

## The Heart of Seeking Faith

**Mark 7:24-30** *From there He arose and went to the region of Tyre and Sidon. And He entered a house and wanted no one to know it, but He could not be hidden. <sup>25</sup> For a woman whose young daughter had an unclean spirit heard about Him, and she came and fell at His feet. <sup>26</sup> The woman was a Greek, a Syro-Phoenician by birth, and she kept asking Him to cast the demon out of her daughter. <sup>27</sup> But Jesus said to her, "Let the children be filled first, for it is not good to take the children's bread and throw it to the little dogs." <sup>28</sup> And she answered and said to Him, "Yes, Lord, yet even the little dogs under the table eat from the children's crumbs." <sup>29</sup> Then He said to her, "For this saying go your way; the demon has gone out of your daughter." <sup>30</sup> And when she had come to her house, she found the demon gone out, and her daughter lying on the bed.*

Probably every mountain climber dreams of climbing to the top of the top – to reach the summit of Mount Everest, at 8848 metres, or 29 000 feet. However, it's not for everyone. Over 200 people have died trying to make the climb, 10 of them this year. Temperatures close to the top range from -4 C to -31 C. Wind speeds can reach up to 250 km per hour, which is a category 5 hurricane. The mountain actually punctures the jet stream, and the oxygen level is so low above 8000m, that climbers call it the death zone, where the human cannot acclimatise, and uses up oxygen faster than you can take it in.

Yet, hundreds of people make the attempt every year. Only 1 in 4 succeed, but hundreds go. To prepare, they do weightlifting, jogging, swimming, and other kinds of body conditioning, to be fit enough for the climb and the low oxygen. They invest thousands into specialised gear, shoes, clothing, climbing tools, camp supplies, and electronic equipment. Most climbers will hire a Sherpa, a guide, to assist them on the climb, which can cost up to \$65 000. All of this does not include plane tickets, insurance, and paying for the accommodation for the two and a half months it takes to do the whole climb. During this time, the climbers are at risk from frostbite, altitude sickness, avalanches, possible falls, exhaustion, severe storms. With all that, hundreds make the attempt every year.

Why do people put in that kind of effort; that kind of training; that kind of money and embrace all the risks, with only a 25% chance of success? People do it for various reasons, maybe the greatest is what Sir Edmund Hillary said, "Because it's there." It is the highest goal as far as mountains go, and some will not stop seeking until they reach that goal.

People put in that kind of effort to climb mountains, win Olympic medals, become famous, or be at the top of their profession. What kind of effort and discipline and commitment and perseverance ought to be in the one who is seeking God?

Because faith is not something that tries to earn God's favour, some have gotten the wrong idea and think faith is passive, almost weak. If we're not careful, the flesh turns this into an excuse to be lazy, or apathetic. You don't have to go long in the Christian life to meet people who tell you that their lazy, passive attitude to the faith is because they don't want to be caught up with works-based Christianity. They may even tell you that a hard, wholehearted pursuit of God is what legalists do, people who don't understand the truths of justification.

This is completely wrong. The Christian life is not one of finding God once and for all by one act of faith. Yes, there is certainly a moment of justification and regeneration. However, the day we believe by faith becomes the starter's gun for a life of pursuing God, a race in which the prize is the sight of God. The Christian life is a life of faith, a life of pursuing God.

I fear that wrong theology, along with a culture that teaches us to have everything instantly,

immediately, microwaved, out of box, 24-hour delivery, high-speed Internet, instant Wikipedia answers, discourages an attitude of seeking faith. Unless we learn the persistence and vigorousness of true faith, we may end up like Israel, looking on at the Promised Land of victorious living, but not entering. A dry Christian life follows, with unanswered prayer, an increasing dullness, a growing sense of unreality pervades the life.

In the meantime, God awaits to reward the hungry. The Bible reveals a God who waits to be pursued. He seeks and then will be sought. In this account we read of persistent faith. It was the faith of an unlikely person – a Gentile woman, outside of the community of faith, Israel. We see an example of what it does, and then we see how God treats that kind of faith.

## **I. The Time for Faith**

**Mark 7:24-30** *From there He arose and went to the region of Tyre and Sidon. And He entered a house and wanted no one to know it, but He could not be hidden. <sup>25</sup> For a woman whose young daughter had an unclean spirit heard about Him, and she came and fell at His feet. <sup>26</sup> The woman was a Greek, a Syro-Phoenician by birth, and she kept asking Him to cast the demon out of her daughter.*

The Lord has journeyed from Galilee to the region of Tyre and Sidon. This is not a place around the corner. Tyre and Sidon are to the far north, and along the Mediterranean coast. It was around 200 kilometres. If Jesus and His disciples walked a good twenty kilometres a day, this would have taken them at least a week or two to get there. The whole idea was to finally get away from the crowds in Galilee, and begin the private preparation of the twelve apostles.

