

As Christians, those who bear the name of Christ and seek to follow in His footsteps, we will experience things very similar to what Christ experienced. Last Sunday, we heard about how Christ was tested in the wilderness. This Sunday, we hear about the testing of a woman who believes in Christ, and in her testing, we can relate to our own.

Yet just as Christ was preserved through His trials in the wilderness, and this woman was preserved and even strengthened in her trials, so we too are preserved and strengthened in our trials.

As our Gospel texts beings, we hear of a Canaanite woman coming to Jesus. She tells Him, “My daughter is severely oppressed by a demon.” Afflicted by a demon – similar to Jesus being tempted, attacked, by the prince of demons in the wilderness. And just as it was God who sent Jesus into the wilderness to be tempted, God has allowed this demon to afflict the woman’s daughter.

We may not like to hear that, that it is God who sends affliction, but the Scriptures declare it to be the case. Also, consider the alternatives. Affliction coming because God isn’t able, isn’t powerful enough, to stop it? A terrifying situation. Or suffering because God isn’t aware of it? An ignorant god makes for a hopeless world. No, God is both all-powerful and all-knowing, and so neither of these is the case.

Well then, why does God send affliction? Often, we don’t know the specific reason. Note that in this text, and in many other places, we aren’t told why the person suffers. We aren’t told why the daughter is being oppressed by the demon.

And in fact, as the account progresses, we see that the daughter isn’t even suffering for her own sake, but that this seems to be happening for the sake of the mother, that her mother’s faith may be grown. This is seen in Christ’s suffering as well. He wasn’t sent to the cross by His Father so that He might grow or benefit personally, but so that others might be redeemed.

In our suffering, we may not know why we’re suffering. But we do know that God has a reason, that He is in control, that He has promised in His word to turn all things for good to those who love Him, and that He loves us more than we can possibly imagine.

Those promises and that love lead us to what we should do in the midst of our affliction: cry out to God. We see this in the woman, who cries out to Jesus, “Have mercy on me, O Lord, Son of David.” This is a remarkable cry, especially coming from a Canaanite woman. The Canaanites had their own gods – plenty of the them. And the Canaanites were very often great enemies of the Israelites.

Yet here she is, this woman who ought to be hostile, calling out to Jesus, and with a Messianic title, no less! By proclaiming Jesus as the Lord and Son of David, she is confessing her faith that He is the Messiah, the One promised in the Scriptures to bring God’s salvation.

This woman had clearly heard those promises from Scripture, and by the Holy Spirit’s working believed them. She believed that the Lord loved her and would desire to save her and her daughter.

Those promises of God in the Bible, and the love God shows in its pages, lead us to cry out to God as well. The Psalms are full of such words, such as Psalm 18:6: “In my distress I called upon the Lord; to my God I cried for help. From his temple he heard my voice, and my cry to him reached his ears.” Or in Psalm 50:15, where the Lord tells us, “call upon me in the day of trouble; I will deliver you, and you shall glorify me.” In His word, the Lord tells us that He desires to hear our needs, our desires, our cries.

And also in His word, He tells us of His love for us. We are blessed as Christians that we don’t call on an indifferent, petty, or unknowable god, like the pagans, who send up offerings and prayers but never really knowing if it’s enough to earn the favor of Zeus or Odin or Allah. No, we know our God loves us because He sent us Jesus, His only-begotten Son, to die for us. As Scripture tells us, “He who did not spare His own Son but gave Him up for us all, how will He not also with Him graciously give us all things?”

This is why a crucifix is such a wonderful aid to prayer. It’s not a graven image to which we pray, but rather a very visible – even tangible, if you hold one as you pray – reminder of how much God loves you as you pray to Him.

With these great promises spoken to us and this great love shown to us, we might think that surely God would hear our prayers and grant them right away. Yet what often happens? What happened to the Canaanite woman? We read, “But [Jesus] did not answer her a word.” The woman’s cries are met with silence. Even more, it seems that Jesus keeps on walking, as His disciples speak of the woman’s cries coming from behind them.

