

A woman of Canaan

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[0 : 00] Let us turn to the Gospel of Matthew, the 15th chapter, where we read and the words that we find at verse 21 and following.

Matthew 15 and at verse 21. Then Jesus went thence and departed into the coasts of Tyre and Sidon.

And behold, a woman of Canaan came out of the same coasts and cried unto him, saying, Have mercy on me, O Lord, thou son of David. My daughter is grievously vexed with the devil.

And the narrative which continues, as you see, to verse 28. In the earlier part of this chapter, we have an account of the conclusion of our Lord's great ministry in Galilee.

And you would observe that as he was thus ministering in Galilee, he was impeded and opposed by men, scribes, who had been sent from Jerusalem.

[1 : 15] They were not sent to attend upon his ministry, but to be an obstruction to him. And our Lord speaks so plainly concerning these men that the disciples are alarmed and disturbed.

And our Lord has to assure them that they have no need to be disturbed. That these were poor blind leaders of the blind.

And men who were to be let alone. And yet, while our Lord was not disturbed by them, we may well believe that he was wearied and in need of rest.

And that, I think, is apparent from the words that we have in verse 21. At the conclusion of that ministry, we read, Then Jesus went thence and departed.

And departed, not to minister in another part of Israel, but rather he departed, says Matthew, into the coasts of Tyre and Sidon.

[2 : 29] That is to say, he moved into that area of the land, which was not inhabited by Jews, but by Gentiles. By the remnants of the old Canaanite tribes.

The majority of which had been destroyed in the time of Israel. The remnants of these people, thus surviving in Tyre and Sidon.

And it is thus into this area that Jesus went. Not to minister, I say, but to rest. And I'm sure that that is clear enough from the testimony of Scripture, because the Gospel of Mark tells us that our Lord, upon arriving at his destination, he entered into a house, says Mark, and he would have no man know it.

In other words, he gave instructions to the apostles, to the disciples, that his presence, that his coming into the coasts of Tyre and Sidon was not to be made known.

But, Mark goes on, but he could not be hid. There were those, even in Tyre and Sidon, who had journeyed into Galilee, who had seen something of Christ's power and grace and miracles.

[3 : 55] They had carried word back, even into this dark corner of the land. And thus, when Jesus comes, his presence is known, and he could not be hid.

And there follows then the story of this woman, this Sarah Phoenician woman, this Canaanite woman, who, having not previously met with Christ, had nevertheless heard of him.

And what she had heard had persuaded her that he was indeed the promised Messiah. And that if she could only get access to him, and put before him her need, and in particular the need of her daughter, then he would remove her grief and answer her cry.

And thus we read that this woman came out of the same coasts, and cried unto him, saying, Have mercy on me, O Lord, thou Son of David.

She cries, says Matthew. She pleads. She speaks to Jesus with importunity. And yet, as you at once observe, he answered her, not a word.

[5 : 13] She is met with complete silence, as though our Lord was not even conscious that she had spoken. And she has, therefore, to retire from his presence, with her petition unanswered.

And one might suppose that at that point she could have been tempted to wonder whether her information was wrong, and whether she had believed some false report. But that is not what she does. Instead, we read here how she continued to speak, not to Jesus, for evidently she could not get access to him, but to the disciples. And she speaks to them, not once or twice, but so often, that the disciples are wearied with her requests. And thus, and thus we read, his disciples came and besought him, saying, Send her away, for she crieth after us. In other words, if for no other reason but this, that we can have no rest from her pleading, grant her request, and send her away.

[6 : 30] But he answered and said, I am not sent, but unto the lost sheep of the house of Israel. And that would surely remind the disciples of a statement that our Lord had made a little earlier, as we read in Matthew chapter 10 and verse 5, when Jesus sent out the disciples themselves to preach, he gave them the instruction that they were not to go into the way of the Gentiles, and into any city of the Samaritans, Enter ye not, but go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.

And what he says here is in harmony with that statement. I am not sent, he says in verse 24, but except unto the lost sheep of the house of Israel.

And it would appear, I think we may assume it from the words that follow, that this message was transmitted to the woman. This was not the house of Israel.

And he, the Savior, is sent to the lost sheep of the house of Israel. And therefore the conclusion seemed to be inescapable, that Christ's business was not with this woman.

Then, verse 25, Then came she, and worshipped him, saying, Lord, help me.

