

Matthew 15:21-39

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[0:00] Leaving that place, Jesus withdrew to the region of Tyre and Sidon. A Canaanite woman from that vicinity came to him crying out, 'Lord, Son of David, have mercy on me.'

My daughter is demon-possessed and suffering terribly. 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 only sent 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 to toss it to the dogs.'

'Yes, Lord,' she said. 'Even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their master's table.' Then Jesus said to her, 'Woman, you have great faith.'

Your request is granted. And her daughter was healed at that moment. Now Jesus left there and went along to the Sea of Galilee. Then he came up upon a mountainside and sat down.

[1:10] Great crowds came up to him, bringing the lame, the blind, the crippled, the mute, and many others, and laid them at his feet, and he healed them. The people were amazed, and when they saw the mute speak, and the crippled made well, the lame walking, and the blind seeing, and they praised the God of Israel.

Jesus called his disciples to him and said, 'I have compassion for these people. They have already been with me three days and have had nothing to eat.'

'I do not want to send them away hungry, or they may collapse on the way.' When his disciples answered, 'Where could we get enough bread in this remote place to feed such a crowd?'

'How many loaves do you have?' Jesus asked. 'Seven,' they replied, and a few small fish. He told the crowd to sit down on the ground, and then he took the seven loaves and the fish, and when he had given thanks, he broke them and gave them to the disciples, and they in turn to the people.

They all ate and were satisfied. Afterwards, the disciples picked up seven basketfuls of broken pieces that were left over. The number of those who ate was 4,000 men, besides women and children.

[2:31] After Jesus had sent the crowd away, he got into the boat and went to the vicinity of Magadan. Well, as we continue in this series of studies in Matthew's Gospel, I would invite you to turn with me there and to the passage which we read together, just a few moments ago here in chapter 15.

Matthew 15 and verses 21 to 39. And just to say that though touching here on the story of Jesus feeding of the 4,000, we are going to be largely concentrating our attention, almost wholly upon this account of this woman who came to Jesus with her demon-possessed daughter.

In the NIV, the title is The Faith of a Canaanite Woman. One of the greatest preachers, one of the greatest evangelists who ever lived, was a man by the name of Jonathan Edwards.

He lived in the America of the 18th century and was God's instrument in a time of quite remarkable revival in 1740, 1742, which led to what has come to be known as the Great Awakening.

One of the greatest revivals in the history of the church. The revival began in the town of Northampton, Massachusetts, New England, and spread to other towns and villages in the eastern seaboard of the country.

[4:35] And one of the things which Jonathan Edwards did during that time of revival was to keep a diary, to keep an account of all that took place, and not least the stories of some of the many, some of the astonishing conversions which happened in these days.

And that diary was to become a book with this very wonderful title, A Narrative of Surprising Conversions.

A Narrative of Surprising Conversions. Now, if you wanted a title to our study here in this passage, then it might well be this, The Narrative of a Surprising Conversion.

And the note of surprise comes across to us when we read this story through, not in the NIV Bibles, which we have here in church, but in the authorized King James Version.

You see, verse 22 reads, A Canaanite woman from that vicinity came to him crying out. But what the AV says, and it says it so much more accurately, is, And behold, behold, a woman of Canaan came out of the same coasts and cried unto him.

[6:17] Now, whenever we read this word, behold, in the Bible, we are meant to be surprised. We are meant to be taken aback, astonished.

You know, I never but never expected to see this. And so I'm going to tell you to do something very strange this morning.

I'm going to tell you to deface your Bible if you've got an NIV. You're not to do it if it's a church Bible. You've got.

But I want you to take a pencil and write in at the beginning of verse 22, And behold. And behold. And I want you to underline it. And in the margin, you can write, Isn't this surprising? Because you see, this is what this is.

[7:23] It's such a surprising conversion in that it's the very last thing that you expect to see happening. But in what way?

Well, let's spend a little time looking at it and looking at it to see what it has to tell us about both the nature and the importance of biblical faith.

the nature and the importance of biblical faith in that there is a key phrase in this story. It's the words of Jesus to this woman.

In verse 28, Then Jesus said to her, Woman, you have great faith. Just to ask, who's the only other person who Jesus said had great faith?

Wasn't it the centurion who came to Jesus to ask help for his servant who was ill? And when Jesus said that he would come to heal him, the centurion said to Jesus, But just say the word.

[8:42] You don't need to come to him. You just say the word and my servant will be healed. And Jesus said, and this is Matthew 8 and verse 10, I tell you the truth.

I have not found anyone in Israel with such great faith. So let's look at this story together, this account of great faith and what it has to teach us about the nature and the importance of biblical faith.

