

O Woman, Great Is Your Faith

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[0 : 0 0] Well friends, we're going to turn back to the chapter that we read together, Matthew chapter 15. I'd like us to consider section from verse 21 through to verse 28 for to take for a text this evening, we could perhaps take the words of verse 28. Then Jesus answered her, Oh woman, great is your faith, be it done for you as you desire, and her daughter was healed instantly. Well friends, we read in 1 Peter 1 verse 7 the following. We read there verses 6 and 7 rather in this you rejoice, though now for a little while if necessary you have been grieved by various trials, so that the tested genuineness of your faith, more precious than gold that perishes through though it is tested by fire, may be found to result in praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ. I wonder friends, tonight as we gather together for worship and as we reflect upon our lives, can we say at any point, perhaps even right now, that our faith has been tested. Has your faith ever been tested? The fact is that as we sojourn through life, as we find ourselves faced with many trials and difficulties, as I alluded to in prayer, as we wake up each new day, not sure what it's going to have in store for us, the reality is that there are so many opportunities for our faith to be tested. And as we reflect on that reality, questions can arise in our mind. Why does the Lord allow our faith to be tested? We might think well surely in doing this he is setting us up to fail, that he is some angry detached God who is doing all in his power to test us so that he can trick us and trip us up and so that somehow if we do not pass that test, well that's it. We've had our chance, it's game over for us as a Christian and we cannot go any further on in our Christian walk. That is of course not the attitude of our God, that is the attitude that sadly we ourselves all too often have one to another. We're not very good at giving second chances. We're quite happy to call to mind a failure or a fault of someone in the past and hold that against them in the future so that as it were their copy book was blotted beyond redemption, not our Savior. And as we come to this encounter that we have tonight, it might seem that that is exactly what is happening. Here we meet with this woman, this Canaanite woman you might know as a Syrophoenician woman. And as we meet with this woman this evening, we're able to see very clearly that her faith is tested. A woman who as we reflect upon the narrative that she finds herself in here we would be forgiven for thinking that she too has been set up to fail. This is a woman who responds to her particular providence in a way that leads the Lord Jesus to say to her, Oh woman, great is your faith. We're going to think about three things this evening just very briefly. We're going to think about Christ's apparent rejection of this woman in verse 24. I was sent, sorry, first of all verse 23, Christ's apparent silence to this woman when he says, but he did not answer her a word.

And then we look at his apparent rejection of her in verse 24 when he says, I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel. And then finally we're going to think about Christ's apparent insult to this woman in verse 26. And he answered, it is not right to take the children's bread and throw it to the dogs. And I use the word apparent for each of these points for a reason. I suppose this in many ways reflects how we look upon God's dealings with us. Because when there's silence, rejection, insult, we can perhaps look at it in a different way to the way that God has actually intended these things to be for us. And I'd like us just to work through that for a short time, this evening, and to see that in reality these perceived actions of Jesus towards this woman, woman, were in fact a means of strengthening her faith. None of us can stand back to see the bigger picture of our life as Christians. But it's often the case that when we look at an immediate context, an immediate situation, that we can become so submerged that we're unable to lay hold of the reality that God has a plan for us. And I hope that as we reflect on this, we'll be able to see that for ourselves. As we see this woman being strengthened following all these perceived silence, rejection, and insults, as this woman is strengthened, that we'll see that we too, ourselves, can be strengthened in the same way. Let's then turn to verse 22. Verse 22. And when we come to verse 22, we meet with this woman coming to Jesus with what appears to be an urgent request. She cries out, Have mercy on me, O Lord, Son of David. My daughter is severely oppressed by a demon. Now, I don't want us to focus on the daughter this evening. That would be a sermon for another time. We're going to think especially of this woman who makes this plea. Here is a woman who is possessed by demons, a woman whose whole being is taken up with satanic forces. We've seen that in other points in scripture. It was a reality for so many, so much so that the daughter that this woman would have known and loved in this world would not have been recognizable as these demons took over her whole being. And as she comes to the Lord, she wants help. She wants help. And if we're to look at the Greek here, we see that the cry that the woman here makes is a repeated cry. She cries out these words over and over and over again. She's crying out these words, Have mercy on me, O Lord, Son of David. My daughter is severely oppressed by a demon, so much so that the streets would have been ringing with her cries. This is a plea of desperation. I need to just

pause there and remember exactly who this woman was. She wasn't an Israelite. She wasn't one who could identify as being a child of God, one of God's chosen people as it were. She was a Canaanite.

