

women IN SCRIPTure

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The Syro-Phoenician Woman: A Story of Faith, Healing and Hope

by Stephanie Catmull



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Know that this Gentile woman, by going to Jesus and proclaiming her faith in Him, was risking everything.

The story of the Syro-Phoenician woman, found in Matthew 15:21-28 and Mark 7:24-29, has to be one of the most controversial, misunderstood passages in the entire Bible. Antagonists of Jesus use it to call Him a cold, impassive, uncaring racist who cruelly insults a woman, calling her nothing more than a dog. Antagonists cry foul that Jesus only cared about the Jews, and the rest were a worthless pile of dung in His eyes. Antagonists will try to use this passage to convince you that Jesus ignores you when you call out to Him. Antagonists will use say Jesus is impersonal, distant, and power-hungry. Antagonists will tell you that God is silent. Antagonists will try to tell you that you are not deserving of the scraps of His Word.

The antagonists are liars, and their spirit of misinterpretation is only trying to lead you farther away from the Truth. Don't let your faith be steered away by their misguided deception. Listen to Jesus. Listen carefully to what He is really telling this Gentile woman. Really listen to what God is speaking to YOU in these passages.

From there He arose and went t the region of Tyre and Sidon. And He entered a house and wanted no one to know it, but He could not be hidden. For a woman whose young daughter had an unclean spirit heard about Him, and she came and fell at His feet. The woman was a Greek, a Syro-Phoenician by birth, and she kept asking Him to cast the demon out of her daughter. But Jesus said to her, "Let the children be filled first, for it is not good to take the children's bread and throw it to the little dogs." And she answered and said to Him, "Yes Lord, yet even the little dogs under the table eat from the children's crumbs." Then He said to her, "For this saying go your way; the demon has gone out of your daughter." (Mark 7:24-28, NKJV)

Then Jesus went out from there and departed to the region of Tyre and Sidon. And behold, a woman of Canaan came from that region and cried out to Him, saying, "Have mercy on me, O Lord, Son of David! My daughter is severely demon-possessed." But He answered her not a word. And His disciples came and urged Him, saying, "Send her away, for she cries out after us." But He answered and said, "I was not sent except to the lost sheep of the house of Israel." Then she came and worshiped Him, saying, "Lord, help me!" But He answered and said, "It is not good to take the children's bread and throw it to the little dogs. And she said, "Yes, Lord, yet even the little dogs eat the crumbs which fall from their masters' table." Then Jesus answered and said to her, "O woman, great is your faith! Let it be to you as you desire." And her daughter was healed from that very hour." (Matthew 15: 21-28 NKJV)

The place where Jesus traveled to is in modern-day Lebanon. Once, five

hundred years before Jesus' ministry on earth, the land was subjugated by the Assyrians who captured and enslaved the Jews as punishment for their idol worship. This was the same place that Jezebel reigned as a wicked queen alongside King Ahab – worshipping Baal. The land was prosperous, had a mighty navy, and was directly at the crossroads of trade routes. It was a brilliant society, one that gave us the modern-day Phoenician alphabet. They were masters in weaponry, and leaders of the ancient world in its economy, military, and assimilating culture.

Yet in high contrast, this was also the land that provided the lumber for the great Temple of Jerusalem. Hiram, a bronze-worker filled with wisdom and understanding, was hired by King Solomon as his master craftsman. The cedar from Tyre (Lebanon) was shipped from his homeland to build the richest palace ever constructed. Hiram built the pillars for God's temple, the furnishings, the carts, the lavers, the Sea and the oxen. He built the altar, the table, the lampstand, the basins, the bowls, the censers, even the hinges of pure gold. He painstakingly constructed the inner sanctuary where the Ark of the Covenant would be kept. Hiram, from the land of Tyre, built God's house, the great Temple of Jerusalem, where God's presence would reign and the people would worship.