Jesus is actually now in Gentile territory. He is in the area where the residents worshipped Athene and Zeus and Astarte and a whole pantheon of Greek gods. The inhabitants are Canaanites, Phoenicians, who embrace the Greek gods and Greek culture.

In these surroundings, Jesus brings His disciples, desiring to escape the hysterical crowds that want to make Him king. In Gentile territory, He will be less well-known and more private teaching could take place.

At least, that was the idea. Look at verse 24. Here is the humanity of Jesus. He desired to be secretly in a house, probably one owned by Jews living in the area, but our text tells us, He could not be hidden. The fame of Jesus had spread to Gentile lands and even those who did not confess Israel's God had heard of Him.

And among those who knew who Jesus was and had heard of what He could do and who found out that Jesus was in their area, was a mother. This mother had a young daughter who for some reason, probably connected to the idolatrous worship of her culture, had been demon possessed. Demon possession is not an easy thing to behold - to see a human racked by a filthy being that torments the mind with filthy thoughts, filthy longings, tortures the soul endlessly and restlessly. Imagine seeing something like that in a young girl.

We don't know if this woman had been a devotee of the false religions of her culture. We don't know if perhaps she involved her daughter in some ritual. Whatever was behind all this, she now knew the devastating effects of idolatry. She now knew the pain and harm that false religion brings not only to you, but to your family.

This was her time for faith.

## II. The Trial of Faith

*For a woman whose young daughter had an unclean spirit heard about Him, and she came and fell at His feet. <sup>26</sup> The woman was a Greek, a Syro-Phoenician by birth, and she kept asking Him to cast the demon out of her daughter. <sup>27</sup> But Jesus said to her, "Let the children be filled first, for it is not good to take the children's bread and throw it to the little dogs."*

Living alongside Israel, living in places where Jews would have been either settled nearby, or frequently trading or moving through, she would have known about Israel's God. She knew Israel claimed to worship the one and only true God, the Creator, the I AM. She knew too, that Israel expected a Great King, of great power, who would rescue them – their Messiah.

And somewhere along the line, she had concluded that Jesus was the Messiah. And if He was the Messiah, then the God of Israel was the true God.

But faith is never simply a matter of head-knowledge. It is never simply concluding the right answer from a certain number of facts. James tells us that demons themselves have that kind of faith:

**James 2:19** <sup>19</sup> *You believe that there is one God. You do well. Even the demons believe -- and tremble!*

Real faith does more than agree in the head, it is an action of the heart. And for her to know that her faith was real, her faith was put to the test. Tests are never there to teach God anything. They are always there to reveal to us what is in our hearts. They reveal to others if what we say we believe is what we really believe.

But how would she, or others know if this faith was real?

**1 Peter 1:6-7** <sup>6</sup> *In this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while, if need be, you have been grieved by various trials, <sup>7</sup> that the genuineness of your faith, being much more precious than gold that perishes, though it is tested by fire, may be found to praise, honor, and glory at the revelation of Jesus Christ,*

I want you to see four furnaces that her faith had to pass through. If it didn't burn up and evaporate by the time it came through the others side, then she had the God-given faith.

Notice what she professed.

Here we pick up reading in Matthew's account:

**Matthew 15:22** <sup>22</sup> *And behold, a woman of Canaan came from that region and cried out to Him, saying, "Have mercy on me, O Lord, Son of David! My daughter is severely demon-possessed."*

*Son of David* is the title of the Messiah. This Gentile woman was professing belief that Jesus was truly the Messiah of Israel, and that the faith of Israel was true.

**Furnace 1** – Jesus was not there to heal. Jesus had come to this place to get rest and quiet and privacy with his apostles. There are no other records of healings, miracles, exorcism done in this area. For her to receive help, she needed to be willing to intrude, to disturb, to risk being rejected,

Jesus sometimes taught that the faith of people is way too polite, and not disturbing enough.

**Luke 11:8-9** <sup>8</sup> *"I say to you, though he will not rise and give to him because he is his friend, yet because of his persistence he will rise and give him as many as he needs. <sup>9</sup> " So I say to you, ask, and it will be given to*

*you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you.*

**Luke 18:1-7** **Luke 18:1** *Then He spoke a parable to them, that men always ought to pray and not lose heart, <sup>2</sup> saying: "There was in a certain city a judge who did not fear God nor regard man. <sup>3</sup> "Now there was a widow in that city; and she came to him, saying, 'Get justice for me from my adversary.' <sup>4</sup> "And he would not for a while; but afterward he said within himself, 'Though I do not fear God nor regard man, <sup>5</sup> 'yet because this widow troubles me I will avenge her, lest by her continual coming she weary me.' "* <sup>6</sup> *Then the Lord said, "Hear what the unjust judge said. <sup>7</sup> "And shall God not avenge His own elect who cry out day and night to Him, though He bears long with them?"*

## **Furnace 2 – the apostles wanted her gone.**

We read from Matthew's account:

**Matthew 15:23** <sup>23</sup> *But He answered her not a word. And His disciples came and urged Him, saying, "Send her away, for she cries out after us."*

As if it were not enough that she was a woman in a society where woman did not have equal status; that she had intruded on a men's meeting in a private house, she now got the chilly reception that one fears when taking this risk. Jesus does not seem to reply, and the apostles urged Jesus to dismiss her.

