

The Silent Christ

by J.R. Miller

Jesus' silence to the Canaanite woman's pleas was a means to train her faith and develop her character, teaching us the importance of persistence, faith, and trust in God's sovereignty.

Scripture: Matthew 15:22

Topics: "Faith", "Perseverance in Prayer"

Description

J.R. Miller explores the story of the Canaanite woman who persistently sought Jesus' help for her demon-possessed daughter, despite His initial silence and seemingly harsh response. He emphasizes that Jesus' silence was not indifference but a means to strengthen her faith and character. The sermon highlights how suffering can lead to deeper blessings and encourages believers to bring their burdens to Christ with passionate love and unwavering faith. Miller reminds us that God's delays in answering prayers are often for our growth and that silence does not equate to rejection. Ultimately, the story illustrates the power of persistent faith and the importance of enduring trials for spiritual maturity.

Transcript

A Canaanite woman from that vicinity came to him, crying out, "Lord, Son of David, have mercy on me! My daughter is suffering terribly from demon-possession." Jesus did not answer a word. So his disciples came to him and urged him, "Send her away, for she keeps crying out after us." He answered, "I was sent only to the lost sheep of Israel." The woman came and knelt before him. "Lord, help me!" she said. He replied, "It is not right to take the children's bread--and toss it to their dogs!" Matthew 15:22-26

Usually, Jesus was quick to answer cries for His help. No mother's heart ever waked so easily to her child's calls--as the heart of Christ waked to the calls of human distress! But once at least, He was silent to a very bitter cry. It was over in the edge of a heathen country. The story begins by saying that He went into a house and wanted nobody to know that He was there. He desired a little time of quiet. Even Jesus needed sometimes to rest. But He could not be hidden.

An Indian legend tells of a sorcerer who sought to hide the sun, moon, and stars in three great chests--but failed in his effort. One cannot hide light--it reveals itself by its beams. One cannot hide fragrant flowers--their perfume reveals their place of concealment.

There is a kind of wood in China, which, though buried in the earth--yet fills all the air about it with its perfumes. Nor can holy lives be hidden! No matter how modest and shy they are, wherever they go,

people know of their presence. There is something in them which always reveals them.

Never was there another such rich, loving, helpful life in this world--as that of Jesus. He was everybody's friend. His heart was full of compassion. His hand was ever stretched out to serve. No wonder He could not be hidden--even in a strange place. Burdened hearts would be drawn to Him--by the very power of His love and sympathy.

A heathen woman heard of Him that day, and came to Him with a pitiful plea. It is worth while to notice, that it was this woman's trouble which sent her to Christ. If all had been sunshine in her house, she would not have gone to seek Him. This is one of the blessings of affliction--it often leads us into experiences of blessing we never would have had--but for our suffering. We never shall know until we have gone to heaven--how much we owe to pain and sorrow. Then we shall see that the long days when we were sick--were days of wondrous divine revealing; that what we called our misfortunes and calamities--were really pieces of shaded path, leading to nobler blessings.

It is interesting to think of the good that has come to the world through the centuries, from the mere telling of the story of this woman's trouble. Other mothers with suffering children have been encouraged to bring their burdens to Christ, as they have read of this mother and her persistent and finally availing plea. Other pleaders at the throne of grace, discouraged for a time--as they have seen this prayer prevail at length, have taken fresh hope. No one can tell what a history of blessing this one fragment of the gospel has left among men. Yet this story never would have been written--but for the pitiful suffering of a little girl.

We do not know what blessing may go out into the world from the anguish in our home, which is so hard for us to endure. Every human pain or sorrow--is intended to make this world a little gentler, sweeter, warmer-hearted. We should never forget that the gospel, which, these nineteen centuries, has been changing the earth from coldness, harshness, cruelty, and barbarism--into love, gentleness, humane feeling, and brotherly kindness, is the story of a sorrow--the sorrow of Calvary. We ought to be willing to endure pain--to make the world more heaven-like.

We are not told anything about this woman, save that she was a woman with a great burden of sorrow. She was a broken-hearted mother, with a demoniac child. But that is enough for us to know. Her sorrow makes her kin to us all. It was not her own trouble, either. She was not sick. Yet hear her cry: "Lord, help me!" She represented a great class of burdened and crushed people, who are bowed down under the maladies or the sins of others. Especially was she the type of many human mothers, whose hearts are broken by the sufferings or by the evil ways of their children. You never enter a sick-room where a child lies in pain, and the mother keeps watch--but the mother is suffering more than the child. There are many parents prematurely stooped and aged--by reason of the burdens they are bearing for or on account of their children.