Hiram and this Syro-Phoenician woman, both Tyre citizens, have much in common though they are separated by centuries. They both lived in the same land of great wealth and insidious pagan idol worship. They both were called by God – one by the great king of the land; the other by seeking the Healer. Both were outsiders of Jewish culture. Both were seeking God, wanting to worship Him, wanting to be close to Him, wanting Him to be the centre of their lives. Both wanted to serve Him. One wanted to build a place for God's presence to reside; the other wanted God's presence to reside in her heart. Both demonstrated the gifts of God's Spirit: One with the gift of Craftsmanship; the other with the gift of Faith.

Did Jesus specifically travel to Tyre/Sidon for the exact purpose of meeting this Gentile woman? Understand that Jesus never went anywhere without a mission – His planning was strategic, and knew where He was going, when He was going, and *why* He was going. Jesus had a reason why He hid in Tyre. Could it be that he wanted only to rest in peace, away from the mobs and throngs of people? Yes, but take into account that He could have done this anywhere.

Jesus chose Tyre for a reason, and a specific *house* in Tyre for a reason. The purpose was the woman of this house, who represented the lost sheep of Israel desperately trying to get close to Jesus, and needed their voice to be heard. Jesus went back to the city where the precious metals of God's Temple were molded and formed. He went back to where the building blocks of His foundation were kept. Jesus went to the place where the souls were ripe for

harvest, and to hear the pleas of a woman who placed the tremendous mustard seed of faith in Him.

Jesus went there, because this was the intended extension of His ministry. This is the place and time where He lets it be known that His gospel is for all the world, not just Jews. Don't you see? Jesus KNEW what she was going to say. He KNEW that her words would be recorded for the multitudes in history. He KNEW that her faith was great, that she was representative of all the lost souls that were seeking Him. This was the turning point in Jesus' time on earth. This is the time where He lets it be known that ALL can come unto Him for His love and saving grace. That when we proclaim that Jesus is the son of God, when we worship Him with all our heart and soul, we then belong to Him.

Jesus doesn't suddenly "decide" to allow this woman to share in His gospel (as if He hadn't considered it up until this point). He doesn't change His mind because of the loud, desperate words of a Gentile. He is not bullied by a "pagan dog of a woman" into losing an argument, and then ruefully granting her wish. Jesus has majestically orchestrated these circumstances to announce that His gospel is for the world to hear. And as the Grand Conductor, Jesus, through this woman, instructs the disciples to do just that.

Yet, some people think Jesus treated her cruelly. That He called her a dog. That He treated her with cold abandonment. They question how such a loving God would viciously ignore the pleas of an outsider.

Look at it from another direction. Suppose you go to Jesus and say "Hey Jesus, guess what? I have a daughter who is on drugs."

And?? Crickets. Deafening silence. How do you interpret this reaction?

Do you say – obviously He doesn't care about me? Do you believe that God is an evil God who is dispassionately allowing this bad thing to happen to your family? Do you rage at God, and think He is mean-spirited because if He wanted to, all He would have to do is snap His fingers and everything would be ok? If God cared about your happiness, then wouldn't He would fix this miserable, painful part of your life? Do you think that God must be silent, because He doesn't care? Do you blame God for the circumstances in your life?

Your reaction to Jesus' response in this passage says much more about *you* than it does about God. It speaks to your level of faith, your measure of trust, and your knowledge of who God truly is.

What should Jesus do in this situation? How would *you* react if someone demanded something from you, not because they loved or respected you, but

simply because you were the rich man on the block and they felt entitled to what you could give them? That *you* owed *them* simply because you are wealthy. Is the Gentile asking Jesus for help because of her sense of entitlement, because of What-God-Can-Do-For-Her?

Or is she asking through faith in whom God is? *A faith that she hasn't professed yet.* She has just stated that her daughter is sick. Doesn't Jesus want more than us telling Him what is wrong with our life? Don't you think He already knows? He wants us. He wants to hear our confession that He is the Son of God and Lord of our life *before* we give him a laundry list of problems we want Him to fix.

