

August 17, 2025

EXTRAORDINARY FAITH FROM AN UNEXPECTED SOURCE

Mark 7:24-30

(16 of 22 in a series through Mark 1-9)

If we survey the Bible, it would seem that there is nothing more gracious the Lord can do for us than to give us faith, strengthen our faith, and mature our faith. Now, that might feel like too strong of a statement to make. But stop and consider it for a second. First, we have to have faith in order to be saved. We are saved by *grace through faith*, Scripture tells us. We also know that without faith it is impossible to please God. Additionally, we know from phrases like the “obedience of faith” (Rom 1:5; 16:26) that obedience stems *from faith*. We persevere and hold fast our confession, as Scripture calls us to do, by *persevering in faith*. And so, if faith is not only a fundamental requirement for our justification but also for our sanctification and perseverance, it’s not hard to say that the most gracious thing the Lord can do for us in this life is give us faith, strengthen our faith, and mature our faith.

So, if that’s the case, then how does our Lord create, strengthen, and mature our faith. What are the requirements for exercising mature faith? What does it look like? How do we grow in it? These are crucial questions, but I think we’re helped with answers from a source that we wouldn’t necessarily anticipate as we look at a story from Mark 7:24-30 about a Syrophenician Gentile woman who encountered Jesus as he went to the land of Tyre and Sidon. So, much as we did last week, I just want to walk through the story and stop and make some applications about how the Lord produces, strengthens, grows, and matures our faith.

The story begins with Jesus leaving the area to go to Tyre and Sidon. Mark doesn’t tell us why. Perhaps Jesus wanted to rest, have some private time to instruct his disciples, or just get away from those who sought evil against him, as we saw from the scribes and Pharisees. But what’s more surprising than Jesus getting away is where he goes. Mark tells us that he “went away to the region of Tyre and Sidon” (v. 24).

Now, it may not register with us just hearing those names, but Tyre and Sidon were thought of as areas of great evil. Throughout the Old Testament, Tyre and Sidon are held up as notorious enemies of the Lord’s people. Josephus, a Jewish historian, said of the inhabitants of Tyre that they were “notoriously our bitterest enemies.”¹ Moreover, when Jesus was denouncing Chorazin, Bethsaida, and Capernaum, he tells them that on the day of judgment it’ll be more tolerable for Sodom, Tyre, and Sidon than for them (Matt 11:20-24). And we know why he uses Sodom as his comparison. They’re the symbol of the most horrifically evil of cities. Well, Jesus puts Tyre and Sidon right alongside of it as he makes that comparison, showing the evil nature of

¹ Quoted by James R. Edwards in *The Gospel According to Mark*, PNTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 217.

those cities as well. And so that's what these cities are known for, as Mark tells us that Jesus went away into Tyre and Sidon.

Mark also tells us that Jesus didn't want anyone to know he was there. Perhaps hiding out in a place most Israelites wouldn't be excited to go would suggest that he might finally get some peace and quiet. But once more, that wasn't to be the case. We're told in verses 25-26, "But immediately a woman whose little daughter had an unclean spirit heard of him and came and fell down at his feet. Now the woman was a Gentile, a Syrophenician by birth. And she begged him to cast the demon out of her daughter." Now, right here is where I want to stop and provide our first point of application from this story—faith is often formed in times of adversity.

Faith is often formed in times of adversity

I'll go ahead and note that this woman is going to demonstrate great faith in this story. In fact, in Matthew's telling of the story, Jesus will respond, "O woman, great is your faith!" (Matt 15:28). But, even without us knowing that, she's demonstrating her faith in Jesus simply by coming to him. She trusts that Jesus can make her daughter well, casting the demon from her.

But let's just ask the simple question: Why is this woman here? That is, why is this woman in this position where she will demonstrate such faith that Jesus will recognize it as great faith? In other words, what is pushing her to have this great faith? Well, the obvious answer is that her daughter is being tormented by an unclean spirit. And it's greatly troubling. It's so greatly troubling that she fell down at Jesus's feet and *begged him* to cast the demon from her daughter. And if you're a parent, deeply loving your children, you know why she would feel such desperation. But this highlights the point that just as her faith arises from a time of great adversity in her life, so great faith arises from times of adversity in our lives as well.