I wonder if many people would not at this point have said, "I don't mean to be a bother. I'm sorry for the disturbance", and backed out. Often, people who do that are not necessarily as sorry for disturbing, as they are sorry for their own feelings of not wanting to look like a disturbance. Often what looks like humility is really pride, putting on the face of being apologetic, but really not wanting to give the impression of being a burden.

But faith is humble. It is not protecting a reputation, it is pursuing a relationship. She fell at his feet and kept on asking Him. The disciples' cold calls for her rejection did not loosen her grip on his feet.

## **Furnace 3 – she was not Jewish.**

She is a foreigner, and Jesus is here on foreign soil. In Matthew's account, we read

**Matthew 15:24** <sup>24</sup> *But He answered and said, "I was not sent except to the lost sheep of the house of Israel."*

What's going on here? Remember, Jesus' first mission was to announce Himself to Israel as her Messiah. Israel was always meant to be a light to the Gentiles. But in order of announcement and in order of priority, Israel came first.

Back when Jesus sent the apostles on their first commission, He told them,

**Matthew 10:5-6** <sup>5</sup> *These twelve Jesus sent out and commanded them, saying: "Do not go into the way of the Gentiles, and do not enter a city of the Samaritans. <sup>6</sup> "But go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.*

But Israel, both in its leaders, and in general, rejected Jesus as Messiah from sin. It was a few Israelites who, in a way, became the new Israel – twelve apostles, like the twelve tribes, who took the Gospel to all nations. It was 120 Jews in Jerusalem, and then 3000, who finally became a light to the Gentiles.

But at this stage, the mission was still to announce to the Jews who Jesus was. Jews came first in order. In fact, they still come first, according to Romans 1:16. It was Paul's approach when entering a city – the announcement was made first to the Jews in that city, and then to the Gentiles.

So here, the obstacle is that she finds herself part of the nation that is not being told and targeted at this time. She is like someone who has come to the embassy at the wrong time, and with the wrong passport. You won't be served, because you're not of the people being reached, and it's not your time.

Wrong place. Wrong time. Wrong nation. A Canaanite woman, interrupting a private meeting of Jewish men. But faith sees beyond nation and race and culture. It is pursuing the God who made us all.

#### **Furnace 4 – Her request was apparently unfitting.**

<sup>27</sup> *But Jesus said to her, "Let the children be filled first, for it is not good to take the children's bread and throw it to the little dogs."*

These words by Jesus are easily misunderstood. It sounds as if Jesus is insulting her, and calling her a dog. But look closely. Jesus is not calling her a dog; He is using an illustration. In a house, the family sits around the table. When food is served, do you scoop out food meant for the children, and give it to the pets? No. This would be an inverted order. The word for dog is not the word for a dirty, street-dwelling scavenger. It is the word for a little house-dog, a dog kept as a pet. Jesus says, you don't take food meant for children and give it to the pets.

Notice the word *first*. Let the children be filled *first*. *Who does the Gospel go to first?* The nation of Israel. Jesus is really repeating what He said, I was sent only for the lost sheep of Israel. The Gentiles are not children of the covenant. They are not seated at the table of Israel. But I think Jesus is giving a hint, and a help to this woman's faith. By saying, let the children be fed first, doesn't it mean that there will be someone or something that gets fed second?

Jesus would often say hard and challenging things that exposed a person's faith, to see if it was like the faith of demons. He exposed superficial well-wishers, shallow political groupies, fickle thrill-seekers, and religious hypocrites. His challenge was like a hurdle that only those with faith will clear. His challenge was like a filter, that only pure faith gets through.

Here is His hurdle to this woman: The Jews are the children at the table, being fed by the Messiah of Israel. The Gentiles are not part of the family, they might be around, like house-pets, but they are not at the table. His work cannot simply be given to her, as a Gentile.

Four furnaces: Jesus was not there to heal, the apostles did not want her, she was not Jewish and Jesus seemed to discourage her and tell her that it would not be fitting for Him to help her.

Did her faith burn up in those furnaces?

