

Three Stories of Desperate Prayers

Matthew 15:21-28 New American Standard Bible (NASB)

The Syrophenician Woman

²¹ Jesus went away from there, and withdrew into the district of Tyre and Sidon. ²² 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." ²³ 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." ²⁴ But He answered and said, "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel." ²⁵ But she came and began to bow down before Him, saying, "Lord, help me!" ²⁶ And He answered and said, "It is not good to take the children's bread and throw it to the dogs." ²⁷ But she said, "Yes, Lord; but even the dogs feed on the crumbs which fall from their masters' table." ²⁸ 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.

Introduction

Our topic this morning is desperate prayers. Not just prayers, but desperate ones that we cry onto the Lord in time of need. I am going to tell you three stories. They are all true. One from a book that I read. The second one from today's Scripture. The last one my own.

A. The woman with scuffs

A pastor went for a hospital visit. In the corridor, he saw her. *kc: From now on, you are about to hear in his own words:*

"Her head was against the door, and both fists were up beside her face, and she was banging on the door: "Let me in, let me in, let me in!" I couldn't imagine someone locking her out of the room. I got there, and it was the chapel door. I said, "Let me help you." I tried to open the door, but the knob wouldn't turn. It was locked. I stopped a worker, and I said, "The chapel is locked."

She said, "We have to keep it locked. There were some kids in here some time ago, and they trashed the chapel. We had to get all new furniture and paint the room. We can't afford to keep doing that, so we keep it locked."

"Well, find someone with a key."

She came back a little bit later with another woman, who opened the door for us, and this woman and I went in. I would say she was about forty. She had the look of desperation. I could tell that she hadn't come to the hospital with any planning; she came urgently, she came running. The dress she had on was not typical public wear. She had no shoes, just scuffs. Her hair had not been combed, no makeup. She had the look of

desperation. She had the voice of desperation. I can't tell you if she was screaming or crying or moaning or what it was, but it was desperation. Strange sound. I heard some of her words. "I know he's going to die. I know he's going to die. I know he's going to die."

"Who?"

"My husband."

"What's the matter?"

"He's had a heart attack."

I said, "Can I get you some water?"

She said, "No."

I told her who I was, and I said, "Can I pray with you?" And she said, "Please."

I started to pray for her and for her husband, and she interrupted me. She didn't just interrupt me; she took over. She started praying herself and stopped my prayer. I think maybe I was too quiet or too slow or saying the wrong thing or something. Anyway, my prayer wasn't getting there, and she knew it. So she said, "Lord, this is not the time to take my husband. You know that better than I do, he's not ready. Never prays, never goes to church or anything. He's not ready, not a good time to take him. Don't take him now. And what about me? If I have to raise these kids, what am I going to do? I don't have any skills, can't find any work. I quit school to marry him. If I'd have known you were going to take him, I'd have stayed in school." She was really talking to God. "And what about the kids? They don't mind me now with him around. If he's gone, they'll be wild as bucks. This is not the time to take my husband." Whew.

I stayed as long as I felt useful. I went back the next morning, and she had on a nice dress; she had on shoes; she had combed her hair. She looked fine. She was in the hallway outside intensive care. Before I could ask, she said, "He's better." She smiled and said, "I'm sorry about that crazy woman yesterday."

I said, "Well, you weren't crazy."

She said, "I guess the Lord heard one of us."

I said, "He heard you."

She was desperate. She had God by the lapels, both hands, and was screaming in God's face: "I don't think you're listening!" That's desperation.

"Craddock Stories, pp. 110-111, Fred B. Craddock, ed. By Mike Graves and Richard F. Ward).

B. The Syrophoenician Woman

The next story is about the Syrophoenician Woman who lived in the region of Tyre and Sidon. Tyre and Sidon was the area far northwest side of Israel (modern day Lebanon territory). All the people who lived there were considered Gentiles, who had nothing to do with Jehovah the God of Israel, therefore no salvation to them. Quite often, the Israelites despised Gentiles as subhuman and treated them like dogs or pigs. They would have no dealings with them whatsoever.

Before the trip to Tyre and Sidon, the all-knowing Jesus, must have known ahead of time that he would encounter a Gentile woman on the road. In other words, Jesus didn't enter this region casually. He had something in his mind when he chose to withdraw to this particular region of Gentiles. He knew exactly what was waiting for him. He knew that the Canaanite woman would ask Him to cure her demon-possessed daughter. This background knowledge is crucial for us to understand Jesus' cold attitude toward the woman in verses 24 and 26.