Just this week I visited with a dear brother going through a time of great adversity. He's going through struggles he'd never have chosen for himself. He's followed a course of life over the last few months that no one would desire. But I want to bear witness, that I see great faith in him that deeply encourages and challenges me. Though I'd rather not have seen him walk through this difficulty, I've found myself thanking God this week for what seems to me to be a strong, mature, persevering faith that I do not think would have arisen to the degree that it has without this adversity in his life. And I have no doubt that we could multiply such stories—in the lives of others and ourselves. Adversity is often the incubator for producing great faith in the lives of God's people.

Now, if that is true, and if it's true that great faith is a tremendously gracious gift that the Lord can give us, then isn't it fair to say that some of the very elements in life that cause us most pain are the Lord's richest gifts to us? This is no doubt why Paul can tell the Roman believers, "We rejoice *in our sufferings* [rejoice in suffering? That's preposterous, isn't it? But he continues], knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not put us to shame" (Rom 5:3-5).

You see, Paul is saying that we rejoice in sufferings because of what it produces in us, and one of the things it often produces—as we see here in this story—is great faith. It may well be as you walk through a time of great adversity, that one of the things the Lord is doing is producing in you great faith precisely because he loves you as his precious child. Faith often arises from times of great adversity. Now, let's continue the story.

At this point in Mark's gospel, we're used to how this goes, aren't we? Jesus heals, shows compassion in extraordinary ways, and blesses the one with faith to seek him out. But that's actually not what happens here. In fact, Jesus' response is not only shocking but can feel very unsettling. Mark tells us, "And he said to her, 'Let the children be fed first, for it is not right to take the children's bread and throw it to the dogs'" (v. 27). That's how Jesus answers this desperate woman who wants her child to be made well.

Now, why would Jesus say that? Well, first, he was indeed sent to bring the message of redemption first to the Jew and then to the Gentile. This was his mission from his Father. He began his ministry in Israel. Paul also affirms this in Romans, writing that the gospel "is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, *to the Jew first* and also to the Greek" (Rom 1:16). Moreover, Paul will note later in Romans that it was the Jews who were blessed to be entrusted with the oracles of God (i.e. the Scripture, Rom 3:2), were given the law, had the temple and priesthood so that they might worship, and on and on (Rom 9:1-5). They were God's chosen people through whom the Messiah would come in a way that the Hittites, Perizzites, and every other nation wasn't. So, when Jesus says to woman that the children (a reference to the Jews) are to be fed first, he's not saying anything that the Scripture doesn't affirm throughout. Salvation has come first to the Jew.

I mean, instead of being offended on her behalf, we could even ask, "Where does this Gentile woman from Tyre (of all places!) get off thinking she should benefit from this Jewish Messiah who has come to save his people?" And whether it feels setting to us or not, that's basically the response Jesus gives her. I've actually sanded down the rough edges a bit to this point, not even getting to the fact that he refers to her as a dog (which I'll address shortly).

But, amazingly, she doesn't simply go away at this point but keeps pressing Jesus. Now, before I get into those details of why she's referred to as a dog and how she specifically responds to Jesus, I want to stop and draw out one more note, namely, that faith is strengthened by God's seeming rejection of our pleas.

Faith can be strengthened by God's seeming rejection of our pleas

This may sound odd, but let me flesh it out a bit. First, note that this is what happens in the story. This woman is going to show great faith in this text, indeed faith so great that in Matthew's gospel, Jesus specifically notes the exceptional greatness of her faith. But how do we get there? Well, we get there by Jesus first seeming to reject her desperate plea to heal her daughter, as he tells us that the children must be fed first, for it is not right to take food intended for them and throw it to the dogs.