It seems that Jesus doesn’t care about this woman and her daughter’s affliction. At least, that what she’ll be tempted to believe. She is enduring that silence that Christ endured in the wilderness – fasting, praying, and yet instead of hearing from His Father, the devil comes along.

Prayer met by silence is something God’s people have experienced throughout the ages. In Psalm 22, the psalm Jesus prays while hanging on the cross, David laments, “O my God, I cry by day, but you do not answer, and by night, but I find no rest.” Centuries later, the prophet Habakkuk would cry out to God and say, “O Lord, how long shall I cry for help, and you will not hear? Or cry to you ‘Violence!’ and you will not save?”

Still today, this same thing occurs. I’m sure each of you can think of examples where you prayed to the Lord, and for a long time... nothing. Perhaps there are things you are still crying out to God about, and have been for a long time, and til now it seems that the Lord hasn’t heard, or doesn’t care.

When it comes to these times of silence, what are we to do? Give up and resign ourselves to whatever trial we’re in? Figure we’re on our own and God’s not going to help with this one? No and no! When God seems silent, He is actually directing us to continue crying out.

The woman doesn’t ask just one or twice and then give up. She keeps on crying out, to the point that the disciples get irritated and ask Jesus to send her away. Or think of the blind man outside Jericho whom we heard about on the Sunday before last. Like the Canaanite woman, he too calls out,

addressing Jesus as the Son of David and begging Him for mercy. And when the crowds tell him to be quiet, what does he do? Cries out all the more!

This is what our Lord desires of us. He even tells a parable about a woman crying out to a judge for justice over and over and over again, until finally the judge gives her justice. If an unjust judge would finally grant such petitions, how much more the perfect God, Jesus says.

He has us pray repeatedly so that, through our prayers, we would grow closer to Him. When we pray in faith, the Holy Spirit not only brings the prayer to the throne of God, He also uses that prayer to strengthen the faith of the one who is praying. Repeatedly asking for our Lord's mercy strengthens our faith, as it reminds us that He has promised mercy, and that all things are in His hands, as we wait on His perfect timing.

Finally, Jesus speaks to the woman. At last! But... His words are almost certainly not what she expected. "He answered, 'I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.'" Oof. It would seem, on the surface, that Jesus is saying that He's not there to help her. Other people, sure. He's healed plenty of others, driven out lots of demons. But that was other people. Is she not among those for whom Jesus was sent? Why them and not her – not her daughter?

We feel this as well. Perhaps you know someone with a problem similar to you. You both pray, as far as you know, and then as answer comes... for the other person. His surgery went well, yours did not. She got to keep her job, you got laid off. Their child has adjusted well to a change, yours continues to struggle. Their marriage has had peace return, yours has not.

Anytime someone is given blessing and deliverance by the Lord, we're tempted to look at God and say, "Why not me also?" We might also be tempted to pride and jealousy in such as instance. The woman might have thought, "Those lost sheep of the house of Israel include those Pharisees who harass you nonstop." We might think, "That person hasn't darkened the door of the church for years!"

Yet that's not what the woman says to Jesus. She responds with the simple words, "Lord, help me." Is this just exhaustion, or desperation? I don't think so. See, when Jesus told her that He was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel, He wasn't denying her request. He was asking her if she considered herself one of those lost sheep.

In the New Testament, it is made clear that the true Israel is made up of all those who believe in Jesus. And this is found in the Old Testament as well, that the Messiah would gather all nations into the one flock of God.

The woman has declared previously that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of David, and now, by her response, and her posture of worship before Him, she confesses that she is a member of the flock of God as well. As Jesus is her Lord, she may make the request of Him. "Help me." It's as if she's saying, "You have promised good things to those who believe in you. I believe, so let your promises be for me as well."

This confession is what our Lord calls us to when He doesn't answer our prayers in the way we would like, or seems to only answer them for others and not for us. He invites us to step back and ask

ourselves, “Do I belong to Christ?” We then look at our Baptisms, when He put His name upon us, and say, “Yes, I do belong to Christ.”

We then ask, “As one who belongs to Christ, one of His sheep, do I know that He loves me?” We then look to His cross and hear His words, “I am the Good Shepherd. The Good Shepherd lays down His life for the sheep.”