She was one who had been born and brought up steeped in pagan idolatry. But as we reflect even upon this detail, we were reminded of the fact that the Gospel is for all. Just because she was a Canaanite didn't mean that she couldn't or didn't have faith in Jesus. Just remember Rahab the Harlot. She was the most unlikely of candidates to cast her law down with the Lord. She was a Canaanite prostitute, but still she was the one who did all, who even risked her life for the Lord's people. Of course the Gospel is open to Jew and to Gentile alike. It doesn't matter our culture or context. It doesn't matter who we are or where we've come from. The Gospel is for you.

[10:52] We can of course have a tendency to brand the Gospel to our own particular culture as if it's only really for us or if it's only us that understand it fully and deeply. That's not of course true. That is an insult to the finished work of Christ. Here we have a Canaanite woman and here she's coming, pleading to the Lord. But how does he respond? How does the Lord Jesus respond to this woman's plea, bearing in mind who she is? Well he doesn't. He doesn't respond at all.

There's silence. We read in verse 23, but he did not answer her a word. Just picture the scene.

You're crying out to someone desperately needing help. Someone that you believe is able to help you. You're pleading with them and nothing. Silence. How would you feel? How did this woman feel? He answered her not a word. Perhaps you know exactly how she feels. You know if you're a Christian here tonight, you know what it is to cry out to God and to hear nothing back. And of course such times can be so difficult in our experience. Such silences can almost be deafening.

Samuel Rutherford who said that he went so far even to say that the silence of God is a taste of hell on earth for the believer. It's a worse thing when God is silent in any way shape or form.

Even when we've done wrong, even when we've sinned against God and nothing, not even a rebuke or a chastisement, nothing. Just silence. Those times when we're praying and it feels like the heavens are almost like brass. Our prayers aren't going past the ceiling. Those times when we perhaps you didn't feel like this tonight. Those times when we feel so alone in our souls, so perplexed at our providence, feeling that nobody understands what we're going through. And so we turn to the Lord and still not a word. Those times when we share the burden of the bride in the song of Solomon, when she says, I will rise now and go about the city in the streets and in the broadways, I will seek Him whom my soul loves. I sought Him, but I found Him not. Have you had that experience?

[14 : 16] It's not a pleasant or a comfortable place to be. But be encouraged friends that if you find that place in uncomfortable and discouraging to be, that's a good sign. The danger is that we don't miss not hearing the voice of God. That God isn't speaking to us in a personal way and we're not even noticing as if our conscience is numbed and seared as if with a hot iron. Martin Luther, he knew this deafening silence from God. He was leaving home one day and he said to his wife, and it's encouraging when we hear those of old, we can of course always esteem people to be so high and holy and forget that the best of men are men at best with their trials and tribulations like us.

We see that in scripture. We see that in history. And one day, Martin Luther was leaving his house and he was in such a place of darkness that he said to his wife, Katie, he said, God is so silent that I think he is dead. He came home that night and as he did, he noticed that all the shutters on the house were closed. All the shutters on the windows were closed, the sign that somebody had died in this culture. So he burst in and he asked his wife, who is it that has died? Who's passed away, anxious, worried about the news that was going to face him? What did she say? She said with a tone of rebuke, you said this morning that God had died. Is that not a rebuke? That this eminent man of God had allowed unbelief to overshadow his soul? A picture of the reality of what it is to be a Christian no matter who we are. So we might ask then why? Why is it that God can at times be so silent? Often we'll never know the exact reason. We can't know that. It's not ours to know.

But yet ultimately we know that his silence is for his own greater glory. We read in the Gospel of John 11 that love that Jesus had for Mary and Martha and Lazarus. He would come and he would stay at the home. He was a friend of theirs. But yet we see that when Lazarus became sick, when he became sick and Mary and Martha sent to Jesus seeking help, we read in verse six of that chapter, that when he heard that is Jesus, that he was sick. He stayed two more days in the place that he was. He didn't respond straight away. What a strange thing to do. A friend, a friend of Lazarus.