Okay, now, in addition to seeing that this is what happens with this woman, how can I see that the Lord's seeming rejection of our pleas can actually serve to strengthen our faith. Well, consider Job. Most of the book is spent with Job crying out to the Lord, desperately pleading with God to answer him, and—until the end—God seems silent. He seems dismissive from Job's perspective. But does Job go away? No. He keeps appealing to the Lord. In God's seeming silence, Job's faith keeps pressing toward him. In fact, he declares at one point, "Though he slay me, I will hope in him" (Job 13:15). And can't we point to many others who seem to hear nothing from God in answer to their pleas, and yet they keep pressing toward their Lord until what comes out on the other side is a person with great, mature, much stronger faith?

Surely you've been there as well. I can think of many times in my life where I pleaded with the Lord for a certain outcome or provision, and what I asked for didn't happen (in that moment, if at all). And yet, if you will not walk away in that moment, but keep pressing toward the Lord with your prayers, you'll find that he's strengthening your faith in the way that granting your every desire never could.

As it feels that he is rejecting your plea, cling to him, cling to who you know he is, cling to what you know of his love for his people, and cling to the promise that he will never leave you, forsake you, or withhold anything good from you. And in that crucible of God's seeming rejection, you'll find a great faith is being formed and fashioned by him. This woman's demonstration of great faith is preceded by Jesus' seeming rejection of her plea, and don't think that's by accident. It is when the Lord seemingly rejects our pleas that our faith can be strengthened. And let us never forget that there was one who came before us who pleaded with his Father to let the cup of the cross pass from him if there were another way. And as the answer was that there was no other way, he demonstrated great and strong faith in holding fast to his Father, saying, "Not my will, but yours be done."

Now, let me continue in the details. Jesus doesn't just seem to reject her pleas. It seems that he insults her. Specifically, he says, "Let the children be fed first, for it is not right to take the children's bread and throw it to the dogs" (v. 27).

Let's parse out these details. When he says "children," he's referring to the Jews. This woman would have known that. The Lord repeatedly refers to Israel as his "son" or child in the Old Testament. And when he says "dogs" he's referring to this woman and all whom she represents as a Gentile from the region of Tyre. Again, this woman would have known that. Israelites would commonly refer to Gentiles as dogs.²

What do we do with Jesus speaking that way? Well, some have tried to take the edge off this dog language by pointing out that Jesus didn't use the word for a dog that runs wild in the street but

² David Garland cites a Jewish source saying, "Whoever eats together with an idol worshiper is like one who eats together with a dog; as the dog is uncircumcised, so also is the idol worshiper uncircumcised" in *Mark, The NIV Application Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), 289, n. 5.

the word often used for a pet dog. But if we twist Jesus' words to the point that we act like he's being endearing with his language, we've missed the point. No matter how great you think dogs are, there's a vast difference between the value of dogs and humans, and everyone throughout history has known this. This is language which reminds this woman of her inferior position as a Gentile woman of Tyre. There's no getting around it.

So, if that's the case, let's pause for a second and imagine how this woman might respond. Perhaps you anticipate that she's going to voice to Jesus her deep offense. Perhaps her response will include the words, "How dare you!" or "Why I ought to . . .". And yet look how she responds. "She answered him, 'Yes, Lord; yet even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs'" (v. 28).

Her first response is, "Yes, Lord." In other words, the first thing she says is that she accepts the categories. She is happy to see herself as one unworthy. She knows she's got no claim to be blessed by the Jewish Messiah as she comes to him as a Gentile woman from Tyre. But she's not coming to him because she thinks she's worthy. Her hope isn't in arguing she's worthy. She is happy to acknowledge in humility that she is undeserving categorically of the request she was making. And this is another lesson for us. Faith holds fast by recognizing that we're undeserving.

Faith holds fast by recognizing that we're undeserving

Brothers and sisters, the quickest way to be hardened in bitterness against the Lord is to think that we're deserving of what we desire. If you harbor that thought in your heart, then every disappointment is a prime opportunity for you to walk away from the Lord and not hold fast to him. After all, we might think, why isn't he giving me what I deserve? Well, the answer is that we never deserve his good gifts on our own merits, and we must believe and know that.

