

Jesus Tests

Be a woman of great faith and persistent prayer

By Mary L. Dubler DVM, MS

June 2005

Consider it all joy, my brethren, when you encounter various trials, knowing that the testing of your faith produces endurance. And let endurance have its perfect result, so that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing. James 1:2-4 (emphasis added)

The testing of your faith. What do you think of that? Does the thought of a test bring a smile to your face? Unless you were one of those gifted students who could breeze through any test, you probably dreaded at least a little bit being tested at school. A test meant extra work and extra stress, especially as you waited to get the results.

While testing our knowledge at school is important, the testing talked of in James chapter 1 is the testing of our *faith*. Now that's a whole different issue, isn't it? This is testing what we believe and how much we trust God. These are not facts found in a textbook, but rather matters of our heart.

How does the testing of our faith usually occur? It occurs through trials. The difficult experiences are what test and hone our faith. And James says that the testing produces endurance—endurance to finish well the life we have here on earth.

Let's look at an amazing story of testing found in Matthew 15:21-28:

Jesus went away from there, and withdrew into the district of Tyre and Sidon. And a Canaanite woman from that region came out and began to cry out, saying, "Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David; my daughter is cruelly demon-possessed." But He did not answer her a word. And His disciples came and implored Him, saying, "Send her away, because she keeps shouting at us." But He answered and said, "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel." But she came and began to bow down before Him, saying, "Lord, help me!" And He answered and said, "It is not good to take the children's bread and throw it to the dogs." But she said, "Yes, Lord; but even the dogs feed on the crumbs which fall from their masters' table." Then Jesus said to her, "O woman, your faith is great; it shall be done for you as you wish." And her daughter was healed at once.

Jesus and His disciples have come into the territory of Tyre and Sidon which is well north and west of the Sea of Galilee. A woman approaches Him asking for mercy and help for her demon-possessed daughter. Who is she? What is her background?

This woman is referred to as a Canaanite woman or a Syrophenician [Mark 7:26]. The Canaanites worshipped many gods, the most significant of which was Baal, the fertility god. The Canaanites had gods for war, agriculture, the moon, drought and other things, but Baal worship predominated. Baal worship was an extreme cult, often practicing ritual prostitution and child sacrifice.

It is from this culture that the Canaanite woman comes to Jesus. Why has she come to Him? The account of this story in Mark indicates that she came after *hearing* of Him (Mark 7:25). She had a daughter who was cruelly demon-possessed, and she knew in her heart that all the gods of the Canaanites could not help her. She was seeking for the true God, and when she looked at the idols around her she recognized them as the imposters that they were.

However, when she heard of Jesus she realized that He was different. So she comes to Jesus and says to Him, “**Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David; my daughter is cruelly demon-possessed.**” Here is a succinct prayer with all the essential elements: it states the need and Who can answer the prayer. Notice that she calls Jesus the “Son of David.” This title is the same as saying that Jesus is the Messiah.

When someone declares that Jesus is the Messiah, that person will always be tested by the Lord to see if they really believe what they are saying. The words cannot be just that; they must be words backed up with faith. Jesus is the author and perfecter of faith, and His desire is for our faith to grow. And like it or not, faith grows best under testing conditions.

Therefore, since we have so great a cloud of witnesses surrounding us, let us also lay aside every encumbrance and the sin which so easily entangles us, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, fixing our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of faith, who for the joy set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. For consider Him who has endured such hostility by sinners against Himself, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart. Hebrews 12:1-3

In this you greatly rejoice, even though now for a little while, if necessary, you have been distressed by various trials, so that the proof of your faith, being more precious than gold which is perishable, even though tested by fire, may be found to result in praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ; and though you have not seen Him, you love Him, and though you do not see Him now, but believe in Him, you greatly rejoice with joy inexpressible and full of glory, obtaining as the outcome of your faith the salvation of your souls. I Peter 1:6-9

So the Canaanite woman, the one who comes from the territory of Baal worship, calls Jesus Lord, Son of David. Now Jesus brings her through a series of tests to see if she really does believe He is the Son of God, the Messiah. The first test is that after she cries for mercy for her daughter the Lord doesn’t answer her a word.