He's heard that Lazarus is unwell and he stays where he is. Why didn't he come and rush to the help of Lazarus? Why does he wait a couple more days? By that time Lazarus could and of course would in fact be dead. But this is where we have to think about how God brings glory to himself.

It's difficult for us to understand. Of course this is where faith is involved. What would bring about more glory to God? Healing a sick man like Lazarus or raising Lazarus from the dead, of course, both would bring glory to God. All that God does brings glory to his name. But in the eyes of those in this world, what would show the power of God more? Well surely it would be raising Lazarus from the dead. And that's where we need to then take this principle and apply it to our own lives.

[19 : 06] There can be something horrendous and I'm not in any way belittling or making small the difficulties we have to go through in this world by no means. We must never ever do that and then flippantly put them to one side. But it's good to talk about them nonetheless.

It's good to think about them in the context of the scripture. And sometimes we can have something happening in our life that's just way beyond our comprehension that even tests our faith.

But maybe, maybe if that particular thing wasn't in your life, in the future, you wouldn't be as strong in the Lord. You wouldn't have that closeness to the Lord as you reflect upon how He's taken you from one place to another. A journey that you never ever ever thought you would be able to take it. He has taken you and you know you know it's not of yourself.

You know that you couldn't have dragged yourself to that place. But yet you're here. And had you not had that great mountain to overcome, perhaps you and me with you, you, we would have taken for granted the promises of God, the mercy of God, the grace of God. We wouldn't have experienced it in such a fullness of measure. God's ways aren't our ways. We cannot fully understand them. But Providence is best read backwards. And I'm sure that our many Christians here have been on the road for many years who look back on their lives and can say, well, I can see why that happened. It wasn't good or nice or pleasant at the time. But I can see that for whatever reason it happened, I don't know. It happened for my good.

Maybe tonight you're at your wood's end, coming to the Lord, praying to Him about something. Maybe He's making you wait just for this particular purpose. One commentator puts it like this, that from the ashes of our efforts, He revives the flames of faith and love and gives His answer when we least expect it. From the ashes of our efforts, so true that so often we try and go it alone. We try to do this and that to overcome this mountain. We fail. And it's often from the ashes of that which we try to do ourselves, that we come to Him as a last resort, sadly, sometimes, perhaps even often. And then at that point He revives those flames of faith and of love, giving us that answer. At that point when we don't expect it. And when we look at this woman here, we might think, well, you'll be understandable if she just turned round and gone home, if she'd given up hope that this man Jesus was ever going to answer her prayer. Perhaps those who knew her told her before, she left the house to go and see Jesus that she was completely wasting her time.

[23 : 02] What are you playing at? Why are you going to see this Jesus of Nazareth? This is a Jewish Messiah. Why do you expect Him to have anything to do with you a Kenanite? You can just imagine these words ringing in her ears. Well, there's no surprise that He's having nothing to do with me. Just look at who I am. Look at where I've come from. But she persists. That's how we can see their faith here.

She persists. And that's what faith does. That's what active faith does. It persists. It doesn't give up. Because for the Christian, very much central to the Christian life is a keeping on, keeping on. There's this idea of enduring to the end so that we are saved. Scripture tells us that it's not those who start a race that are recognized, but those who finish a race. And so it is with us.

That's the nature of faith. We're to put our hand to the plow, not to turn back. Yes, we might have the voice of, yes, we will have the voice of the devil telling us we are wasting our time. We shouldn't bother. Let's go back to the world as we lived it before. It was far easier. That's what he tells us.

But we are never, ever, ever to give up. No matter how bleak things are, no matter how loud the silence of God may appear in our experience, don't give up. Don't give up. Because that's when your faith and mine with you, that's when our faith will be strengthened. That's when we mature as Christians. That's when we grow in grace. That's when we can then share in the sufferings of others and empathize with others with authenticity. Because we've been there ourselves. We know what it's like. We must never, ever portray the Christian walk to be all shiny and polished without difficulty. That's just a lie. It's not true. Perhaps in our culture it's something we're not so good at, shading one another's burden. So we give this picture that all is rosy in the garden.