Let's move on. The lady had a daughter who was demon-possessed. We do not know what kind of trouble the daughter had—whether it was physical or emotional, or both. But it must have been very difficult to handle, let alone to cure. One day, the mother heard that Jesus the Healer was in town.

She began to run toward Him crying out aloud, "Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David!" Now, please note here that the woman didn't cry out only once and stopped. Rather, she kept crying out aloud on top of her voice, "*Have mercy on me, Lord! My daughter is cruelly demon-possessed.*" She was desperate. She was determined to get the attention from the Lord.

How did Jesus respond to the woman's desperate cry? We are surprised or baffled to see His response. He did not answer a word (v. 23). Jesus didn't bother even noticing her cries. He seemed totally ignoring her and busy going on His way.

Her outcry surely bothered someone else, though: the disciples. So much so that they went to their Master and begged Him, saying, "*Send her away, because she keeps shouting at us*" (which means, Lord, please do something about her! You have cast out demons many times in the past. What's a big deal now? Please grant her wish and let her go so that we may have peace and quiet!).

But Jesus replied in a very cold and detached way. He reminded his disciples indifferently, saying, "*I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.*" (Not to the Gentiles) (v. 24). Wow! This single statement settled everything. The disciples became quiet and got ready to suffer this ongoing outcry of the woman throughout their journey.

By then, the woman came closer to Jesus, and she prostrated herself before Him and begged, "*Lord, help me!*" (v. 25). I cannot help thinking that Jesus intentionally was ignoring her pleas until she came close enough to him to talk face to face. He was waiting for this very moment.

Have you ever been in a situation like that? Do you feel that God has been silent too long? Don't you think, then, perhaps He has been awaiting the right moment of your coming close to Him like He did with the woman? Let's move on.

Now, the next words that came out of Jesus' mouth were even worse. In fact, they were discriminatory. Please judge yourself. Jesus said to her, "*It is not good to take the children's bread and throw it to the dogs*" (v. 26). An absolute rejection. Jesus didn't directly call her a dog; however, everyone knew what He meant by His words.

After such an insult, most of us, myself included, would give up and say, "Well, excuse me, forget it. I thought you were very compassionate and caring, but I was wrong. Go back to your home and never come back!" Her reaction was amazing. She didn't utter a single word of bitterness and anger. She simply replied, Lord! You are right! I am a dog and you are the master. Yet, listen to me! Even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their master's table, don't they? (v. 27).

Wow! She surely got Jesus' attention this time. In fact, Jesus was so impressed with her reply that He exclaimed, "*O woman, your faith is great; it shall be done for you as you wish.*" And her daughter was healed at once (v. 28). Desperate situation requires desperate prayers.

C. My own testimony:

Lastly, here's my own story to glorify the Lord. It was the winter of 1978. One night my family got a call from a local hospital that my older brother was in the emergency room. Head injury. We all rushed to the hospital. There, on the hospital bed, my brother was lying unconscious with a head injury.

That night, he was drinking and having fun with his girlfriend. After that, he got on his motorcycle and drove home without helmet with his girlfriend at the back. Since he was drunk, he ran into a city block. He and his bike flung in the air, and he landed on his head. His girlfriend escaped with a few scrapes. Later, the X-rays showed that there was a tennis ball size blood clot in his brain. The doctors notified us that there was a 50-50 chance of survival even with a brain surgery. The family opted not to have a surgery (no health insurance, not the best hospital, no government aid,...). There my 28 year-old brother was hopelessly lying in his comatose, just breathing.

What would I do, what would I do? I was just a baby Christian. I heard about the power of prayer. I also heard about the effectiveness of fasting. I decided to fast for three days and plead with the Lord for my brother. I went to a prayer center and fasted for the next three days. I was so desperate that I couldn't elaborate my prayers. All I said to the Lord was this: *Lord, give his life back to me! Give his life back to me!*

On the second day, the Lord answered my prayers. He didn't say audibly that my brother would make it, but He filled my heart with such a peace and assurance that I knew He answered my prayers. Coming back home, I told everybody in the family that my brother would live again. No one believed in me. Even my mother thought I was crazy. But to make the long story short, two weeks after the accident, my brother came out of his comatose opening his eyes by himself. Another two weeks, he walked out of the hospital on foot. With no surgery. With no physical therapy. Nothing. Just God's miracle. The same brother is still alive today. Praise the Lord who answered my desperate cries. He still does.

Conclusion

We worship and serve the same Lord. He is the same, yesterday, today, and forever (Hebrews 13:8). Next time, when you are stuck in a desperate situation, please go to God and cry out unto Him. Let your heart be known to Him. And, He will answer and show you great and mighty thing, which you do not know (Jeremiah 33:3). Amen.