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## Whether the Time is Favourable or Unfavourable

**Clifford Reinhardt**

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### **Text: Luke 18:1-8**

Dear friends in Christ: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

How and when does God reign over us and all that exists? In his explanation to the Second Petition of the Lord's Prayer, Martin Luther writes, "God's kingdom comes on its own without our prayer, but we ask in this prayer that it may also come to us." I have kept that in mind as I have prepared a contemporary re-telling of Jesus' parable. Taking a cue from our Second Lesson for today (2 Timothy 3:14-4:5) I have entitled it, "Whether the Time is Favourable or Unfavourable."

He slowly sipped his second cup of coffee while shuffling through the letters which his secretary had directed to his attention. She did that so well: picking through the volumes of daily mail and sorting with intuitive insight those which she could deal with and those which, for political reasons, he should consider. After all, in his life politics was everything, from his modest beginnings to this constituency office. "Member of Legislative Assembly" had a satisfying ring to it, especially since he had had to work so hard to achieve the distinction.

He had won his first election only the year before. And he had earned it. At great expense he had hired people who knew the soul of the electorate. They were consummate professionals. They had helped him shape the various planks of his platform so that they appealed to and won the people who held the greatest influence in the riding. It was a credit to his handlers' skills, and a credit to his own shrewdness in hiring such talented people, that he had won a landslide victory in the election. Of course, he dismissed these aides shortly after the election. They had served their purpose and were no longer useful to him.

Here was a letter from his riding association president. She and a delegation of party faithful wanted to discuss with him some detail of

his campaign promises, especially in light of party policies. He read the letter, and then read it again, carefully noting the slightly ominous overtones. He toyed with his pencil momentarily, considering and calculating, and then scribbled a few notes in the margin before setting it aside.

He sighed. The riding association and especially its female president often proved to be a nuisance. They spouted loyalty to the party and its principles. They didn't understand this particular MLA's needs. They didn't understand power and success. But precisely because they were who they were – and more importantly, precisely because of his needs – he did not ignore the letter. It was part of the reality he had to deal with in order to achieve his own ends.

The next letter was entirely different. It was typed on drugstore stationery and came in a cheap envelope. Although the return address was local, it was headed by a foreign-looking name. It wasn't immediately apparent whether the name was male or female, but that question was resolved quickly enough.

In the stilted English of one who has learned it as a second language, the writer explained that her husband had died suddenly and tragically. They had immigrated within the last year: only she and her husband and their one young child had come, no other family members. He had been a lay pastor. He had come to serve a small Christian congregation in a poor ethnic neighbourhood. His salary had been very meagre, and because they had barely had time to get settled in this country, they had not saved any money – not that they really had had any money to save; their personal resources had always been very limited. And now, with her husband's death, she was facing a very desperate situation: her husband had died without a will. In the land from which they had come, women did not have the right of inheritance. Widows were expected to return to their father's households. She was confused and uncertain about the laws in *this* country. In any case, she couldn't return to her father's household. Neither she nor her father could afford the journey overseas. And although they enjoyed landed immigrant status, there was some problem with the legal processing of the estate. Their assets, as trifling as they were, had been frozen. She had barely been able to afford the humblest of funerals, and now her resources were virtually exhausted. To make a bad situation worse, there was some problem with securing any form of social assistance. She wasn't sure

that she understood it; she was only aware that assistance would not be available to her for the present. Could he help her in any way?

He read the letter again, carefully considering her words and their implications. He was well aware that in his riding foreigners were not particularly welcome. Indeed, his election victory had been so complete because he had correctly read the situation, and had shaped his campaign promises accordingly. He wasn't too eager to help this widow – not because he himself was in any way racist; on the contrary, he was pleased to talk to and even assist anyone if that would help promote his career. *But would this help his career?* The fact that she was suddenly widowed didn't make any impact on him; things like that happened to a lot of people. She would get over it.

The fact that she was a Christian didn't mean much to him, either. Although he had come from a nominally Christian background, the church didn't command his loyalty. Actually, he was suspicious of the church, but didn't reveal this to anyone because he thought it wasn't prudent. In light of all the bad publicity of self-serving TV evangelists and scandal-ridden orphanages, he thought it was expedient simply to maintain distance from any organized church. That could change, of course, if his needs changed. No, about the only thing he remembered from his religious upbringing was some saying about *being everything to everyone*. That he understood well. *Who had said that, by the way – Noah or Jesus or someone like that?* No matter. He set the letter aside and turned to more important matters.