This mother's persistence in pressing her plea, was very remarkable. When she came first, Jesus "did not answer her a word." He stood silent before her piteous appealing. But she would not be discouraged, and as He walked on and talked with His disciples, she continued following, and beseeching Him to have mercy on her. When the silence was broken at length, it was in words which seemed strangely harsh and insulting, coming from the lips of the Christ. Yet even the offensive words did not chill the ardor of her earnestness. Indeed, she caught at the very offensiveness, seeing hope in them. She was content to be a dog--and to take a dog's portion. Even the crumbs from that table, would abundantly satisfy her.

The woman's prayer and its final answer tell us that we may bring to Christ in our love and faith--those who cannot come to Him themselves. Many of Christ's healings were in answer to the prayers of friends. It is not enough for us to pray for ourselves. That love is not doing its full duty--which does not carry its dear ones to God in supplication.

Then this mother teaches us how to pray not timidly, faintly, and feebly--but with all the earnestness of passionate love, strengthened by overcoming faith. When we are at Christ's feet with our burden, we are before One who can help us whatever our need. We should determine to stay there--until we get our plea. This mother's supplication was as different from many of our tame, mildly-uttered requests which we call prayers--as the storm's wild sweep is different from evening's soft zephyr. Jesus' silence did not discourage her. Jesus' refusal did not check her pleadings. Jesus' reproach had no power to drive her away. Such faith overcomes every obstacle--and wins its way to sublimest victory!

Christ's treatment of this distressed mother, is one of the strangest things in the Bible. It seems at first scarcely consistent with our conception of Christ's character. On nearly all other occasions He answered at once--but now, when the woman came to Him with her broken-hearted supplication, He did not answer her a word. When she continued crying, His only reply was a refusal, on the ground that His mission was not to any but His own people. Then, when she still persisted and cast herself at His feet, looking up appealingly to Him and pleading still for mercy, what was His reply? Not a kindly "no," such as He might have spoken, to make the pain of refusal as little as possible--but words which some haughty Pharisee might have used, calling the sorrowing woman a Gentile dog.

How can this be explained? If we were to hear that some good, generous, kindly Christian man, whom we know, had treated a poor distressed woman in this way, either we would not believe it, or we would say that the man must have been mentally disturbed, that he was not himself that day, because of some secret trouble of his own. Men do such things--they do treat the poor and distressed coldly, rudely, even in these late Christian days--but not men like Jesus. When we think of the character of Jesus--so gracious, so unselfish, so compassionate, and that He was always so ready to help even outcasts--this narrative perplexes us beyond measure.

We may as well admit, too, that there are difficulties, not unlike those we meet here, in many of God's providences in our own days. We believe in God's fatherhood, in His love and grace, in His tender thought and care of His children. Yet the world is full of sorrows. Distressed mothers yet cry to heaven for relief in their troubles, and He who sits on the throne is silent to them. Prayers seem to go long unanswered, and suppliants appear to get no pity from Him whom we believe to be full of compassion. These are painful perplexities with many godly people.

If we can find an explanation for Christ's treatment of this heathen mother--it will help us to understand many of the other difficulties in God's ways with His people. It is very clear that what seemed unkindness, was not unkindness. While Jesus was silent to her pleading and apparently indifferent, He was not really indifferent. He did hear her, and His heart was greatly interested in Her sorrow. When He seemed to spurn her, there was not in His heart toward her--the slightest feeling of real contempt or spurning. He did not despise her. His thought toward her did not change at last, when He yielded to her importunity and healed her child. His compassion was moved at her first approach to Him. He intended all the while--to grant her request. His treatment of her was only seemingly unkind. Suppose she had given up and turned away, when Jesus seemed to be so indifferent to her, what would she have lost? Her faith faltered not, and at last she got the blessing.

It is evident, too, that there was wise love in Christ's apparently harsh and severe treatment of this woman. It was the very treatment her faith needed. Of this we may be sure, as we read the story through to its close. We are safe in saying that gentle kindness from the first, would not have brought out such a noble faith in the end--as did the apparent harshness. We are apt to forget that the aim of God with us--is not to flood us all the time with tenderness, not to keep our path strewn always with flowers, not to give us everything we want, not to save us from all manner of suffering. God's aim with us--is to make something of us, to build up in us strong and noble character, to mature in us, qualities of grace and beauty, to make us like Christ. To do this--He must oftentimes deny us what we ask for, and must seem indifferent to our cries.