[8 : 03] Our Lord's apparent refusal to help her, and his rebuff, instead of leaving her to go away, had thus led to this point, when with worship and renewed desire, she says to Jesus, Lord, help me.

And he now speaks to her for the first time. And he says, It is not meat, it is not proper, it is not fitting, it is not meat to take the children's bread, and to cast it to dogs.

And that statement would make sense, following his earlier statement. You have already heard, he says, that the blessings I bring, are blessings for the household of Israel.

It is not fitting, it is not meat to take the children's bread, and to cast it to dogs. God's house is not here in Tyre and Sidon.

And is it right, therefore, that what has been provided for children, should be cast to dogs? And she said, Truth, Lord, yet the dogs eat of the crumbs which fall from their master's table.

[9 : 27] In other words, she says, Lord, I agree, that is right. But I am not asking that the children be deprived of their bread, but only that I eat of the crumbs which fall from their master's table.

In other words, it is the dog's crumbs, not the children's bread, for which I ask. There is no need to deprive the children. But why may I not be, as the dogs that eat the crumbs, which fall from their master's table?

Then Jesus answered and said unto her, O woman, great is thy faith. Be it unto thee, even as thou wilt. And says Matthew, her daughter was made whole from that very hour.

Now here, my friends, we have before us again, on this Lord's Day morning, a familiar passage of the Word of God. I suppose that most of us cannot even put a time on the point in our lives when we first heard these words.

And yet, they are not here just as a beautiful narrative. They are not here simply as a piece of history. They are here preeminently to guide us, and to instruct us.

[10 : 53] And the guidance which they give us concerns the most important of all things that we need to know. And what is that?

It is the answer to the question, how can we come with assurance into the presence of Christ, knowing that we will be accepted by Him?

How can we also come as she came and come to Him and to know that He receives us?

And the answer to that question which is given us in this passage is a very simple one. It is that this woman had no natural advantages.

She was not nurtured and raised in a godly home. She was not taught over a long period of time the commandments of God.

[11 : 55] She had none of the advantages which many others had. But she did have one thing. And by means of that one thing she obtained everything from Christ.

And the one thing that she had was faith. And this passage as so many others in the New Testament teaches that the one thing the vital thing the supreme thing for all who would come unto God by Christ is this precious gift of faith.

That if we come believing we will be received. That those who come trusting will be heard. That is what our Lord so continually teaches to men who thought that they had something else to do Jesus said on one occasion this is the work of God that ye believe on him whom he hath sent.

Or again he said to others fear not believe only or again believe us thou that I am able to do this.

And so on throughout the New Testament.

we have to come believing. But that is not all that this passage teaches us. It teaches us what faith is. And I think this is of great importance.

[13:23] Because it may be there is not a single person in this church this morning who does not already know what I have just said. That we have to come to Christ believing.

But knowing that you go on to say to yourself yes but I don't believe. And I haven't got this gift of faith. And I don't know how faith comes to people.

And it may be that one day I will find myself believing. But that is not my present position. And therefore while my friend you may listen to sermons and you may hear things that you have heard innumerable times before you still don't know what it is to believe and to trust in Jesus Christ.

And I say this passage not only teaches us that faith is the way into the presence of God through Christ it also shows us what faith is.

Now let us consider it in that light for a little time this morning. Let us notice in the first place that we are taught here that faith is born out of need.

[14:39] This woman came to Jesus because of need. The need of her daughter her own need.

And all who came to Christ in the gospel narratives were all brought similarly by a sense of helplessness of need.

It might be physical need perhaps blindness perhaps they were maimed some who were diseased it was need that brought them to the feet of Christ.

And here as I say in the case of this woman we see not simply her petition for her daughter but we see the evidence of her own consciousness of spiritual need.

need. Now I wonder if you notice how that is to be seen in this passage. It is surely as clear as daylight and yet it is not stated explicitly but it is seen in this way.

It is seen by the way in which she responds to the words of Christ. When Jesus at length speaks to her as we noticed he told her that it was not fitting to take the children's bread and to cast it to dogs.

[16:12] She understood what he meant. He was saying to her that she and the whole race to which she belonged had no claims upon God, had no rights in his presence, that they were a fallen people, a people not only who were undeserving but who were ill deserving, a people under God's condemnation, a people upon whom God's judgment had previously been poured out.

