

**And from there he arose and went away to the region of Tyre and Sidon. And he entered a house and did not want anyone to know, yet he could not be hidden. 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. 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." But she answered him, "Yes, Lord; yet even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs." And he said to her, "For this statement you may go your way; the demon has left your daughter." And she went home and found the child lying in bed and the demon gone.**

**(Mark 7:24–30)**

## Introduction

John Calvin writes of our text: "Faith will obtain anything from the Lord; for so highly does he value it, that he is always prepared to comply with our wishes, so far as it may be for our advantage."

This account, as recorded by Mark, is primarily for the purpose of encouraging the Gentile Christians to whom he wrote to remember that the gospel of Jesus Christ is good news for all peoples, not exclusively Jews. And yet, the good news that we have a Saviour, who will deliver us from our sins, can only be realised when we put our faith in the one who is the good news, the Lord Jesus Christ. And this is precisely what this unnamed, yet well-known, woman and mother did. As one commentator described her interaction with the Lord, she displayed "irresistible confidence." It is this theme that we will explore in this study. As I hope to explain, this irresistible confidence in the Lord can be good news for all peoples – including you and me.

It is good news that God's purpose is global, not parochial. It is good news that Jesus has all authority and we can trust him for what otherwise seems impossible: conversion of others and our won conversion! It is good news that Jesus is a gracious Master who feeds his people; he is the Bread of Life and he is all that we need.

## The Setting

Jesus had been harassed by the religious leaders (the elite) of the day. Herod had tried to toy with him, and his disciples had been less than stellar when it came to understanding him, his message, and his mission. "There was too much excitement among the people, too much bitterness among the Pharisees, too much suspicion on the part of Herod Antipas, too much dullness on the part of the disciples for Jesus to remain in Galilee" (Robertson).

So, once again, it seems that Jesus was seeking a break from it all. He left Galilee and headed for the region of Sidon and Tyre where he entered a house. He was now in Gentile territory. If Peter indeed was the source for Mark's Gospel, one can imagine him reminiscing about his own struggles with the gospel reach to all peoples (see Acts 10). He knew that Gentile believers might be helped with a story indicating that, even before Pentecost, Jesus was gracious to those who were not Jewish; to those who were at that time considered unclean by Jewish society.

The Greek text indicates that Jesus was very intentional about this. The word translated "went" has a distinct force to it. Jesus was deliberately, decisively leaving Galilee.

Mark wants us to make a connection between what he has just recorded and this new episode. Jesus, rejected by the religious leaders, was now deliberately heading to a region that many would deem unlikely for a warm reception; but we would be wrong to make such a conclusion. For, in this Gentile territory, Jesus would be well received, at least by one desperate person. Having declared that all foods are clean (vv. 1–23), he would now demonstrate that God shows grace to people whom are otherwise considered unclean. As France notes, Jesus demonstrates "his unconcern for convention when it stood in the way of his mission."

This story has generated much interest, if not confusion, over the centuries. Jesus' seems to be rather harsh, even rude, if not tinged with a bit of ethnocentric prejudice. But we who know Jesus know that there must be more here than meets the eye. I trust that our study will help us all to see what was really taking place here. I hope that we will see that the gospel of Jesus Christ is good news for all, that is for all who place their faith, their confidence, in him and in him alone for deliverance from their sin. What does such faith look like?

### A Destined Faith

Jesus, having been surrounded by unbelief in the so-called Promised Land, headed for the most unlikely of places for the presence of belief: the territory of Tyre and Sidon. This pagan land would, in fact, become a land of promise.

This region was notorious for paganism. It was home to the false religion of Baal and Ashtoreth and was known to be the home of infamous Jezebel. The prophet Ezekiel had pronounced God's judgement upon this region many centuries earlier and much of that came to pass when Alexander the Great marched triumphantly over this area. It seems like a strange place for Jesus to have gone for retreat, but God was up to something. In this pagan area, irresistible faith would be manifested.

Mark tells us that Jesus met a woman who, according to the ESV, was “a Gentile.” A better translation is “a Greek.” Mark wants us to know that, religiously, she was a Greek, that is, an idolatrous pagan. This, of course, stands in contrast to the traditional and “orthodox” Pharisees who had just opposed Jesus. It seems that Mark wants to highlight the contrast between those with religious privilege (and attendant responsibility) with those no such privilege. This will highlight the grace of God in Christ and will encourage the reader what can occur when we persevere with irresistible faith.

There is something else that we should note as well: She was a “Syrophenician.” That is, she was from Phoenicia of Syria.

In the Old Testament there was a Syrophenician woman who also received great mercy from the God of Israel. First Kings 17 tells us of a widow from Zarephath (in the region of Sidon of Phoenicia) who was faithful to God’s prophet, Elijah, and whose faith was rewarded.

