

The Syrophoenician Woman

In 1994 my wife and I moved into our current home after leaving California. Unlike our previous home, we now see a wide variety of wild animals: birds, rabbits, ground squirrels, javelina, coyotes, owls, and roadrunners. On one occasion, I was standing near a window and saw a shower of feathers descending to the ground just like snow. I quickly stepped outside to see what was creating this flurry. When I looked up to the top of the roof, I discovered that an eagle was rapidly plucking the feathers off a little bird. The little bird was squawking, squealing, and crying out as each feather was pulled, but the eagle continued rapidly removing its feathers. As soon as the eagle saw me, he lifted his great wings and flew away with the little bird in its clutches. The little bird was helpless and so was I. I could not do anything for that little bird. Sometimes we are in situations like that little bird. Have you ever felt like that little bird? Your feathers are being removed one-by-one. You are squawking and squealing and all of your crying doesn't do any good. Well, then this study is for you.

Background. The events of our study are recorded in two different gospels: Matthew 15:21-28 and Mark 7:24-30. In the opening verse in Matthew, we are told that Jesus had left the region of Capernaum and had withdrawn to the region of Tyre and Sidon.

[Mark 7:24b \(NAS95S\)](#)

Jesus left Galilee in order to get some badly needed rest. This was His attempt to get a short vacation from the crowds of people. Jesus was tired and needed the escape. We all need rest on occasions. We are told that Jesus entered a house.

The most likely reason that He did was to escape visual

notice. If anyone saw Him, they would tell others; the word would spread, and crowds would come after Him. His attempt to have a vacation would be destroyed. But He was not successful. Someone saw Him. The news about His location spread from house to house,

[Jesus went away from there, and withdrew into the district of Tyre and Sidon. Matthew 15:21 \(NAS95S\)](#)

Mark 7:24 adds,

[And when He had entered a house, He wanted no one to know of it; yet He could not escape notice.](#)



city to city, and throughout the region. The people came. The news about Jesus had spread outside of Galilee.

The Interruption. Matthew 15:22 says that a Canaanite woman had heard about Jesus and came seeking Him.

And a Canaanite woman from that region came out and began to cry out, saying, “Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David; my daughter is cruelly demon-possessed.”
Matthew 15:22 (NAS95S)

Mark 7:26 adds that the woman was of the Syrophenician race. That means she was a Gentile, someone a “good” Jew would have despised, rejected, and wanted to ignore. What is worse from ancient Jewish perspective is that she was a woman. She would have known that the Jews would not want to have anything to do with her. Yet, she came to Jesus anyway. What a bold woman!

Mark 7:25 reveals that when she found Jesus, she fell at His feet.

But after hearing of Him, a woman whose little daughter had an unclean spirit immediately came and fell at His feet. Mark 7:25 (NAS95S)

I would have fallen at His feet too, if I knew that Jesus was a Jew. I would have been afraid that He might not want to help me. Maybe, just maybe my action might invoke His sympathy. Why did she come? Matthew 15:22 says that the woman was in desperate trouble. Her daughter was “cruelly”

or “badly” or “severely” possessed by a demon. That means her daughter was in extremely unusual trouble.

Matthew 15:22 also tells us that after she found Jesus and fell at His feet, she started “crying out.” The Greek word that is translated as “crying out” is “*Kraugazo*” It is in the imperfect tense, and it means that she was crying out again and again. She must have been a great irritation and an annoyance to everyone around her. She was a despised Gentile, a despised woman, and she was repeatedly yelling as loudly as she could, “Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David” or “Help me!”

The Unexpected. One would have thought that

Jesus would have welcomed this poor anxious, distraught mother and lovingly helped her daughter. But Jesus did not do that.

But He did not answer her a word. And His disciples came and implored Him, saying, “Send her away, because she keeps shouting at us.”

Matthew 15:23 (NAS95S)

Jesus said nothing. Jesus did nothing. Jesus just ignored her! He was as silent as a stone. Martin Luther stated,

He answered her not a word.¹

What a huge disappointment for this mother. Was she discouraged? Then Jesus’ disciples started “implored” or begging Him to send her away. They wanted her to leave because she was loud and irritating. There was no thought

1. Martin Luther. Complete Sermons of Martin Luther. Baker Books. 2000., vol. 5, p.323.



about her pain in heart or of the suffering child. It was their comfort that was important. This Gentile woman was an embarrassment to them. They wanted Jesus to get rid of her. What cold, cold hearts the disciples had. This Gentile mother was not wanted. When she heard these words, she must have felt like the little bird having its feathers plucked off one by one by an eagle - totally helpless!

More Disappointments. Then Jesus increased her sense of helplessness and anxiety.