They were not of the household of Israel, they were not of those who could plead any covenant promises, but they were a fallen, ruined people.

And when Jesus says to her that this was their position, that they had no claim or merit or worthiness in the presence of God, she said, truth, Lord, I agree, that is right.

And my friend, if you have been brought that far, then you have a sense of need, because that is not the way that we feel and think by nature.

That was the very truth at which the Pharisees and the Jews stumbled. when Jesus said that they, who were, as it were, of the house of Israel, who attended the synagogue, who sat under the very word of God, when he said that their hearts were deceitful and desperately wicked, and that from their hearts proceeded evil thoughts and murders and fornications and adulteries, they did not say truth, Lord.

[18:11] They hated it. They disliked it. They refused to listen to him. They sought to hinder him. And they did it for this one reason.

There was no sense of need. They were not prepared to say, we are fallen. We need thy mercy. We have no rights upon in the presence of God.

There was no sense of spiritual need. I like that story of how Robert Haldane went from Edinburgh here to Geneva in the year 1817 or thereabouts, and how in a little hotel or guest house room, he took in some students who were being taught theology in Geneva, but not the theology of scripture, not the theology of the reformers.

And he began to teach these young men out of the purity of the New Testament itself. And the record goes that as he taught them through the epistle to the Romans, there came an evening when he was in the middle of chapter 3, dealing with the words, there is none righteous, no, not one, there is none that understandeth, there is none that seeketh after God.

And as he expounded the truth of those solemn words, one of the students, Merle D'Aubini, said, I see it now, everything seemed to fall into place, but Robert Haldane immediately looked at D'Aubini and he said to him, but do you see it in your heart?

[20 : 02] That's the thing. We may read Romans chapter 3, we may hear the words, but the question is, do we see it in our hearts, that that is true of me, that I am by nature lost and without claim or right or desert in the presence of a holy God?

That is what this woman saw. It is true Lord, she says. And yet although she sees that, you notice at once how our Lord deals with her.

You may even say, he doesn't deal with her, he just seems to ignore her, doesn't speak to her, total silence, refuses to have any conversation with her, and then sends that message that he is not sent but to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.

And then when at last she does find access to him and cries, Lord help me, he answers her, it's not meet to take the children's bread and to cast it to dogs.

What's he doing? Well, he is doing what he does with all those whom he brings to salvation. He is deepening her sense of need.

[21 : 29] He knows how precious that sense is. He doesn't rush to comfort her. He doesn't immediately tell her that her case is not as bad as she thinks.

He doesn't immediately say that she's no need to be so distressed, that her sins are not as great as she supposes, or anything of that kind. He doesn't do that at all.

He does the opposite. He works to deepen her sense of need in the presence of God. And I say that is what Christ does still.

And he does it because, as he says in one place, the whole have no need of a physician but them that are sick. And that sickness, my friends, is not something that comes from our own hearts, and not something that we learn from the world, but which God himself has to work within us as Jesus works it here.

And the one reason why the gospel meets with no saving response in the lives of so many people is just that they have no sense of need.

[22 : 44] How often you see that in these gospel narratives themselves. How often our Lord is surrounded with multitudes who are onlookers, who listen, who as it were observe, but nothing more.

And that's true even today. People hear sermons, read the scriptures themselves, but they're mere onlookers. And they're like that because they've never been smitten with the consciousness that this woman had.

Think of those two men outside the walls, the village of Jericho. we read in Matthew chapter 20, as they departed from Jericho, a great multitude followed Jesus.

He didn't appear to speak with them or even to have dealings with them. And, says Matthew, and behold, two blind men sitting by the wayside, when they heard that Jesus passed by, cried out saying, have mercy on us, O Lord, thou son of David.

David, what a difference, a great multitude standing watching, nothing more, and two blind men cry, have mercy on us, O Lord, thou son of David.

[24 : 00] That was the same when the apostles preached. There were multitudes who didn't believe. They didn't believe for that same reason. They had no sense of need. Paul said to the church at Corinth, ye see your calling, brethren, how that not many wise men after the flesh, not many mighty, not many noble are called.

What's wrong with these people? Well, their wisdom, their wisdom, their strength, their nobility, these are the things upon which they live. They never cried, Jesus, have mercy on me.