Imagine the scene: the woman runs up to Jesus and implores Him to have mercy, to deliver her daughter from demons. This is an important request requiring an immediate response, right? And yet Jesus says *nothing* to her. Silence is one of the more difficult tests for a woman to pass; women use a lot of words to communicate, and when we don’t get an immediate response we easily lapse into impatience, indignation, or discouragement. Silence from the throne of God after we have prayed means “wait.” It

does not mean “go away.” However many people today simply give up if they do not hear something immediately.

Jesus’ silence does not mean He has not heard her. Jesus’ silence is not intended as a rejection of her plea. Instead, He is testing her faith, seeing if she is earnest and will persist in her request. Does she really believe He is the Messiah? Does she really believe He has the power to deliver her daughter from the demons? He wants her to show Him the measure of her faith.

The disciples’ response is typical—send away this irritating person! The fact that she was a Gentile certainly made her less acceptable in their eyes.

Jesus does not do what they ask. He doesn’t send people away who cry to Him.

Jesus finally answers the woman and says to her, “**I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.**” This is the second test for her. Jesus states His current purpose which is to focus on the Jewish people. This does not indicate Jesus’ rejection of the Gentiles. On the contrary, He had cast demons out of two men in the country of the Gadarenes [Matthew 8:28-34] and He also healed the Roman centurion’s servant [Matthew 8:5-13]. Of course the greatest indication that Jesus came to offer salvation to all peoples, both Jews and Gentiles, is found in His instructions to the disciples to “**Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit.**” [Matthew 28:19-20]

The Canaanite woman does not allow herself to be deterred by Jesus’ statement. She persists in her plea, taking the position of humility and worship. She bows down before Jesus and says to Him, “**Lord, help me!**”

Now the Lord brings her through a third and the most amazing and difficult test. He says to the woman, “**It is not good to take the children’s bread and throw it to the dogs.**” Wow. This statement almost takes our breath away. When the Jews wanted to employ a derogatory epithet against a gentile, they would apply the word “dog” to them. The woman could have easily interpreted this as the Lord calling her a dog, implying that she shouldn’t have what is being given to the children of Israel. Jesus has not told her this to be cruel. He is testing her to see if she really believes He is the Son of God having full authority to answer requests as He sees fit.

The woman could have become very offended with Jesus and gone off in a huff, but she doesn’t. Instead she says to Him, “**Yes, Lord; but even the dogs feed on the crumbs which fall from their masters’ table.**” Isn’t this incredible? The woman takes the place of complete humility, acknowledging Jesus as master and herself as a dog willing to eat crumbs under the table.

We can almost see Jesus smiling at this point, for He says, “**O woman, your faith is great; it shall be done for you as you wish.**” **And her daughter was healed at once.** It is as if He was saying, “You passed! You get an A+!” The woman has gone through the fire of

testing, and her faith has withstood the test. She indeed did believe with all her heart that Jesus is the Messiah. And the grand result of this testing is that her daughter is healed.

Several important lessons regarding faith and prayer can be gleaned from the story of the Canaanite woman:

- The crucial element of prayer is acknowledging in faith Jesus as Lord, the Messiah. We must believe that He is able to answer our prayers.
- We should assume an attitude of humility and worship when praying.
- We must be ready for testing.
- We must be perseverant in prayer, not letting obstacles discourage us or cause us to give up.
- We are to allow trials and testing to increase our faith.

The Canaanite woman passes the test. You can too!

© 2005 Mary L. Dubler. All rights reserved.

All scripture references from the New American Standard, Updated Version. Used with permission.

Questions for you to ponder:

1. Write out your testimony about what happened when you decided to allow Jesus to be Lord of your life. What does it mean for Him to be “Lord?”
2. In the past, what have you done when you have not heard an answer right away for your prayer? What does the story of the woman with the demon-possessed daughter teach you regarding this?
3. In James chapter 1 it says that the testing of our faith produces endurance. What situations are you currently facing that will require endurance?
4. Psalm 5:3 states, “**In the morning, O LORD, you will hear my voice; In the morning I will order my prayer to You and eagerly watch.**” What is the psalmist eagerly watching for? What does this verse say about prayer, and what does it mean for you?
5. The Canaanite woman and the woman with the hemorrhage believed in Jesus solely because of what they had *heard* about Him. Read Romans 10:17. List some things you have heard about Jesus through these lessons. Do you believe what you have heard?