It's absolute necessity for knowing God and for getting to heaven. You see, it's Hebrews 11 and verse 6, which tells us that without faith it is impossible to please God.

Because anyone who comes to him must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who earnestly seek him.

Well, this is the story of someone, this woman, who did exactly that, who earnestly sought after God and was rewarded for doing so.

[10:07] And what a woman she was. And there are at least three things which we learn about her here. And all of this, all of this takes us by surprise.

Firstly, there is who she was and where she lived. Secondly, there is what she sought and how she sought it.

And then thirdly, there is how she was rewarded by Jesus. First of all, there is who she was and where she lived.

Now, we need to begin by putting this passage and its story in its context. And I want you to note at the very outset that it's a geographical context.

Do you see this in verse 21? Leaving that place, Jesus withdrew to the region of Tyre and Sidon.

[11:14] Now, we know from the parallel passage in Mark's gospel that Jesus went there exhausted, overwhelmed with the pressure.

He went there for some rest and relaxation. But the important thing, and it's a surprising thing, the important thing is that it was to this region of Tyre and Sidon that he went for this R&R.

You see, Tyre and Sidon was to the north of Galilee on the coast. you would recognize the region today from maps on the television news showing the Middle East and that area of conflict which we would know today as southern Lebanon.

And the thing about this region was that it was out with the borders of Israel and was almost totally Gentile. it was almost totally non-Jewish.

And this immediately makes us think back to what we were talking about last Sunday morning with Callum in verses 1 to 20 with respect to the Pharisees and the way in which they were so wholly obsessed with spiritual with ritual cleanliness and that one of the things which these Pharisees always did if they had been out and about and they had come into any sort of contact with a Gentile you know they're in the thistle center and they're going down the stairs to the car park and they bump in to a Gentile and that made them immediately to be ritually spiritually unclean and they would have to make their way home and have a spiritual bath a spiritual shower to spiritually decontaminate themselves and so you see they would have been scandalized absolutely scandalized at what Jesus did here in that he actually he purposefully made his way into Gentile into unclean territory and there there in the very last place you would have imagined it and this is the point it was there that he found faith real authentic saving faith

[14:02] I wonder if you can think of places where you would hesitate to go with the gospel because you're really quite sure that you would never find faith there you know where are the gospel no-go areas for you I was chatting just the week before last to a ministerial colleague and he spoke about being in a certain situation and he said I was totally out with my comfort zone out with my comfort zone you see Tyre and Sidon was a spiritually it was a gospel no-go area but not to Jesus not to Jesus but you know there's something else here and let me read these words of one of the Bible commentators the supreme significance of this passage is that it foreshadows the going out of the gospel to the whole world it shows us the beginning of the end of all barriers and this is actually underlined for us in the next story we're not going to study it in any detail but the next story which is the feeding of the four thousand which to many is just a repeat of the feeding of the five thousand which it's not and it's not not least because it took place as Mark tells us in his gospel on the eastern side of the sea of Galilee in a region known as the

Decapolis so named because it consisted of ten cities Deca ten polis cities and ten cities which had a largely almost exclusively Gentile population now look at verse 31 Jesus has been performing works of healing in this area the people were amazed when they saw the mute speaking the crippled made well the lame walk and the blind seeing and they praised the God of Israel what a surprise what a surprise but what about this woman what can we say about her well just this that in terms of coming to a true saving faith absolutely everything was stacked against her you see this woman was the very last person you would have expected

Jesus to have anything to do with indeed what was the reaction of the disciples to her verse 23 send her away send her away you know you don't want to have anything to do with the likes of someone like her now why was that well there are three things about her aren't there firstly she was a woman you remember the reaction of these same disciples when Jesus got into a conversation with the woman who came to get some water from the well at Sychar in Samaria John 4 and verse 27 the disciples were surprised surprised to find him talking with a woman you need to forget about the equality of the sexes in these days women had no status whatsoever they were nothings they were nobodies they were of no value they were worthless and if that wasn't bad enough she was a Gentile woman she wasn't

Jewish she was a foreigner and to make it even worse it's not just that she was a woman it's not just that she was a Gentile woman it's that she was a Canaanite Gentile woman verse 22 a Canaanite woman from that vicinity came to him and being a Canaanite and just to say that the Canaanites had always been the arch enemies of the Jews being a Canaanite meant that she most probably came from a background not just of gross idolatry but of sordid immorality and so sent her packing Jesus you don't want to have anything to do with the likes of her let me give you a verse which underlines