You remember the words perhaps that George Buchanan sent to King James I when George Buchanan was dying, having been the tutor to the king when he was a prince here in Edinburgh, and having sought unsuccessfully to lead the prince to a knowledge of the Lord Jesus Christ, Buchanan sent that final message, go tell his majesty that I am going where few kings or great men ever come.

Faith is born of need, and our Lord here is working to increase that sense of need. Now, let me ask everyone listening to the word of God this morning, have you that sense of need? Do you know what it is? Is it possible that there is anyone in this congregation and I'm afraid it is possible because this is our hearts by nature?

[25 : 48] Is it possible that anyone supposes that their hope of acceptance with God is that their sins are not many or not great or at least not as bad as others?

Is it possible that anyone thus hearing the word of God supposes that because you have no sense of need and conviction, that you are therefore safe?

That the people who have this sense of need like this poor Canaanite woman, well, perhaps they were great sinners, but I have never had that, and my hope is that I am not as sinful as other people are.

My friend, that is the most appalling delusion. physician. It is exactly what our Lord meant when he said the whole have no need of a physician.

It is need and unworthiness and conviction which make Christ precious. And when we are convicted of sin, and when we know the Lord Jesus Christ, we know that it is not because sins are small or great that we are forgiven, but it is because of the omnipotence and the power and the all sufficiency of the Lord Jesus Christ.

[27 : 19] The psalmist says, pardon mine iniquity, for it is great. That is how a believer argues. The greatness of his need and his ill-deserving, these are the very grounds upon which, in the presence of Christ, he pleads for mercy.

So it is with this woman here. Now, that leads us on immediately, as I have already indicated, to say that where there is a true sense of need, there will be a certain manner of approach and of thinking about the Lord Jesus Christ.

You know, we think about ourselves and we are self-centered until God graciously convicts us. And a person in spiritual need has to turn from themself and to look away to Christ.

And that is what we have with this woman. The Holy Spirit who gives the need is the one who glorifies Jesus. Notice then how she thinks of Christ.

She says in the first place that he is the son of David. Have mercy on me, O Lord, thou son of David. Why does she say that?

[28 : 44] why doesn't she call him a son of Abraham or a son of Adam or whatever? Why this? Well, there can only be one answer.

And that is that with all her ignorance she knew one thing. She knew that God had promised to David's house a royal heir.

father. And she knew that such were the works of Jesus of Nazareth that he must be the one promised of God, the son of David.

And I think she may even have gone a step further and heard it may be fragments of the Old Testament scriptures. For example, in Psalm 72 we read of the son of David, he will deliver the needy when he crieth, the poor and him that hath no help.

Men shall be blessed in him and all nations shall call him blessed. It is possible she had heard such marvelous words. She certainly knew that Jesus was the son of David and that meant for her that all that was promised that the son of David would do, she could expect from Jesus.

[30 : 10] Jesus, Lord, she says, thou son of David, have mercy on me. Now my friends, this is how faith operates.

It begins with a sense of need. And then it leads men to take hold of the words of scripture concerning Christ.

the titles of Christ and to plead those titles, to lay hold on them. As John Bunyan used to say, like a drowning man would hold on to a piece of wood.

That's what faith does. But further, it is not simply that she thinks correctly about Christ's titles, but notice the thought, the apprehension she has of Christ's person.

She comes, as we read in verse 25, and she worships him. He is silent, he seems to rebuff her, he does not answer her, what will she do?

[31 : 19] She will come and she will acknowledge him, and worship him, and fall down before him, and call him Lord. That's what she does. That is the exercise of true saving faith.

Faith does not mean that we understand everything. Faith means that we acknowledge Christ, that we own him, that we fall before him, that we commit all things into his hands.

That's what this woman does. He seems to deny her. Well, she will fall and acknowledge him. She doesn't dispute, she doesn't argue, she doesn't profess to understand, but she says, Lord, thou art eternal, thou art infinite, thou art able to do in a way that I cannot understand, and she worships him.

My friends, that is always the way in which faith is to act. It is the way in which we find peace and rest.

It is the way which Job took when he said, though he slay me, yet will I trust in him. It is the source of the Christian's peace when he realizes how great his sins are.

[32 : 44] It is to realize that the Savior who made atonement for sin is God, that the blood that he shed is the blood of one who is God, man.

and to worship and to adore and to own him. But further and finally you see that the climax of her faith comes at the very point where everything seems darkest.

it is not meet to take the children's bread and to cast it to dogs. What does she say about that? She uses that statement to say something about the character of the Lord Jesus Christ.