After she gave Elijah the last food in her house, the Lord blessed her with all the food and oil she would need through a time of great drought and famine. Sometime after this, her son died, and the Lord used Elijah in a resurrection miracle. This confirmed to her that Elijah was indeed “a man of God” (v. 24). Jesus alluded to this in Luke 4 where he stirred up controversy by revealing that God is merciful and gracious to Gentiles, just as he is to Jews.

Whether our Lord was aware of eventual presence of this woman, or whether his Father had hidden it from him, we are not told. But it is clear from the result that this episode was destined (willed) by God. God had determined that this woman and her daughter would be helped. God was orchestrating all things for his glory and for the good of this mother and daughter.

We need to remember that everything that happens in this world is a “God thing.” So, whenever and wherever there is such faith, it is a “God thing.” He is at work. Though this woman was, and should be, commended for her faith, nevertheless, this was all of God. Saving faith always is (Ephesians 2:8–10). Though we are responsible to steward this gift, let us never lose sight of the fact that it is a gift, and therefore we need to take good and faithful care of it.

### A Determined Faith

This mother was determined to get help for her daughter. Somehow, she knew what Jesus could do and what he had done and, therefore, when he came to town, he could not be hidden. This woman hunted him down until she found him. A more determined mother does not appear in Scripture—although the Syrophenician woman mentioned earlier would be some stiff competition. Edwards comments, “Her pluck and persistence are a

testimony to her trust in the sufficiency and surplus of Jesus: his provision for the disciples and Israel will be abundant enough to provide for one such as herself.”

### Obstacles to Her Faith

This woman’s faith was remarkable and therefore irresistible for several reasons.

First, she was a woman, and in the ancient world, women were not treated with the respect and dignity they deserved. Even among the Jews—who should have known better—a common daily prayer among “pious” men was, “Lord, I thank you that I was not born a Gentile or a woman.” Nice.

I mention this because it indeed would have required pluck for her to approach Jesus. Added to this, she came to someone’s house where Jesus was. She was an uninvited and indeed unwelcome guest (see Matthew 15:23). She was determined that Jesus must do something in her family. How we need the same determination! Regardless of society’s opinion, let us persistently and with great determination come to Jesus.

Second, as mentioned, she was a Gentile and therefore not a member of God’s covenanted community. She was truly an outsider, in the full sense of the word.

Third, as mentioned, she faced the obstacle of being from a pagan environment. If anyone had an environmental argument for unbelief it would be this woman. However, contrary to her religious surrounding, and perhaps contrary to her wrongheaded religious upbringing, she believed in Jesus.

Matthew records that she cried out, “Have mercy on me, O Lord, Son of David” (15:22). This—“Son of David”—is a distinctly Jewish conception of Messiah. Whatever was behind her using this title (was she, as some have conjectured, claiming Jewishness illegitimately?) it’s clear that she recognised Jesus as Messiah.

I wonder if she had sought help for her daughter at the local temples of Baal and/or Ashtoreth, all to no avail? Perhaps she had become disillusioned about what these religions could do. Perhaps in her despairing disillusionment she heard about one named Jesus, from Nazareth who purportedly had cast out demons from many over the past several months. She heard that he had come to her town. Her heart leapt with hope as she crashed his time of retreat.

There are perhaps some reading with a similar testimony. You knew you were in spiritual need and yet you had become disillusioned by what religion, including so-called Christian churches, were presenting you. Your disillusionment was used by God to bring you to a faith that became irresistible. God heard your cry and he brought spiritual deliverance to you.

This story is sandwiched between miracles that involve food and feeding. In chapter 6, we saw Jesus feeding a multitude and we will see him repeat this in chapter 8. It is interesting that the second miracle involves feeding a Gentile crowd whereas the former was most likely a Jewish crowd. I think it significant, therefore, that here we have a miracle that involves this Gentile woman. And again, it references food.

You will remember that hospitality in ancient days involved food; it involved sharing meals together. Jesus' response to this woman indicates that food was present. I think we are on safe ground to conclude the following scene.

As Jesus was at the table of his host, eating a meal, this woman (perhaps known to the householder) urgently and determinedly gained access. She fell at Jesus' feet indicating respect, humility, even worship. She begged him to cast the demon out of her daughter (v. 26). The original tense indicates that she kept asking. Jesus responded with what at first blush seems very rude: "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). Wow. What do we make of this?

To the Jews, Gentiles were viewed as unclean. Since dogs were considered unclean animals, many Jews referred to Gentiles with this derogatory term. Therefore, some say that Jesus was simply speaking in accommodation of the existing prejudice. I have a hard time believing that.

Others say that Jesus was simply testing her faith, and I think there is some merit in that argument. In other words, Jesus was putting her humility to the test. Faith requires the humility that confesses that we deserve nothing from God.