But He answered and said, "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel." Matt 15:24 (NAS95S)

She heard, "I was sent only to the lost of Israel - not to you Gentiles." She had travelled from her home to find Him in order to get some help. She had probably been asking one person after another, "Where is He?" She had been on a mission. I wonder how she felt? It had taken "guts" to come to Him. She came crying and shouting and was ignored at first. Then she was told, "You are not one of our kind. You are not like us." How would you have felt? Would you have felt like the little bird when the eagle flew away clutching it in its talons?

Then she responded,

But she came and began to bow down before Him, saying, "Lord, help me!" Matthew 15:25 (NAS95S)

The Greek word for "bow down" reveals that she was repeatedly bowing down while pleading for help, "Help me!" "Help me!" What an emotional scene! Her heart must have been tearing and her eyes swelling with tears.

More Heartache. One would have thought that surely Jesus would respond now with grace and compassion to help her. But He didn't,

And He answered and said, "It is not good to take the children's bread and throw it to the dogs." Matthew 15:26 (NAS95S)

Jesus' words must have seemed especially cruel. "It is not

good" or "It is not fit" to give the children's food to dogs. Jesus compared her to a "dog." The word "children" was symbolic for the nation of Israel. This is a first class rejection of the woman and her daughter. Jesus implied she was not worthy of any help. She and her daughter did not measure up. They were not deserving of help. She was a Gentile and a woman and so was her daughter. They were just two dogs - something to kick and to reject.

Most of us would have walked away at this point. Some of us might have walked away crying, some in anger, and others cursing God or Jesus Himself. Many would have been so hurt that they might have considered lawsuits or contemplated some means of revenge. Today we might have contacted a local newspaper or posted something on the internet. This woman was emotionally hurt.

Have you ever asked God for something only to end up feeling like God has ignored you? Some might have "given up" on God because they thought that they heard nothing and were ignored. In fact, some of us have thought that God was not going to help, or we have concluded that God will not help. Some of us have felt like this woman or like the little bird being prepared to be eaten. Why did Jesus do this? Why does God do this to us on occasions?

The Turning Point. Then the woman responded.

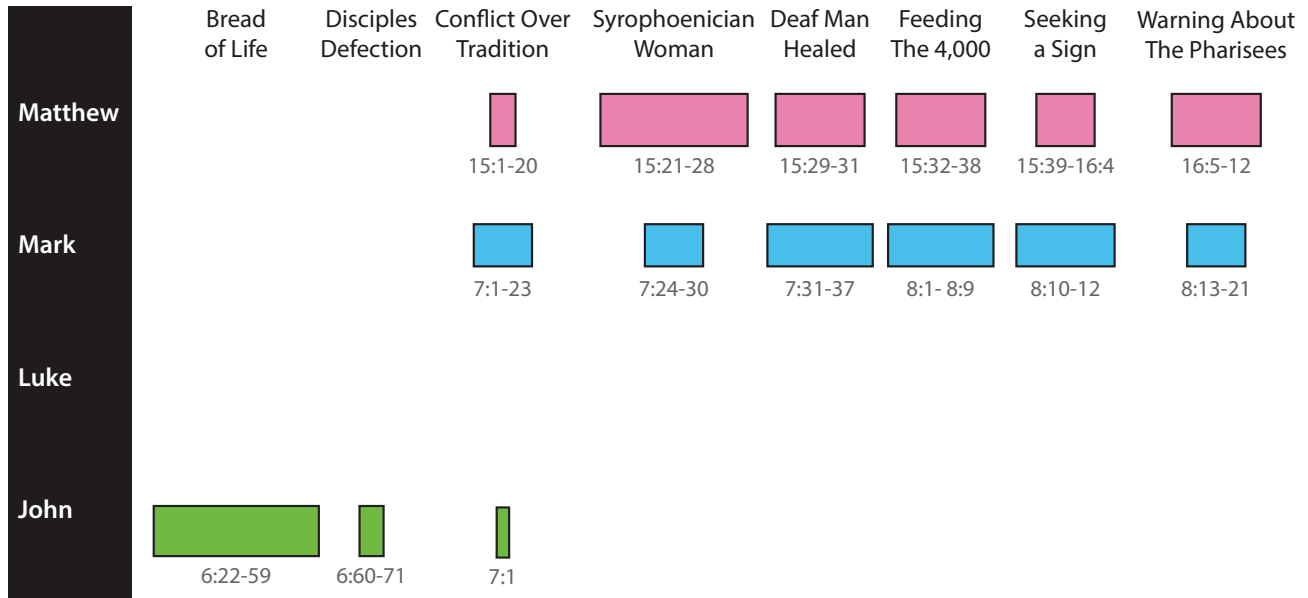
But she said, "Yes, Lord; but even the dogs feed on the crumbs which fall from their masters' table." Matthew 15:27 (NAS95S)

She responded, "Yes, Lord, the children eat, but at least the dogs get something - scraps that fall from the table! At least they get scraps! They get something, Lord!" She admitted she was a "dog." The Jews hated dogs! They considered dogs to be unclean animals. She would have known that. This woman really humbled herself. Jesus was not attempting to help her have a great sense of self-worth. You see God was not trying to increase her self-worth. Self-worth is a worldly concept - not a divine one. In fact our problem is that some of us have too much "self-worth."