And what she says is this, in so many words. She thinks to herself, ah, here is a picture. Jesus is talking about a table and bread and blessings for the children.

And he is the master of this table. And he says that the blessings are for the children. Yes, well then she goes on a further step. What kind of table does Jesus spread?

[34 : 05] Will there just be a few niggardly portions upon it? Or will it be so laden with blessings that there's no question that there is enough, not simply for all the children who meet at that table, but for every dog who will gather beneath it.

The children's hands will be so full that without question there will be crumbs enough for a whole ruined world. That's what she thinks.

She has a vision of the magnitude of what Christ had brought into the world. She saw it. She saw that there was enough for Israel and indeed enough for a Gentile world as well.

Because a crumb would be all that she would need to fill her soul with grace and peace and to do all else. That's the way she thinks.

My friends, that is faith. that is the faith which Jesus here owns and commends. But you know there were multitudes who saw Jesus, heard him and never came to that faith.

[35 : 28] There were those ones beside Galilee who when Jesus had fed the five thousand they said to him in so many words, well, it was a great miracle but Moses, but Moses fed our fathers forty years in the wilderness.

What about that? Forty years manna from heaven. and our Lord looked at those poor unbelievers and he told them that their comparison was altogether foolish.

In any case it was not Moses but his father which fed the fathers in the wilderness. But then he went on to say these amazing words. He said, I am, I am the bread of life.

He that cometh to me shall never hunger and he that believeth on me shall never thirst. In other words, the greatness of our Lord's work was not feeding five thousand, that was but a token of his power.

The glory is that he is the one who is all sufficient to feed with the bread of life all who will come to him.

[36 : 47] And that's really what this parable is also teaching us. The table of Christ is so full and so bountiful that everyone who gathers near it, who comes under it, who pleads nothing as this woman pleaded nothing, yet who comes looking and believing and trusting, they will certainly be filled.

and if we did but have a larger view of the bounty of Christ, how it would invigorate not only our spiritual lives, but it would invigorate us also to speak and to witness to those multitudes around us who do not know what Jesus is.

there was an old black man who was once asked what the gospel meant and he couldn't put it in any theological language, but he struck the heart of it when he said the gospel means plenty for all. That is the gospel, my friends, plenty for all, plenteous grace, plenteous redemption. about a hundred years ago, and more than that now, in 1859, one of the last great movements of the Spirit of God in this country.

And a woman who heard of that working of the Spirit of God, she sat down and she wrote a prayer, and her prayer was this, Lord, she said, Lord, I hear of showers of blessing, thou art scattering full and free, showers the thirsty land refreshing, let some droppings fall on me.

[38 : 39] Well, she was like this Saraphanesian woman, Christ scattering showers of blessing, no difficulty for him to let some dropping fall on each one of us today.

I ask then as we conclude, do we know what it is to have this sense of need to seek Christ, to keep coming to him, to call upon him.

And if we don't, it is for one reason only, it is that the blindness and deadness of your heart by nature has not been broken up.

Faith means looking to Christ, looking from ourselves. And the Bible says they looked to him, they were lightened, and their faces were not ashamed.

There is nothing more delightful to Christ than the look of a poor, needy sinner who looks to him.

[39 : 50] That's what we are commanded to do. that's what he calls us to do. That's why he said to that woman, be it unto thee, even as thou wilt. He says also to us, I am the bread of life, he that cometh to me shall never hunger, and he that believeth on me shall never thirst.

May God help us so to believe. Shall we pray? O Lord, our gracious God, we thank thee for thine abundant mercy.

We thank thee that there is no single person living in this earth who cannot come pleading the name of Christ, pleading the fact of sin, and falling at thy footstool.

We pray thee that thou would grant us this faith, that thou would quicken us, that thou would give new life, that thou would take away unbelief.

And help us, O Lord, this day not only to be hearers of thy word, but to be those who do it, who come to thee, who rejoice in thee, who seek to give thee praise.

[41 : 14] Lord, be with us as we part, watch over us, guide us, grant thy blessing upon the further preaching of thy word this day, in this place, and throughout the whole earth.

We ask with the pardon of our sins, in Jesus' name, Amen.