But there may be a better, though related explanation. The word translated "dogs" is diminutive: It can be translated "little dog," as in a household pet. If this is the case, Jesus was still making the same point about the privilege of being Jewish, and he was still testing humility, but he was not caving to the unwarranted, sinful prejudices of many Jews of the day.

This would account for the likelihood that Jesus was eating a meal in this house. Perhaps a household dog was eagerly waiting for someone (a child?) to sneak some table food to it. Jesus used this analogy. It was not a statement about the value of the dog but rather about priorities: Those within the covenant family must get the good news of Messiah first, and only then could those who on the outside (cf. Romans 1:16).

### A Desperate Faith

Calvin observes that the Syrophenician woman's "unshaken constancy ... her continuance in prayer was a proof of her perseverance."

Jesus seems to have rebuffed this heartsore mother, but she would not be deterred. She responded with both faith and respectful wit when she said, “But the little dogs eat the crumbs from the table.” As Witherington writes, “The woman achieves her desire not so much by a witty remark as by a faith that goes on beseeching the one who can help until the aid is granted.” If it is true that Jesus had referenced domesticated house dogs, then the picture here may be that of a someone at the table sneaking table scraps to the dogs. This would be a tender picture in which this mother humbly identified both as a guest at the table as well as loved by the Master at the table! Regardless, the mother manifested a desperation of faith: She would not let this matter go. Her little daughter was suffering, terribly so. She wanted spiritual deliverance and she would not give up on her desire. You have to be moved by this. Jesus was.

We can summarise in the words of G. Campbell Morgan: “Against prejudice she came; against silence she persevered; against exclusion she proceeded; against rebuff she won.” In her story, we find faith outside traditional religion – outside the covenant.

We could equally label this a “discerning faith” for it is interesting that, in response to what Jesus said, she is seemingly the first person in Mark’s Gospel to understand one of our Lord’s parables. We see this in her desperate and yet discerning response of v. 28. As Lane helpfully says, “The faith of the Syrophenician woman contrasts dramatically with the determined unbelief of the Pharisees and the scribes from Jerusalem, while her witty reply to Jesus indicates a degree of understanding which puts the disciples to shame.”

We can appreciate the insight of James Edwards who wrote, “She has sparred with Jesus as Jacob sparred with God at Peniel, ‘Your name will no longer be Jacob, but Israel, because you have struggled with God and with men and have overcome.’ She is a female Jacob. She, too, has overcome.”

### A Dynamic Faith

Jesus was pleased with her faith and responded with the promise she wanted to hear: “For this statement, you may go your way; the demon has left your daughter.” We can imagine how this mother’s spirits were lifted! “She went home,” where she found her daughter “lying in bed and the demon gone.” This is an interesting phrase because it translates the word that is normally used in the context of demons either being “cast out” (*ekballo*) or of demons throwing someone about. It seems that Mark is recording the condition of this little girl as the result of the demons cast out of her. In other words, this dynamic deliverance was a traumatic one.

When our children are under the influence of the domain of darkness, there is hope – and yet it may be accompanied by heartache.

### A Delightful Faith

William Lane observes, “The irresistible confidence of the woman in Jesus delighted him.” I am confident of this, for as the writer to the Hebrews said, “Without faith it is impossible to please him, for whoever would draw near to God must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who seek him” (11:6). Her faith would have been very pleasing to the Lord. In fact, Matthew records, “O woman, great is your faith! Be it done for you as you desire” (15:28).

### A Duplicated Faith

As mentioned, this passage was intended by Mark to make clear that the good news of Jesus’ Messiahship—the gloriously good news that Jesus is King—is good news for all peoples. Since Mark’s original readers were Gentiles, this would have been greatly encouraging to them. And it should be to us.

But further, the example of this woman’s irresistible faith in the grace, mercy, and power of Jesus is also something that should be duplicated in our lives. In other words, we too should be growing towards an irresistible faith, an irresistible confidence in the same Lord to hear similar pleas. In other words, we need to apply this passage to ourselves. There are many ways in which this story should or could resonate with us but, fundamentally, it should both rebuke and encourage us to persevere in faith.

For example, we should learn from it to exercise faith for the challenges we and our family and our loved ones and our friends face. We should learn from it to exercise faith for the challenge of discipling the nations. We should learn to exercise faith that, if Jesus delivered this young girl, why would he not deliver us? Let me flesh this out.

Like this mother, sometimes we are up against situations that seem utterly hopeless—situations which seem to offer nothing but obstacles to our confidence that things can be better. Situations are some desperate and dark, if not demonic. Sometimes, we face situations in which our demographics and society’s discriminating prejudices inform us that there is little if any hope for improvement, and which seem hopeless because of former disillusionment. Think for instance of what we are facing as a nation.