This woman humbled herself incredibly. She told our Lord, "I am willing to get whatever is left. I am a 'dog!'" She

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was willing to be content with the smallest of crumbs. She was not asking for bread, steak, cookies, pizza, chocolate, or anything that we might consider to be good enough. She was now willing to accept crumbs. Someone once said,

Surrender isn't giving up something you do not want.
It's giving up something you want.

And she was willing to sacrifice everything. Jesus had waited for this moment. Then Jesus responded with grace and compassion,

Then Jesus said to her, "O woman, your faith is great; it shall be done for you as you wish." And her daughter was healed at once. Matthew 15:28 (NAS95)

Jesus declared that she had great faith and then granted her request. The mother's daughter was healed.

Why? Why did Jesus say "Your faith is great?" It is obvious that she already believed that Jesus could heal

her daughter. That is more than some have believed or do believe about Jesus. Jesus was not talking about believing more facts about Himself or that He could cast out the demon. By the way, Jesus cast out the demon from a long distance - while the daughter was at home. Jesus said she had great faith because she had finally submitted herself. It is all about submission to Him. Jesus was waiting for her submission. Faith includes trusting a loving, caring God and she did! Jesus was waiting for the woman to stop shouting, stop yelling, stop insisting, stop demanding, stop pleading, stop fighting and to be willing to accept whatever Jesus was willing to give her - maybe nothing! Jesus waited until she was willing to accept whatever He wanted to offer. She finally surrendered and then Jesus responded.

Faith is more than believing some facts about Jesus or "having enough" in order to get what you believe you are entitled to - "the will of God." If we are supposed to have "enough faith" in order to get "what we ask for," then why did Jesus wait for her to finally yield to His will? Why did Jesus drag her through an emotional turmoil and wait for her

to admit that she was a dog? The answer is simple. Real faith yields to God and trusts Him to give us what is best and not necessarily what we think we need or want. Psalm 51:17 captures the attitude well,

The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit;
A broken and a contrite heart, O God, You will not despise. Ps 51:17 (NAS95S)

God looks for a broken and contrite heart.

Conclusion. There is a song that God has used to touch my heart. It captures the heart of this situation,. It is called "Follow Me."

I traveled on a lonely road and no one seemed to care.
The burden on my weary back had bowed me to despair;
I oft complained to Jesus how folks were treating me,
And then I heard Him say so tenderly,
"My feet were also weary, upon the Calvary road;
The cross became so heavy, I fell beneath the load,
Be faithful, weary pilgrim ,the morning I can see,
Just lift your cross and follow close to me."

"I work so hard for Jesus," I often boast and say.
"I've sacrificed a lot of things to walk the narrow way,
I gave up fame and fortune, I'm worth a lot to Thee."
And then I hear Him gently say to me,
"I left the throne of glory and counted it but loss,
My hands were nailed in anger upon a cruel cross,
But now we'll make the journey with your hand safe in mine,
So lift your cross and follow close to me.

Oh, Jesus, if I die upon a foreign field someday,
'Twould be no more than love demands, no less could I repay,
"No greater love hath mortal man than for a friend to die."
These are the words He gently spoke to me,
"If just a cup of water I place within your hand,
Then just a cup of water is all that I demand.

But if by death to living they can Thy glory see,
I'll take my cross and follow close to Thee.

- Ira F. Stamphill

Are you struggling, demanding and yelling at God for help?
Has the eagle lifted off and you are screaming? Then Jesus is waiting for you to stop and yield yourself to Him. He is waiting for you to submit.

Often you wondered why tears come into your eyes,
And burdens seem to be much more than you can stand.
But God is standing near, He sees your falling tears,
Tears are a language, God understands.

When grief has left you low, it causes tears to flow,
Things have not turned out the way that you had planned.
But God won't forget you, His promises are true,
Tears are a language, God understands.

God sees the tears of a broken hearted soul,
He sees your tears and hears them when they fall.
God weeps along with man and takes him by the hand;
Tears are a language, God understands.

- Gordon Jensen, 1971

But He waits until the demanding stops and we yield ourselves completely. May the Lord bless you.