Jesus attitude here namely that the gospel is for everyone this is what we're being taught here the gospel is for everyone no matter who they are in terms of gender race religion lifestyle who they are where they're from what they're like it's John 6 and verse 37 all those the father gives me will come to me and whoever comes to me I will not drive away in other words if you come to me I won't send you packing I wonder if there's someone here this morning I don't know what it is that's brought you to church maybe it's been a struggle for you to come here and you're thinking to yourself with my background my circumstances my sort of life

[20:53] Jesus wouldn't have anything to do with the likes of me well let me tell you Jesus won't drive you away but what about what Jesus says in verse 24 when the disciples tell Jesus to send her on her way he answered I was sent only to the lost sheep of Israel we can't be absolutely sure

here but some writers believe that what Jesus was actually doing here was putting a question and so not I was sent only to the lost sheep of Israel but was I sent only to the lost sheep of Israel well of course he wasn't anything but you see what we're being told here is that the gospel is for everyone absolutely everyone and that included the likes of this woman who the

Pharisees wouldn't have touched never touched even with a barge pole dipped in dettle so whoever you are whatever you are the gospel is for you so who she was what she was and where she lived but then secondly I want you to notice what she sought and how she sought it what did she want of Jesus what did she want from Jesus well verse 22 a Canaanite woman from that vicinity came to him crying out Lord son of David have mercy on me my daughter is demon possessed and suffering terribly now how did she come to Jesus this is the important thing here as we come to see what true saving faith really is and let me try and answer this by giving you a number of adverbs and there are four of them first of all do you notice she came desperately

I'm not sure if that's good English helplessly might be a better word and can't you see and hear this by the look on her face and the sound of her voice my daughter is suffering terribly from demon possession now we don't know we are not told how this actually manifested itself but it's clear that it must have been simply awful simply awful with this woman at the end of her wits at the end of her resources in that she didn't know what to do and then and how we don't know but she heard about Jesus who had been performing all these miracles over the border in Galilee and she perhaps thought to herself maybe just maybe he can help me

I'll go to him I hear that he's around and just how desperate she was as seen in verse 23 as the disciples say to Jesus she keeps crying out after us you know she didn't stop she kept on and on and on and on and you know my friends this is where the journey to faith sometimes begins does it not with this kind of desperation something happens maybe some enormous difficulty maybe a tragedy of some sort an illness something to do with your family something to do with your work and you're brought to the end of your resources in that there doesn't seem to be anyone or anything that can possibly help you quite simply you're desperate you're desperate and in your desperation you think to yourself and it's the very last thing you ever saw yourself doing the very last thing

I'll turn to God maybe he can help me in some way now again I wonder if there's anyone here this morning maybe it's your first time in Cornerstone and what's brought you this morning is you're desperate you're just desperate I don't know your situation but you've been brought to the end of your resources maybe I'll go to church try God she came desperately helplessly do you notice secondly that she came humbly look at what she says to

[26 : 46] Jesus in verse 22 have mercy on me in other words she knew that in and of herself she had nothing to plead with with respect to Jesus you see mercy and I was speaking partly about this the other Tuesday to the men in Glen O'chill prison

God be merciful to me a sinner mercy she came humbly but then thirdly do you notice that she came believingly do you notice how she addresses Jesus in verse 22 Lord son of David now we're not told how this happened in the sense of how it was that she had come to hear about Jesus and what it was about Jesus that she had heard but it's clear that her eyes had been opened to grasp to understand exactly who he was you see this man was God he was the Lord the promised son of David the Messiah verse 25 the woman came and knelt before him Lord help me she said the force of the verb here is that she came and prostrated herself before

Jesus that is she threw herself down at his feet if I might quote one of the Bible commentators recognizing who Jesus is what he does and our utter dependency on him are the essential components of faith and so I'm bound to ask you have you come to see have your eyes been opened to understand and grasp!

who he is and in seeing who he is prostrate yourself at his feet for some reason when I was thinking about this earlier the words that came to my mind were from that awful film Jesus Christ Superstar and the song of Mary Magdalene about Jesus he's a man he's just a man well he's not just a man she would never have come to Jesus if he was just a man because a man couldn't help her but he's more than just a man he's the Lord he's God he's able to do for us what we could never ever do for ourselves and she saw this and acted upon it desperately humbly

Believingly! And then fourthly do you notice she came to him determinedly! Again it's maybe not good English but the picture we're given here of this woman is that nothing but nothing was going to put her off and she could have been put off when we read in verse 23 that Jesus didn't answer a word said nothing to her why?

[32:01] Well was he encouraging? Was he drawing out faith? You see what does Jesus say to her? And here she is lying prostrate at Jesus' feet verse 26 he replied it is not right to take the children's bread and toss it to the dogs bread what does that mean?