Jesus is not *ignoring* the gentile when she says her daughter is demon-possessed; He is patiently, silently waiting for her confession of Him first and foremost, before He responds to her request. Don't forget that God has no obligation to fulfill the requests of those who don't believe. Before you get mad at God, look at your relationship with Him first. Go back to your foundation, and see where the pillars of your life stand. If they are not built on the foundation of God, they will crumble into formless sand. It takes your faith, your action, your belief and profession in who God is before you are given the keys to His kingdom. Don't just decorate the outside of your house with the things of God; decorate your heart with the desires of God.

And the Syro-Phoenician woman does. The gentile falls at His feet, she worships Jesus as the Son of God, and she pleads for His mercy. She persistently pleads again and again for Jesus' healing for her daughter. For even Matthew says earlier in 7:7-8, "Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives, and he who seeks finds, and to him who knocks it will be opened." The Syro Phoenician woman is faithfully asking, seeking, knocking, pulling at God's heartstrings through the right course of action.

Incidentally, Jesus wasn't just focused on *that* moment in time, since time is relative to the Creator of the Universe. Jesus perceives that her words would be read thousands of years later to give the hope, confidence and understanding to us today– to the drug addict, adulterer, alcoholic, murderer, rebellious teen, prostitute, disrespectful wife, abusive husband, liars, thieves, gossipers, and slanderers.

Jesus spoke certain words to her, in order for her to respond with words of faith. Not to condemn her, not to make her feel small; she is the foil upon which the Lost Sheep's faith is declared. Jesus was there to proclaim His global ministry to his disciples **through her.**

Know that this Gentile woman, by going to Jesus and proclaiming her faith in

Him, was risking everything. Already she was probably being shunned by her own people since she is turning away from their paganistic rituals. And now she is risking being shut out by Jesus' disciples, because she is not a Jew. She fits into neither world. She is a lowly woman who is lost, alone, scared, and her daughter is suffering a demon.

So again, why doesn't Jesus respond here? She has professed her faith. She has proclaimed who He is. She has worshiped Him. She has persistently asked for mercy and healing. She has demonstrated certain humility and deference to His Lordship.

Is He testing her? Many scholars think so. Many think Jesus is wanting to see if she will give up, to see if her faith can withstand the silence you sometimes hear from God. Yet God sometimes has multiple purposes He wants to achieve through a single act.

Maybe God was simply waiting for the next event to happen. The event that would be the turning point in His ministry. An event that would bring both the Gentiles and the Jews together for His purpose. His jigsaw puzzle of life was waiting for a crucial piece to be in place before He connected it to another. He was not just waiting on the Syro-Phoenician woman's pleas; He was also waiting on the *reaction* of His disciples to her, in order to progress His mission on earth. Jesus simply waited for His followers to tell Him to send her away, which He knew they would do.

Jesus was not ignoring her; He simply turned his attention to the words of His disciples, and clarifies that ***His mission was for the lost sheep of Israel***. That meant EVERYONE who believes in Lord as God, and are seeking Him with their whole heart, mind and soul. He was not here just for the Jews by birth, but for all the children who believed in Him. That His gospel, His mission, His blood-atoning sacrifice was for every person on earth, including this Gentile woman before them. He was here those lost sheep, who are searching for their Savior in Jesus Christ.

Jesus was not "capitulating" to her faith. He already knew of her faith. He already knew her heart. He already knew He was going to meet her. He knew that she would confess it aloud for all to hear, and for it to be written down as a permanent record for the Jews and Gentiles alike. They are now aligned perfectly with each other: Her Faith furthers His global outreach, and He in turn saves the world.

