray. As the morning drew on, Peter became hungry for his breakfast, and while the smell of food being prepared came up to the roof, Peter fell into a trance. In his vision: "He saw heaven opened and something like a large sheet being let down to earth by its four corners. It contained all kinds of four-footed animals, as well as reptiles of the earth and birds of the air. Then a voice told him, "Get up, Peter. Kill and eat" (Acts 10:11-13 NIV).

This made no sense to Peter. Nothing Jesus said could possibly have told him that he could eat snakes. So, he replied, "Surely not, Lord! I have never eaten anything impure or unclean." Peter knew better than to lay aside a commandment from the Written Law on a mere vision. But the voice spoke a second time: "Do not call anything impure that God has made clean." This happened *three times*.

Peter did not take this to mean that part of the Law had been abolished, but while he pondered what the vision might mean, the three men sent by Cornelius arrived at the house. The voice said: "Simon, three men are looking for you. So, get up and go downstairs. Do not hesitate to go with them, for I have sent them." The vision was given *three times*. *Three* men were at the gate

waiting. If the number three meant nothing, it served at least to minimize any thoughts of coincidence.

When Peter explained later at Jerusalem, he made a special point of this. He was challenged by the circumcised believers for going to the uncircumcised and eating with them. So, Peter told the whole story, omitting nothing. He told them about the great sheet full of animals and then he said: "This happened *three times*, and then it was all pulled up to heaven again. Right then *three men* who had been sent to me from Caesarea stopped at the house where I was staying" (Acts 11:10-11 NIV).

The rest of the story nailed down a new fact for all the Jewish believers. Their own rules about not eating with Gentiles were pointless, because the Gospel had to go to everyone. But it seems that the idea of three-time repetition carried some level of significance.

The number three crops up again and again in Scripture, so we have to take it seriously. *Three times* in a year all males were to appear before God on the holy-days. This in spite of the fact that there were actually seven holy days. Three times Balaam's donkey saved him from the angel that stood as an adversary to him. Three times the poor animal was smitten for her trouble before she finally spoke to Balaam. When Balaam got where he was going, he couldn't curse Israel as requested, but ended up blessing Israel three times.

David bowed himself *three times* to Jonathan before they parted. Elijah stretched himself three times upon the dead child, and the child recovered. Daniel prayed three times a day in the face of a sentence of death. Then, of course, Jesus was in the tomb and Jonah in the fish for three days and three nights. Lazarus was three days in the tomb as well. And then, Peter denied Christ three times, and Jesus demanded his reaffirmation of love three times.

There is something about this that I feel a need to understand. I don't yet, but I think I see this. There needs to be an end, a kind of closure to ongoing petitions to God. There is the example of the unjust judge to consider, but that doesn't necessarily suggest unending petitions on a given request. There may come a time when we, like Paul, need to accept God's answer and get on down the road. I don't think God is pleased with whining or nagging. I have long pondered something Solomon said: "Keep thy foot when thou goest to the house of God, and be readier to hear, than to give the sacrifice of fools: for they consider not that they do evil. Be not rash with thy mouth and let not thine heart be hasty to utter anything before God: for God is in heaven, and thou upon earth: therefore, *let thy words be few*. For a dream cometh through the multitude of business; and a fool's voice is known by multitude of words" (Ecclesiastes 5:1-3 KJV).

Spending an hour in prayer doesn't mean rambling on the whole time. "*Too many words*" seems to constitute the sacrifice of fools. An hour is well spent working your way through the issues and clarifying your request.

There is one other thing. Both Paul and Jesus felt they had their answer after the third request. I don't think it is God's will that we go on in a continual state of frustration. There comes a time when you have to accept that you have his answer and that, while not what you hoped it would

be, it is right for you. Learn to relax, to work with what God has given you. After all, when you are weak, that's when you can do great things.

The late Ronald L. Dart was a Christian evangelist whose teachings still inspire thousands of people around the world. His legacy spans decades. For more information about the teachings of Ronald L. Dart, visit RLDEA.com where you will find booklets, articles, sermons, Bible studies, and books by Mr. Dart.

Discussion Questions

1. What does it mean to you to come boldly to the throne of God in prayer?
2. Does praying the same thing over and over again actually show less faith than praying a few times and then leaving the point in God's hands?
3. Are there other numbers in the Bible that seem important to God?
4. Why do you think God likes to use numbers repetitively?
5. Do you have any thoughts on what may be so special about the number three?
6. The Bible says to "pray without ceasing" (1 Thessalonians 5:17), do you think this means to pray about the same thing over and over until you get an answer, or does it mean something else?
7. What are your thoughts about the parable of the unjust judge?
8. How do you stay in constant prayer with God?
9. What does it mean to you to pray in faith?
10. Have you ever had a "thorn in the flesh" experience?