It really does seem to be something of a rebuff but as I say what Jesus was probably doing was drawing out faith from this woman it's actually helpful here to turn over to Mark's account of what took place here and this is Mark 7 where we have Jesus saying at verse 27 first let the children eat all they want for it is not right to take the children's bread and toss it to the dogs you see the picture is that of a meal table with the children being fed first before anyone else now the verse that comes to mind here actually is Romans 1 and verse 16 I'm not ashamed of the gospel because it's the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes first for the Jews this is who the gospel came to first for all first of all but then

Paul adds then to the Gentiles to the Jews firstly but not exclusively and with the eye of faith this woman understood this that a day would come when the Gentiles would be fed with that same bread with the bread of gospel life as he went on to demonstrate in the feeding of the 4,000 Gentiles in the Decapolis and so verse 27 here yes it is Lord she said even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their master's table she was saying in other words I can see this I can see this but in the meantime I'm quite happy to be like a dog sitting under the table the crumbs will do for me that's all

I need from you Jesus just the crumbs that'll be enough it's interesting here that Jesus use of dogs as an illustration in the New Testament there are actually two different words for dog one refers to the dirty mangy scavenger beasts that roam the streets it's it's why Jews often refer to Gentiles as Gentile dogs but the words used by Jesus here is the word that was actually used for a pet dog a dog that's part of the family now if I thought about it I could have had put up on the screen here a picture of our last dog Angus he was a Cairn Terrier he would be a useful illustration in that every single morning at breakfast the same thing happened when I was sitting at the table with my toast and marmalade and he would sit beside me and he would never take his eyes off me never take his eyes off me not for a moment until I got to the crust because he knew that he would get the crust with some butter and marmalade on it well this is what this woman was doing she was saying I'm prepared to wait and wait and wait and wait like a dog sitting under the table until you give me what I need and I know that you'll give it to me

I know that you'll give it to me and so verse 28 Jesus said to her woman you've great faith can't help think here of Jacob with the angel at Peniel Genesis 32 and verse 26 I will not let you go until you bless me who she was where she lived what she sought how she sought it and then thirdly how she was rewarded by Jesus remember Hebrews 11 and verse 6 without faith it's impossible to please God because anyone who comes to him must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who earnestly seek him well verse 28 woman you have great faith your request is granted and her daughter was healed at that moment now what's the big takeaway from all of this in the parish where I served my assistantship as a minister to the north of

[37:44] Glasgow Marjorie and Jackie lived in the flat above us Marjorie had been quietly and quite wonderfully converted during a Sunday morning service she was a gentle gentle soul Jackie who never darkened the door of the church was not best pleased he was actually a drunkard and he had the red bloated face of the drunkard he had a tongue like a sewer and was more than a little nasty to put it mildly to Marjorie she made he made her life a misery roll on sixteen years or so and we're back in the church for an anniversary service and after the service this man came up to me and greeted me so warmly and so enthusiastically hadn't a clue who he was not a clue and then it dawned on me when Marjorie came and stood beside him it was

Jackie he had been changed he was unrecognizable he had been converted and we sat down together and he told me how he had been converted and though I didn't say it the surprise must have been writ large in my face writ large in my face I was surprised but you know something I ought not to have been I ought not to have been I should have been the opposite of surprise I should have been able to say to him you know you know Jackie this is exactly what I expected would happen and of course it was why I began by telling you about a great preacher let me finish by telling you about another great preacher a man by the name of

Martin Lloyd Jones a Welshman who ministered in Westminster Chapel in London from 1938 to 1968 and I just happened to pick up a book this past week containing lectures by him and one lecture was on the subject of preaching and I read this he said I find that when I find that I never

know what is going to happen when I enter a pulpit I am constantly being surprised surprised at the amazing grace of God Lord surprise us with your grace help us to expect the unexpected maybe I'm just being fanciful this morning just being fanciful but I would love to think that looking ahead in our life and cornerstone looking ahead a year two years three years four years five years that we could maybe begin a book a diary a record and we could give it the title cornerstone community church a narrative of surprising conversions wouldn't that be something because he's a God of mercy and he's a God of grace expecting the unexpected Lord surprise us with your grace well let's pray together our

God and our Father we thank you this morning for the wonder of your gospel we thank you that you're a God of mercy you don't treat us as our sins deserve and you're a God of amazing abounding grace lavishing upon us all the blessings of your gospel new life in Jesus thank you for your word and we pray that in our life together as a church in the years that lie ahead that again and again and again you would surprise us with your grace and we pray this in Jesus name Amen