Note the same is said through King David and the prophet Joel in the Old Testament:

"Because he has set his love upon Me, therefore I will deliver him; I will set

him on high, because he has known My name. He shall call upon Me, and I will answer him; I will be with him in trouble; I will deliver him and honor him. With long life I will satisfy him, And show him My salvation." (Psalms 91:14-16 NKJV)

"That whoever calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved"

(Joel 2:32)

Are you a follower who, like the disciples, judge the people who come to Jesus? Are you suspicious of their motive? Of their past? Do you look at them differently if they are rich or poor? How about if they come from a Muslim country like Iran or Afghanistan? If you are – if you are truly being honest with yourself – identify with the disciples, know you are in like company, and hearken the words of Jesus. He instructed them, and is instructing you, that *everyone* is His lost sheep. No matter who they are, what they've done, or where they come from, they can turn to Him in faith and when they call upon His name, they will be saved.

Paul echoes this sentiment when he declared that all are considered children of God through faith in Jesus Christ in his letter to the Romans:

"For with the heart one believes unto righteousness, and with the mouth confession I made unto salvation. For the Scripture says, 'Whoever believes on Him will not be put to shame.' For there is no distinction between Jew and Greek, for the same Lord over all is rich to all who call upon Him. For 'whoever calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved.'" (Romans 10:13)

She asks for His healing. And Jesus responds that His words are not to be wasted on dogs. Was He calling her a dog? Or her demon-possessed daughter a dog? **NO**. She came from the dog pound of hard-hearted pagans who chose not to believe. Jesus' words have no meaning to them, because they do not open their hearts to Him. Jesus considers the atheists and idol worshipers as dogs – similar to the serpents of deception and the antagonists of His word.

The Syro-Phoenician does not challenge Jesus, or argue with Him. She **AGREES** with Jesus. And she adds God's special caveat: she affirms that even in every pagan, evil, heartless generation there will be that faithful remnant who feast on the crumbs of His table, who hunger and have a right to a morsel of His word. Who have that mustard seed of faith and believe that Jesus is Lord. And that those who call upon Jesus **WILL BE SAVED**, and their faith can move mountains.

Jesus responds with the clanging bell of His ministry and her faith in one

sentence: ***“O woman, great is your faith! Let it be to you as you desire.”***
 And her daughter was healed from that very hour.

To those who believe, God's word is their sustenance. To those who don't, God's word is wasted. She is saying what Jesus WANTS her to say. What Jesus WAITS for her to proclaim to the disciples and the world. Her faith saves her, and her faith heals her daughter.

So why does Jesus choose an unnamed gentile woman to announce His word to the pagans? Why not a man? Why not a Jew? Jesus uses on purpose an outcast, a gentile by birth (Canaan, not Israel), and a lowly, unimportant, disregarded woman on the fringe of society. The Big Three. She was among the last of the people, ignored, pushed away, lost. ***The lost sheep of Israel.*** As Jesus' words proclaim: The first shall be last, *and the last shall be first.* Her name doesn't matter; it's what and WHO she represents.

Jesus does not deny that you are a sinner. He does not deny the world you are living in, or maybe even how the world sees you. If you admit you are drug addict, or a prostitute, or an adulterer, and Jesus agrees with you, that doesn't mean that He is insulting you: He is agreeing with the truth that you have finally faced and confessed about yourself. You are finally in alignment with the Truth. You are seeing yourself through the perfect Mirror of Jesus, and your reflection comes up short. You and He are now on the same page, for you both now see your reality of sin. You have seen the Truth, and the Truth is now about to set you free.

For Jesus accepts you for the dog that you are, and still welcomes you with open arms. He DIED for you. You are that gentile woman that Jesus desires to feed with His Bread. No natural birth into a chosen nation can be the substitute for what come only through a supernatural rebirth through faith.

It wasn't just the Syro-Phoenician's faith in the miracles, it was her faith in the Healer. But it is by FAITH that makes you healed. Your faith is what heals you, and it's your faith in Jesus Christ that saves you.

Confess with your mouth the Lord Jesus, and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, and YOU WILL BE SAVED.

(Roman 10:9)

Seek FIRST the Kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things shall be added to you



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(Matthew 6:33).
Amen.



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