Isn't that what this woman is demonstrating. She's not offended. No doubt she knows that Jesus could have said worse. And the same is true for us. You know what we deserve? You know what every one of us has merited and therefore deserve? Death and hell. In and of ourselves—because of who we are and what we have done—we are deserving of the Lamb of God grabbing us up on the day of judgment and casting us into a lake of fire to face his merciless, eternal wrath. If we were measured on our own merits, that would be what we deserve. Let me note this clearly. You'll see a world of difference in your ability to hold fast in faith in all circumstances if you'll never let that truth slip from the forefront of your minds. Can you imagine how differently you and I would think of complaining or moaning about our circumstances if we always held that truth close to our minds? This woman is totally accepting the fact that she is absolutely undeserving of God's grace.

And yet, let me make this better. Not only is it true that we deserve death and hell, but it's also true that we'll never have to face it as God's children. We will never face God's wrath in hell, or live our lives in condemnation, or walk through life being gripped by the fear of death as if it's a reminder that we must bear the penalty for our sins. And the reason for that is because God sent his Son who lived the perfect life we didn't, died on the cross in our place to pay the penalty

for our sins, and then rose from the grave so that those of us who repent and believe may have his righteousness credited to us and be adopted as God's very own children.

Everything that happens in our lives, we must approach from that reality. These categories that this woman happily accepted and did not push back against must be categories we accept and recognize as well. We must know that whatever adversity or disappointment tomorrow holds, we are deserving of infinitely worse. So, let's humble ourselves and hold fast in faith to the one who has shown us infinitely more grace than we could ever imagine. Faith holds fast, just as this woman illustrates, by recognizing that we're undeserving.

Now, as we finish the story we'll see one final note. This woman not only accepts Jesus' categories, but she doesn't let it drive her from him. Rather, she perseveres in trusting in him as her only hope. She believes that his grace is deep enough to save more than believing Israelites. She knows that his arm is not too short to reach into the life of a Syrophenician Gentile woman of Tyre and deliver her daughter. She knows the gracious Lord is her only hope, and so she says, "Let me just have the crumbs that fall from the table of grace that you bring to your people." And Jesus answers, "For this statement you may go your way; the demon has left your daughter" (v. 29). And Mark adds, "And she went home and found the child lying in bed and the demon gone" (v. 30). Faith perseveres as we remember that the gracious Lord is our only hope.

Faith perseveres as we remember that the gracious Lord is our only hope

This woman knew Jesus was her only hope, and we must recognize it as well. Great faith often arises from adversity. It can be strengthened as the Lord seemingly rejects our pleas. We hold fast in faith by humbling ourselves and recognizing we're not deserving. And we do not give up but persevere in faith by remembering that the gracious Lord is our only hope.

In John 6:68, after Jesus had told the crowds some hard words about the cost of following him, Peter responded by pointing out that what Jesus said was, well, hard to take. Jesus then asked him if he wanted to walk away like others had. And Peter answered, "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life." Peter knew that Jesus was his only hope. And this woman knew the same. She wasn't giving up, feeling insulted, and walking away. She was like Jacob, wrestling with God until he was blessed. When you know Jesus is your only hope, you keep holding on, you keep persevering, and you trust that you'll taste his mercy and grace, even as this woman did. Let's always remind ourselves that Jesus is our only hope.

One of the richest gifts the Lord can give us is a faith that grows and perseveres. And in order to bring us to that point, he may take us through times of adversity, knowing that it is in those moments that faith is forced to the surface. He may seem silent in the face of our pleas, knowing that our faith can grow strong in that crucible. And if we'll realize that we are undeserving of his grace and that Jesus is our only hope, we'll find that he's given us the gift of a persevering faith that holds fast to the end. So, even as the Lord pioneered what faith and faithfulness to the point of death looked like as he died for us, so may we imitate his faith, as well as the faith of our brothers and sisters who have run the race before us. Amen.