

## **“The Syro-Phoenician Woman”**

Matthew 15:21-28; Mark 7:24-30

In today’s lesson, we have the story of another unnamed woman in the Bible. This is the fourth woman without a name in our series of Women in the Bible. We might wonder why their names were not given. It certainly is not because they were insignificant, because we know they were not. The culture of their time was not too keen on recognizing individuality. It was a culture where honor of family was something very valuable, and it was usually the male patriarch of the family who was entrusted with preserving it. Women were not encouraged to seek public recognition or praise. Their role was one of submission, modesty and quietness. A woman who spoke out in public could bring shame on her husband and could even be considered defiant. How reassuring it is to know that even though this may have been how women were viewed at the time, this has never been God’s perception of women.

Throughout the bible, God speaks directly to women. He spoke to Eve in Genesis 3, to Sarah in Genesis 18, to Rebekah in Genesis 25, and to the Samaritan woman at the well in John 4, just to name a few from our studies. And let’s not forget the women He raised from the dead: Dorcus in Acts 9, and the daughter of Jairus in Luke 8. It was a woman, Mary Magdalene, to whom Jesus first appeared after His resurrection (Mark 16:9). It is obvious that any constraints society may have had against women never applied to God. Throughout history, God has used women to further the gospel, as in the case of Anna, the prophetess who served in the temple. After witnessing Simeon proclaim the child Jesus as the Messiah, she spent the rest of her life testifying about Him as the Redeemer of Israel. Women have never been forgotten by God. We may rest assured that as daughters of the King, He loves and He places great value on us.

So, although we do not know her name, there are some things we do know about this Syro-Phoenician woman:

- She was not Jewish, but Greek in nationality
- She was from the region of Phoenicia (Lebanon today), which was in the land of Canaan
- She is given the title of being Syro-Phoenician, because Phoenicia was part of Syria
- Even though she was a Gentile, she knew who Jesus was
- She had a desperate need to find help for her demon possessed daughter

Matthew 15:21-22. The first thing we notice is how this woman addressed Jesus. She was not Jewish herself, and yet she addresses him as “*Son of David*”, which had come to mean “Messiah” from the prophecy given to King David that his lineage would produce the Messiah of Israel. Did the woman understand the meaning of this title, or did she just call him this because she had heard it from the crowds? She was from the land of Canaan; they were pagans. What could she know of the Messiah? In any event, Jesus was not moved and did not even acknowledge her. Her plea begs compassion as she tells Jesus that her daughter is being tortured by a demon. We can understand the angst and the desperation with which she cries out. When we first read that Jesus ignored her, we can’t help but be perplexed. Here is Jesus, the epitome of compassion; healer, rescuer, redeemer, and yet He doesn’t even answer her. When did Jesus during His earthly ministry ever refuse to help someone in need?

Matthew 15:23-25. The disciples did not seem to be concerned with the need the woman had. She was obviously tiring them with her request and her persistence. Rather than ask Jesus to help her, they beg him to send her away. But then Jesus speaks, and at last we know the reason for what seemed like apathy on His part. He was sent to tend to the needs of the people of Israel, He tells her; they are His lost sheep. And still she cries out to Him, this time addressing Him as Lord: “*Lord, help me.*” As a mother, she was willing to go to the ends of the earth to save her daughter, and if that meant denouncing every paganistic practice she had ever

participated in and turning her back on every god her people ever worshipped, then so be it! She was making a declaration when she called Jesus “*Lord*”! It was more than a declaration; it was an act of worship! I am choosing You, Lord, and I am putting my faith in You and only You! You have the answers. Lord, help me!

*“My heart and my flesh cry out for the living God.” Psalm 84:2*

When we, too, come to Him in total surrender and submission, it is like sweet incense to the ears of God. When we say, God, I choose You above all the things of the world and I give you all of me ... that’s when we reach the heart of God. That’s true worship!

Matthew 15:26-28. When Jesus explains to her how He cannot help her because it would be like taking bread from the children of Israel, He is astounded by her response. “... *even the little dogs eat the crumbs which fall from their masters’ table.*” She wasn’t asking for much; she didn’t expect a banquet, or even a whole meal for that matter. She had humbled herself to the point of being content with whatever she could scavenge from the leftovers that happened to fall from the table. She knew there was power in whatever crumb fell from the table of Jesus! What she was demonstrating was true humility, and humility always pleases the Lord! Now she had His attention!

*“God resists the proud, but gives grace to the humble.” James 4:6*

“*O woman, great is your faith,*” Jesus tells her. One moment He’s ignoring her, and now He commends her for her faith! Not even the disciples received this kind of commendation from the Lord. It brings to mind another occasion when He marveled at someone’s faith. Oddly enough, it was someone else outside of the Jewish faith; a Gentile, a Roman soldier. Let’s read the story in Matthew 8:5-13. Jesus claims He had not found this kind of faith even among His own people in Israel. He had not encountered anyone who believed that He only had to say the word, and it would be done. What was He saying? He had not found anyone who understood the power of the spoken word of God. The Bible says that God spoke into existence the creation of the world. All the way back to Genesis 1:3, where we read, “*Then God said ...*” The Roman Centurion must have believed this, and Jesus healed his servant, just as he asked. In other words, it is not our lineage that will earn us a place in the Kingdom of Heaven, not who we were born as, not whether we are a Jew or a Gentile, but our faith ... the faith we place in the Son of the living God! This is such a powerful illustration, that the words of that Roman Centurion are still quoted today during the communion portion of the Catholic mass: “*Lord, I am not worthy that you should come into my house, but only say the word ...*” and *I shall be healed.*”



In Matthew 15:28, we read the conclusion of the Syro-Phoenician woman’s story: her daughter was healed from that very hour!

As a review, let’s read the account of the same story in Mark 7:24-30.

In summary, Jesus had gone away from the city of Jerusalem so that He and His disciples could rest. They were out of their element; in an area surrounded by non-Jews and maybe that’s why the disciples wanted Him to dismiss this woman, this outsider who came to plead her case before Jesus. And yet, the love of God knows no boundaries. Maybe we, too, sometimes feel like outsiders with God, ashamed of having failed Him time and

time again. Maybe we feel unworthy of receiving any of the blessings He has for us because we know we've sinned and given in to temptations or weaknesses of the flesh. We need to be encouraged by this story and be assured that God loves us and is always ready to pardon us. His word says so in 1 John 1:9, *"If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness."* We must have faith to believe this. And we must believe that our background does not matter to Him. He is not a respecter of persons just as the Bible tells us in Acts 10:34 where the Apostle Peter says, *"In truth, I perceive that God shows no partiality. But in every nation whoever fears Him and works righteousness is accepted by Him."* Peter had seen this demonstrated firsthand when He witnessed what Jesus did for this Syro-Phoenician woman. It was true for her then, and it's still true for us today.

So, what do we learn from the story of the Syro-Phoenician woman's story?

- It was all about faith! Jesus tested her, and she was found faithful.
- Faith is something we develop as we walk with the Lord and learn to trust Him with every aspect of our lives and the lives of our loved ones.
- FAITH can move mountains. Jesus said in Matthew 17:20, *"... if you have faith as a mustard seed, you will say to this mountain, 'Move from here to there,' and it will move; and nothing will be impossible for you."*

