

Great Faith

by J.C. Ryle

True faith can be found in unexpected places, and perseverance in prayer can obtain a gracious reward from God.

Scripture: Matthew 15:21

Topics: "Faith", "Perseverance in Prayer"

Description

J.C. Ryle emphasizes the profound faith of a Canaanite woman who, despite her background and initial rejection by Jesus, persistently seeks help for her demon-possessed daughter. Her faith, demonstrated through her humble and desperate pleas, teaches that true belief can arise from unexpected places and that affliction can lead one to Christ. Ryle warns against the ungracious attitudes of believers who may discourage seekers and encourages perseverance in prayer, assuring that Jesus hears and responds to those who earnestly seek Him. The sermon highlights that trials can be blessings that draw us closer to God, and that we should not judge Christ by the shortcomings of His followers. Ultimately, Ryle reassures that persistent prayer, like that of the Canaanite woman, will be rewarded.

Transcript

"And Jesus went away from there and withdrew into the district of Tyre and Sidon. And behold, a Canaanite woman came out from that region and began to cry out, saying, Have mercy on me, O Lord, Son of David; my daughter is cruelly demon-possessed. But he did not answer her a word. And his disciples came to him and kept asking him, saying, Send her away, for she is shouting out after us. But he answered and said, I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel. But she came and began to bow down before him, saying, Lord, help me! And he answered and said, It is not good to take the children's bread and throw it to the dogs. But she said, Yes, Lord; but even the dogs feed on the crumbs which fall from their master's table. Then Jesus answered and said to her, O woman, your faith is great; be it done for you as you wish. And her daughter was healed at once." (Matthew 15:21-28)

Another of our Lord's miracles is recorded in these verses. The circumstances which attend it are peculiarly full of interest. Let us take them up in order and see what they are. Every word in these narratives is rich in instruction.

We see, in the first place, that true faith may sometimes be found where it might have been least expected. A Canaanitish woman cries to our Lord for help on behalf of her daughter. "Have mercy on me," she says, "O Lord, thou Son of David." Such a prayer would have showed great faith, had she lived in

Bethany or Jerusalem. But when we find that she came from the "coasts of Tyre and Sidon," such a prayer may well fill us with surprise. It ought to teach us that it is grace, not place, which makes people believers. We may live in a prophet's family, like Gehazi, the servant of Elisha, and yet continue impenitent, unbelieving, and fond of the world. We may dwell in the midst of superstition and dark idolatry, like the little maid in Naaman's house, and yet be faithful witnesses for God and his Christ. Let us not despair of anyone's soul merely because his lot is cast in an unfavorable position. It is possible to dwell in the coasts of Tyre and Sidon and yet sit down in the kingdom of God.

We see, in the second place, that affliction sometimes proves a blessing to a person's soul. This Canaanitish mother no doubt had been sorely tried. She had seen her darling child vexed with a devil and been unable to relieve her. But yet that trouble brought her to Christ and taught her to pray. Without it, she might have lived and died in careless ignorance and never seen Jesus at all. Surely it was good for her that she was afflicted.

Let us mark this well. There is nothing which shows our ignorance so much as our impatience under trouble. We forget that every cross is a message from God and intended to do us good in the end. Trials are intended to make us think, to wean us from the world, to send us to the Bible, to drive us to our knees. Health is a good thing, but sickness is far better if it leads us to God. Prosperity is a great mercy, but adversity is a greater one if it brings us to Christ. Anything, anything is better than living in carelessness and dying in sin. Better a thousand times be afflicted like the Canaanitish mother, and like her to flee to Christ than to live at ease like the rich "fool," and die at last without Christ and without hope.

We see, in the third place, that Christ's people are often less gracious and compassionate than Christ himself. The woman about whom we are reading found small favor with our Lord's disciples. Perhaps they regarded an inhabitant of the coasts of Tyre and Sidon as unworthy of their Master's help. At any rate they said, "Send her away."

There is only too much of this spirit among many who profess and call themselves believers. They are apt to discourage inquirers after Christ instead of helping them forward. They are too ready to doubt the reality of a beginner's grace, because it is small, and to treat him as Saul was treated when he first came to Jerusalem after his conversion. "They believed not that he was a disciple." Let us beware of giving way to this spirit. Let us seek to have more of the mind that was in Christ. Like him, let us be gentle, and kind, and encouraging in all our treatment of those who are seeking to be saved. Above all, let us tell men continually that they must not judge of Christ by Christians. Let us assure them that there is far more in that gracious Master than there is in the best of his servants. Peter, James, and John may say to the afflicted soul, "Send her away." But such a word never came from the lips of Christ. He may sometimes keep us long waiting, as he did this woman. But he will never send us away empty.

We see, in the last place, what encouragement there is to persevere in prayer, both for ourselves and others. It is hard to conceive a more striking illustration of this truth than we have in this passage. The prayer of this afflicted mother at first seemed entirely unnoticed: Jesus "answered her not a word." Yet she prayed on. The saying which next fell from our Lord's lips sounded discouraging: "I am not sent but unto the lost sheep of the house of Israel." Yet she prayed on, "Lord help me." The second saying of our Lord was even less encouraging than the first: "It is not good to take the children's bread and throw it to the dogs." Even then she finds a plea for some "crumbs" of mercy to be granted to her. And her importunity obtained at length a gracious reward. "O woman, great is thy faith: be it done for you as you wish." That promise never yet was broken, "Seek and you shall find."

Let us remember this history when we pray for ourselves. We are sometimes tempted to think that we get no good by our prayers, and that we may as well give them up altogether. Let us resist the temptation; it comes from the devil. Let us believe, and pray on. Against our besetting sins, against the spirit of the world, against the wiles of the devil, let us pray on and not faint. Let us pray for strength to do our duty, for grace to bear our trials, for comfort in every trouble. Let us be sure of the fact that no time of every day is so well-spent as that which we spend upon our knees. Jesus hears us and in his own good time will give an answer.

Let us remember this history when we intercede for others. Have we children whose conversion we desire? Have we relations and friends about whose salvation we are anxious? Let us follow the example of this Canaanitish woman and lay the state of their souls before Christ. Let us name their names before him night and day, and let us never rest until we have an answer. We may have to wait many a long year. We may seem to pray in vain and intercede without profit. But let us never give up. Let us believe that Jesus is not changed, and that he who heard the Canaanitish mother and granted her request will also hear us and one day give us an answer of peace.

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