### **III. The Triumph of Faith**

<sup>28</sup> *And she answered and said to Him, "Yes, Lord, yet even the little dogs under the table eat from the children's crumbs."* <sup>29</sup> *Then He said to her, "For this saying go your way; the demon has gone out of your daughter."* <sup>30</sup> *And when she had come to her house, she found the demon gone out, and her daughter lying on the bed.*

Look at how her faith saw in Jesus' own challenge the answer she needed. He had said, let the children be fed first. And in that, her faith-filled heart saw the answer. Yes, Lord, truly, the children must be fed first. But while they are eating, there is an overflow of crumbs or meat onto the ground, and from that overflow, the housepets eat. Yes, Lord, I may be a house-pet, and not a child. I accept that. My nation and its religion have not lived as Your children. But if house-pets are around the table, they are still part of the house, they still belong to the Master. Here I am, all I ask for is an overflow of Your great power onto my daughter.

Here is faith triumphing. This woman was not only determined, she was witty, and shrewd. Where others might have seen an insult; where others might have taken offense; she saw a way to turn the illustration to her favour. Her trust was in the goodness of Israel's God and Israel's Messiah. She saw the hurdle as a ladder and climbed up it and over it.

Samuel Rutherford, once wrote "It is faith's work to claim and challenge loving-kindnesses out of all the roughest strokes of God."

We have an idea that faith is passive, gentle, spectator-like. The kingdom of God is available to those who seize it, it is not for people to ease their way into it. Faith battles, faith seizes, faith grasps and struggles to get through that narrow door.

When Jesus described the kingdom of heaven and people who enter it, He included the idea of giving up all you have, sacrificing, because it is worth it.

**Matthew 13:44-46** <sup>44</sup> "Again, the kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field, which a man found and hid; and for joy over it he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field. <sup>45</sup> "Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant seeking beautiful pearls, <sup>46</sup> "who, when he had found one pearl of great price, went and sold all that he had and bought it.

Think of the lengths we go to secure something of lesser value. Think of the effort you have put in to get an education, to earn a salary, to make your business succeed, to learn an instrument, to do well in a sport, to lose weight or strengthen your body. When you gave yourself to that, was your effort half-hearted, or whole-hearted?

Think about your whole walk with God. What kind of seeking characterises your walk with Him. Does it look like this Canaanite woman? You have three arenas in which to seek God. The one is private worship – your own times of seeking God in the Word and prayer. The second is public worship – your opportunity to seek God with believers on the Lord's Day. The third is perpetual worship – your opportunity to seek God in all of life, on the job, at home, at leisure.

When you think of those three arenas, what does it take to stop you? What does it take to discourage you from your quiet time, from corporate worship, or from what Tozer described as developing a gaze of the soul.

How much more is waiting for the believer who will, as the old writers put it, pray through. More is waiting for the believer who becomes vigorous, determined, disciplined, even relentless in seeking God's face.

How do we know?

Look at the response this woman got.

<sup>29</sup> Then He said to her, "For this saying go your way; the demon has gone out of your daughter." <sup>30</sup> And when she had come to her house, she found the demon gone out, and her daughter lying on the bed.

I picture Jesus' expression changing, His eyes smiling and twinkling, as He sees one who has God-given faith. Her faith passed right through the furnace and came out the other side and it made Christ's heart rejoice. "Go your way, the demon has gone out of your daughter." She goes home, and finds it exactly as Christ said. Only two people were commended for having 'great faith' and both were Gentiles – this woman, and a Roman centurion. I wonder if here wasn't a message to the twelve apostles - the message of Messiah is not going to spread as you thought it would. It will find fertile soil among a people who did not seek Israel's God. You are going to find mainly hardness and unbelief in Israel, among the Gentiles you will find faith.

**Hebrews 11:6** <sup>6</sup> But without faith it is impossible to please Him, for he who comes to God must believe that He is, and that He is a rewarder of those who diligently seek Him.

As you think of your pursuit of Christ, what needs to change for you to be a diligent seeker? Maybe it would be accepting certain disciplines to make it happen frequently, disciplines of body and time. Maybe it is a discipline of mind, of focus, a habit of looking for God's work around you and seeing His providence in all things. Maybe it is becoming vigorous about refusing certain distractions. Maybe it is recognising whatever influence dulls your love for God and dealing with it. Maybe it is increasing the intensity of your pursuit.

What would it look like if your worship amongst God's people went from seeking to diligent seeking? How would that change what you attend, and when? How would it change what you do when you are here? How would it change what you do afterwards? What if we could say that another name for our church could be the Fellowship of the Burning Hearts?

What would your private times of prayer and study look like, if they changed from seeking to diligent seeking?

What would your perpetual walk with God look like? Do we stop short of mortifying our sins, dealing with them, diligently pursuing likeness to Christ?

We all have powers of seeking. We all have faith, at least like a mustard-seed. The real question is – do you believe the promise that He is worthy of that pursuit? Will you seek the treasure that is God, and trust that you will find Him?