There are 'sentimental ideas of God' prevalent, which are dishonoring to Him. There are those who imagine that God's love, means tenderness that cannot cause pain. They think that He cannot look a moment on suffering, without relieving it; that He must instantly hear and answer every cry for the removal of trouble.

Not such a God is the God of the Bible. When suffering is the best thing for us--He is not too sympathetic to let us suffer--until the work of suffering is accomplished in us. He is not too kind to be silent to our prayers--when it is better that He should be silent for a time to allow faith to grow strong, self-confidence to be swept away, and the evil in us to be burned out in the furnace of pain!

Here, in this very story, we have an example of human compassion that seems more tender than Christ's compassion. The disciples begged the Master to listen to the woman's cries. They could not bear the anguish of her sorrow. It was too much for their nerves. But Jesus remained unmoved. No one will say that these rough fishermen were really more gentle-hearted than Jesus; but they were less wise in their love, than He was. They were not strong enough to wait until the right time for helping. They would have helped at once, and thus would have marred the work the Master was doing in the woman's soul.

This is a danger with all of us. Our tenderness lacks strength. We cannot see people suffer, and so we hasten to give relief--before the ministry of suffering is accomplished. We think of our mission to men, as being only to make life easier for them. We are continually lifting away burdens, which it were better to have left resting longer on our friend's shoulder. We are eager to make life easy for our children--when it were better if it had been left hard. We answer prayers too soon oftentimes, not asking if it were better for the suppliant to wait longer before receiving. In our dealing with human souls, we break down when we hear the first cries of penitence, hurrying to give assurance of pardon--when it were better if we left the penitent spirit longer with God for the deepening of conviction and of the sense of sin, and for the most complete humbling of the soul.

We must learn, that God does not deal with us in this 'sentimental' way. He is not too tender to see us suffer--if more suffering is needed to work in us the discipline that will make us like Christ. Here we have the key of many of the mysteries of Providence. Life is not easy for us--and God does not intend it to be easy! Prayers are not all answered the moment they are offered. Cries for the relief of pain do not always bring instant relief.

Suppose for a moment that God did give us everything we ask for--and did remove immediately every little pain, trouble, difficulty, and hardness that we seek to have removed; what would be the result on us? How selfish it would make us! We should become weak, unable to endure suffering, to bear trial, to carry burdens, or to struggle. We would be only children always, and would never rise into manly strength.

God's over-kindness to us would pamper in us all the worst elements of our nature, and would make us only poor driveling creatures!

On the other hand, however, God's wise and firm treatment of us, teaches us the great lessons which make us strong with the strength of Christ Himself. He teaches us to yield our own will to Him. He develops in us patience, faith, love, hope, and peace. He trains us to endure hardness--that we may grow heroic, courageous and strong.

It is evident that at no time in the progress of this experience, did Jesus mean to refuse this woman's plea. His cold silence--was not denial. His apparent refusal--was not rejection. He delayed for wise reasons. His treatment of the woman from beginning to end--was for the training of her faith. He did not answer her a word--that her pleading might grow stronger. At the last He commended the woman, as He commended few other people in all His ministry!

It is well for us to make careful note of this--that in all God's delays when we pray--His aim is some good in us. Perhaps we are willful, asking only for our own way--and must learn to say, "May Your will be done." Perhaps we are weak, unable to bear pain or to endure adversity or loss--and we must be trained and disciplined into strength. Perhaps our desires are only for earthly good, not for heavenly blessings--and we must be taught the transitory character of all worldly things, and led to desire things which are eternal. Perhaps we are impatient--and must be taught to wait for God. We are like children in our eager restlessness--and need to learn self-restraint. At least we may always know that silence is not refusal, that God hears and cares, and that when our faith has learned its lessons He will answer in blessing.

When God does not seem to answer--He is drawing us nearer to Himself. Ofttimes our unanswered prayers mean more of blessing to us--than those that are answered. The lessons set for us in them are harder--but they are greater, richer lessons. It is better for us to learn the lesson of submission and trust--than it is to get some new sweet joy which adds to our present comfort. Whether, therefore, He speaks or is silent--He has a blessing for us!

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