I recently read an article that listed the ten “happiest countries” on the planet. The article stated, “Every year the United Nations measures the quality of life for citizens around the world through surveys and data analysis. The same 13 countries have dominated the top of the list since the reporting began in 2012. What makes these countries the happiest in the world? All possess a winning formula of good governance, strong sense of community, respect for fellow citizens, and general high quality of life.” Needless to say, South Africa is not in the top 13. Rather, it ranks 106 out of 156 countries—just two places above Venezuela!

We are often, quite literally, sitting in darkness and we face many, many challenges. If we are not careful, we can slip into despair. Many already have – including Christians – and for this reason many are quite literally fleeing our borders. A better response would be irresistible faith. A better response, like this mother, is to take the risk of faith and to refuse to give in to what everyone else assumes is the unchangeable status quo.

I wonder what God would do if the church of South Africa, in sheer desperation, would drop to its knees and refuse to give him rest until he establishes [the new] Jerusalem and makes it a praise on the earth (see Isaiah 62:7)? I wonder what a display of irresistible confidence would look like and what the result would be. Would we experience the demons of unbelief fleeing our land as the church advances?

In other words, based on this text, I am appealing that, rather than flee, we should, like this woman and mother, fall before the Lord and, with desperate determination, seek his grace, mercy, and power to deliver us.

This is not a veiled form of the heresy known as prosperity gospel. Rather, this is a plea to pray in accordance with God's will for the extension of his kingdom to the glory of his name. Such praying is biblical and therefore irresistible. After all, if the gospel of the grace of God is for all peoples, it is for us as well.

## Faith That Saves

It is essential to remember that this woman did not earn God's favour by her irresistible confidence; rather, this episode is the fruit of her faith, and that a gift of God. It is therefore important that we see what elements are included in this faith that wrought results; this faith that brought about the commendation of Jesus and, ultimately, the faith that resulted in salvation from Jesus. We can identify three elements that we too need if we will experience God's gracious deliverance through his Son.

## Realisation of our Need

First, we must realise our need. This, of course, is where the story begins. She was aware that her daughter had a need that could only be met by someone more powerful than Satan and more powerful than sin. As mentioned, perhaps she had sought other religious solutions, but to no avail.

Do you realise that your need is so huge that no one but God can meet it? You will never save yourself from the wrath of God. You will never overcome sin by your own will power. You need the Saviour.

### Desperation because of our Need

Second, this realisation of need must bring us to desperation. Realisation of need is not enough, there must be a corresponding sense of desperation that will break the shackles of self-sufficiency.

Like this woman, those who will receive the mercy and grace of Jesus must be desperate enough to persist in faith, desperate enough to persevere in the face of social conventions, desperate enough to not give up because of hypocrites and heartaches in the church, desperate enough to persevere in the face of disillusionment by false teachers, desperate enough to keep seeking in the face of persistent evil, and desperate enough to persevere despite a godless environment.

In Matthew's account, when this woman first spoke to Jesus, he responded with silence (15:23). Then he seems have confirmed the disciples' annoyance when he said, "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel" (15:24). I don't know what her biblical understanding was, but I doubt that she knew much. The woman did not refute any of this. She did not argue, but just kept asking for help. She made no claim to God's favour. She was quite content to desperately seek the aid of the Master. This is precisely the desperation we need as we seek God's help. And this desperation will be accompanied by the next requirement: humiliation.

### Humiliation because of our Need

The humility of this woman stands out. She would not be deterred, even by what some would view as an insult. Rather she rather wittingly responded, "If the dogs are fed by the crumbs from the children at the table, then the dogs are fed at the same time as those at the table – they don't need to wait!"

If we will receive anything from the Master, we must come to him with humility. "Nothing in my hand I bring, simply to your cross I cling." Is that you?

### Conclusion

Sadly, the Jewish nation, generally, did not see their need and therefore they failed to partake of the feast of Bread that God sent to their table. Rather, they rejected his offer and chose a cross rather than the table. They could have learned a lot from this woman. How sad that spiritual privilege is so often squandered.

May attending a gospel-faithful church for years while rejecting Christ and his body. Many are raised in a home with believing parents and yet reject their God. Many have opportunity to grow in grace and knowledge of the Lord Jesus Christ and yet despise God's means of grace towards this end. Many face opportunity to have needs met through persistent prayer and yet neglect the church's gathering for prayer.

## Irresistible Confidence

Mark 7:24–30

Doug Van Meter

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If this is you, then listen to this woman as she points us to the Lord who is gracious to those who will cease with their self-confidence as they place their confidence in such a Saviour. Listen to her and learn from her that Jesus Christ offers good news to all. Learn from her: a sinner who had such confidence in the Lord Jesus that it was irresistible.

AMEN