Several days later, in the midst of a flurry of telephone calls, his secretary said that she had a call from a woman; the secretary said a name with an oddly familiar ring to it. She had phoned earlier in the day, but his secretary had deflected the call, saying she was sorry but the MLA was very busy that morning. Now she was calling again, and insisted that he speak with her. He sighed, but said he would take her call.

Once again she gave her name and asked if he had received her letter. She had written him about her desperate personal plight. As he shuffled through the papers on his desk, he said that he had indeed received it, and had read it, and that he was *very* concerned, but wasn't sure just what he could do to help.

She seemed to struggle for words and then, with a quaver in her voice, asked if she could come in to see him. She wanted to explain

her dilemma personally. He replied that he had a very busy schedule, and doubted that he could fit her in for several weeks. There was a pause. And then she said, in a low, quiet voice, that she was simply desperate. Couldn't he please help? He had a bad feeling about it, but said, Yes, maybe she could come around and see his secretary. Perhaps she could help her deal with the red tape. Once again, a pause. Then the female voice spoke a quiet but relieved "Thank you," and the conversation ended.

She was already there the next morning when he came to his constituency office. Her appearance surprised him. He wasn't really sure just what he had expected, but he was still taken aback by her youth. She looked to be in her mid-twenties. And she was lovely. When he had read in her letter that she was a widow of a Christian lay-pastor, he supposed that she would look rather plain or severe.

She sat on the edge of her seat, following his entrance with hopeful eyes. He smiled his charming smile at her, said, "Good morning," threw a pointed glance at his secretary, and quickly fled to his inner office. But when he tried to close the door behind him, he discovered that the widow had followed him. He had no option but to offer her a seat.

She repeated what she had written in her letter. He portrayed attentiveness to cover his impatience. When she finished her story, he said he would indeed look into it. He also said she shouldn't get her hopes up too high. These things often took time, you know. He would get back to her when he had information for her. When the widow left, some of the desperation in her eyes had been replaced with something a little more hopeful.

The MLA turned to business more important to his political career. A week later she was back. She came at a bad time. The riding association president and the executive committee were meeting with the MLA in his office. The door suddenly banged open, and there she was. He could see his secretary frantically scrambling to get out from behind her desk, her face awash with panic.

What really caught his attention, however, was the widow. If anything, her eyes looked even more desperate than before. But there was something else there, too. Determination. Perhaps even anger.

It was a tremendous credit to his powers of observation to catch this change in her attitude at all. Few men would have got beyond what else was there: she was simply stunning. Whereas before she

had dressed very modestly, almost prudishly, as befit women of her culture and station, now her attire was alluring, and her make-up seductive. In her distinctive foreign accent she demanded to speak with him.

The MLA was only too aware of the eyes of the president and the executive committee of the riding association. Their eyes darted back and forth between him and the widow. The president raised her eyebrows at him, and excused herself and the executive. They would wait outside, she said, until he was free.

The widow seated herself in front of his desk. Although her moves were obviously rehearsed and lacked natural grace, he found himself captivated. She leaned forward over the desk, and used every trick to keep his attention. Yet as she told her story once again, some of her feigned composure peeled away, and she became once more the desperate, frightened woman who had visited his office the previous week.

He understood. She was even shaming herself in service of her desperate mission. It didn't move him in any way, but it frightened him. He could easily imagine his riding association executive sitting out in the waiting room, exchanging questioning glances...perhaps even a smirk or leer.

Quickly he promised the widow immediate action. He guaranteed her financial relief by the end of the week, underwritten by his own personal resources if necessary. Genuine gratitude suddenly relieved the widow of her role. In sudden self-consciousness, she shrank back from the desk. She tried to pull slinky material more completely around her. Her face reddened deeply. She stumbled over her words of thanks, quickly excused herself, and ran the gauntlet of stares in the waiting room. The MLA calculated frantically as the riding association committee filed grimly back into his office.

A week later he received a final letter concerning the matter. It was from one of the elders of the church served by the late pastor. The elder explained that in his convictions, God was ruler over all. God provided everything for his people, including public officials who were called to rule over people in accordance with God's will. He thanked the MLA for his kind and timely intervention in this tragic matter. *Praise God, he wrote, that God rules here in this land. Praise God that men like you, dear MLA, act as servants of the kingdom. Praise God for so selfless and honourable a man as you, dear MLA.*

*Praise God that he provides for his people, and appoints rulers who will help the helpless, and restore justice and equity.*

Dear friends in Christ: don't lose heart. God's kingdom comes on its own whether the time seems favourable or unfavourable. Only let us ask persistently in all circumstances that it may also come to us.