When in reality we are struggling, don't give up. Be like this Canaanite woman. Persist. Persist.

[25 : 41] She persists and this brings us to our second point. Her points won't be as long as the first one. And as she persists, what happens? She's rejected. It would seem that she's not only rejected by the disciples in verse 23. His disciples came and begged him saying send her away for she's crying out after us. You would expect Jesus to say no, don't send her away. But then he himself goes on to say in verse 24, I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel. I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel. If this woman's heart had sunk before it couldn't sink anymore at this point, why is he pushing me away? Why doesn't he want anything to do with me?

He's silent and now he's pointing out that I'm not even of the house of Israel. Why is he doing this? The fact is that Christ's priestly work has promised saviour through whom all the nations would be blessed. This is a work that needs to be distinguished from his prophetic work during his ministry on earth. And his prophetic work during his ministry on earth was primarily confined to the Jews just for that time. Of course the day would come when Christ would die and rise again and he would ascend into heaven and send forth his spirit to break down that middle wall of separation between Jew and Gentile. But that particular time had not yet happened.

So it's hard to be rejected by people. But by being rejected by the Lord is surely hardest of all. Even in these experiences friends, even at these times of rejection, the Lord is at work. Even when we cannot see it, we see this with the woman who finds herself later for herself. But yet in the meantime, even in the face of rejection, you have to admire her faith as she's not given up, even in the face of rejection, she casts herself upon the Lord. She cries out in worship before the Lord with the simplest of words, Lord help me. Lord help me. That's what true faith does. It pleads on even in the face of apparent rejection and we might feel at times that we've got no words to pray. We've got nothing left in the tank as it were. We've got no desire to spill out hearts out before God with prayer and with worship. But look at this, three words, Lord help me.

We can all manage that friends, can't we? Lord help me. This is not a sign that we have an immature Christian before us. You know, this is a sign of the utmost maturity in the faith.

And a sign of being mature in the faith is a sign that we are willing to humble ourselves. When we will not humble ourselves with such simple prayers, when we think that somehow God will only listen to us if we use theological language, if we take a certain position for a certain length of time, that's the only point you'll hear us. If that's the way we think we are spiritually immature.

[30 : 08] The spiritually mature know the nature of their Savior. They know the fact that he is a father who pities his children. Lord help me. A child dependent upon her father, what a beautiful picture. A picture that we would all do well to emulate as we find ourselves struggling. Lord help me. Surely he'll help her now. Surely, not quite.

Then appears, this is very briefly our final point that Jesus goes on to insult this woman.

We see this apparent insult in verse 26 and he answered, it is not right to take the children's bread and throw it to the dogs. You know, in the culture and the context of the day, comparing someone to a dog was the lowest of insults. You could not be insulted any more than to be called or to be compared to a dog. So what does Jesus mean when he says it's not good to take children's bread and to throw it to the dogs? Well, we know here that the Canaanite woman, she's already accepted her unworthiness as a Gentile, but now her uncleanness is being pointed out. Jesus is apparently stripping off of all her self-worth. She's left with absolutely nothing completely and utterly exposed before Jesus. We need of course, and it's okay, it's easy I suppose for us to look on this from the outside and to say this, but we must remember that Jesus wasn't being cruel or unkind because what he's doing here in testing this woman's faith is strengthening her faith. Remember what we mentioned earlier, William Gernel helpfully points out that faith is a two-handed thing. With one hand, it takes everything of what I am and it wipes it out the way and with the other hand, it reaches out and takes everything that Christ is and draws it to the soul. He must increase and I must decrease and that's what's happening here and that's what often happens to us as the Lord's people. Our faith is tested and strengthened how often by us coming to an end of ourselves.

If we had a walk through this world without any tests of faith, we'd be unable to identify with the wonder of his grace in this way. This woman could. Now she responds to Jesus.

You or I might respond with frustration. She responds beautifully in verse 26. She said, yes, Lord, but even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their master's table. She doesn't deny that she's like a dog. She knows it in her heart, in her own estimation, but yet even in light of how she sees herself by nature, what does she do? She claims what is rightfully hers. She's here saying, give me then a dog's portion, a child's portion. Give me a few crumbs. Even a few crumbs I will be satisfied with. Please give me a few crumbs. What perseverance. You know, she's, is she not like a New Testament Jacob saying, I will not let you go until you bless me. And for us, it comes back to something we always need to remember to plead God's promises. We've got nothing else of our own to plead. One of the Puritans said this, that God is tender of his own handwriting. He loves to read his own letters to you. Show him his handwriting. Show him his handwriting. So that when, even in the face of adversity, things appear that they cannot get any worse, we plead the promises of God.

[35 : 31] We say to God, you have said this, you have promised this in your word. You are a God of truth. You are a God who does not lie. You are bound to fulfill this promise. Let it be so. That is not presumption friend. That is faith. That is faith. Persistent faith. John Bunyan said, and I think we can all identify with this. My problem is that I knock at the door of grace, but only once or twice.

And then I leave God alone. How true. We don't persist. We give up. When we don't get the answer straight away, we give up. And we carry on and we struggle. And we find ourselves floundering in the sea of our difficult providences. But what about those of us here tonight who aren't saved?

Well, this of course can apply to the seeker, the one who is seeking Jesus, but in their own mind hasn't yet found him. The dear soul, perhaps even you here tonight who's knocking, who's even banging at the door and still nothing. Persevere. You persevere. Never, ever, ever give up. Doesn't matter how long you've been seeking him for, whether it's years or decades, you never, ever give up.

Because while you're on mercy's ground, you can say on mercy's ground, mercy was sought. And mercy was found. Don't give up. Keep leading the promises of the Lord. You say in your word that those who seek will find. Let it be so. Your name is at stake. Persist. Never give up.

This woman doesn't give up. She simply will not leave the Lord alone. What an example. And you know, God can use the greatest of obstacles in our path to help us to grow in our faith. But we have to keep begging at that throne of grace. And when we do, the Lord will answer. And that applies not only individually, but as a congregation, as a congregation here in the district of Carloway. So many more people could be gathered in this building tonight and they're not either same in Grava, same everywhere else. They're not. How persistent are we in asking the Lord and pleading with the Lord that he will work mightily? Jesus responds to persistent faith.

[38 : 42] In verse 28, he says to this, to the woman, he says this, Oh woman, great is your faith.

Be it done for you as you desire. Do you think the woman's faith would have been strengthened as much as she not gone through these experiences? But could she not say at this point, Hallelujah?

What a savior. Through thick and thin, he's come through at the end as he always does.

Great is your faith. An experience which served to show the glory and the mercy and the love of Jesus, a faith that was tried but strengthened as she persevered against all odds.

But it was as if Jesus was saying here, here are the keys for my storehouse. Take them. Take them.

[39 : 55] I can see that you really, really want them. I can see that you believe that I have them and I can give them to you. Here they are. Take them. And as she took those keys to the storehouse of the feast that is an offer to the gospel, she wasn't given a few crumbs from her master's table.

She was given a feast that would feed her soul, a feast that would lead her to the greatest feast of all. Let's feast on the Lord, friends. Let's plead his promises and take them to ourselves.

Let's believe. Let's not give up. And in the process, let's watch God work mightily for his glory.

Amen. Let's join together. We give thanks to Lord for the testimony of your people, the testimony that you have in your love and mercy given to us as an encouragement and as a reminder of who you are and who we are in you. Forgive us. We pray for our lackluster faith.

Forgive us for losing sight of your promises and laying hold of the word of man, perhaps even at times more tightly than the word of your promises. We thank you, Lord, that your word is ye and amen in Christ Jesus. And so we pray that you would feed us with that hunger, that thirst and hunger after righteousness so that we would be filled, filled with a word of hope and of purpose and of expectation. Go before us now. We pray and forgive us in Jesus' name. Amen.

[42 : 03] Well, friends, let us conclude our time of worship. We're going to sing to God's praise. Sing Psalms from Psalm 16.