We can then ask, “As a sheep of the Good Shepherd, am I straying from Him, and He is sending this trial as His rod and staff to bring me back to His side?” If we find anything there, we repent, again hearing the word, “If we confess our sins, God, who is faithful and just, will forgive our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness.”

Having been reassured that we do belong to Christ, that He does love us, and that He has washed away the sins that separate us from Him, we approach once more, now with an even stronger faith, and ask again, “Lord, help me,” knowing that the Good Shepherd always cares perfectly for the sheep of the true Israel.

Returning to the Canaanite woman, we see that one more trial awaits her. In response to her faithful plea for help, Jesus says to her, “It is not right to take the children's bread and throw it to the dogs.”

How can Jesus say this? How harsh! How unfeeling! These words seem so out of place to our human ideas of who Jesus is supposed to be that some people try to use them as proof that Jesus wasn't perfect. Blasphemies against the Son of God aside, what is Jesus doing here with such words?

We might think such thoughts as we read God's word while waiting for an answer to a prayer. Maybe we're praying that God would bless our nation and we read Habakkuk, where God punishes wickedness by bringing in even more wicked people from outside.

Maybe we're praying for God to grant peace within our family, and we read the words of Jesus: “For I have come to set a man against his father, and a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law.”

Maybe we're praying for someone to see the sins in which they're mired and repent, and we hear the words from St. John in his first epistle: “Whoever makes a practice of sinning is of the devil... no one born of God makes a practice of sinning.” We cry out to God, and the answer we get is very hard for us to hear.

This is where, to go back to Habakkuk and the words God speaks to him, “The righteous shall live by his faith.” It is the faith of the Canaanite woman which hears those words of Jesus and which trusts them even though they sound harsh.

And in addition, faith lets her see the promise hidden in them. Anyone who has had children and dogs in the house know that, what the children get, usually the dogs get as well. They either wait under the table while the giggling toddler slips them Cheerios, or they come in after everyone has been excused from the table and clean up everything that fell around the children's places.

By faith, the woman sees this promise and clings to it, confessing that, whatever she might receive, it comes from the Master's table, and even the tiniest crumb from that divine table is more than enough.

This faith is what lets us trust in our Lord, even when His words to us are difficult to understand, or even upset us. Faith reminds us that He is God, who knows perfectly what is best for us, and that we are men, whose understanding is clouded by sin. And faith also reminds us that, while our idea of what is loving has been warped by sin, God is love, and loves us perfectly and unconditionally.

Our Lord has made us righteous by giving us faith in His Son, and we now live our lives in that faith. Many times, the Holy Spirit will grant us understanding of those difficult passages of Scripture. But even when He doesn't, faith lets us know that God loves us and will turn all things to good for those who love Him.

This wonderful promise of Scripture, written down in the eighth chapter of Romans, is true for all who believe in Jesus, and we see this in our Gospel reading. Having made a good confession in the face of testing, the woman is finally told those wonderful words: "O woman, great is your faith! Be it done for you as you desire." And the result of those words? "And her daughter was healed instantly."

Remember, Jesus, as God, already knew He was going to heal the daughter. He knew before the mother left to seek Him out. He was going to do what was best. The mother, a human, didn't know this. She had to believe it. It was her faith that let her trust what she couldn't yet see, but which Jesus had already seen.

And through all the trials, her faith was grown, made stronger, that much more capable of clinging to Jesus when the next temptations and afflictions came. This strengthened faith would let her better pass on the faith to her daughter, as well as witness to those around her. And especially, it's this faith which saved her eternally, bringing this Canaanite woman into the eternal Israel.

This is the end result of our trials as well, why our Lord sends them. Already, He knows how and when He will deliver us. Already, He knows how He will turn even our suffering to good. Our deliverance, like the daughter's, is never in question. And faith lets us believe this.

Faith lets us trust that the God who loves us so much that He died for us will not let us be overcome by trials and tribulations. As our Lord sends us hard times, He also brings us through them, and strengthens us as He does.

We can look at the good He has done to us in the past and know that He will continue to do good to us in the future. We can see how He has always been faithful to His promises, and so we can trust in those promises all the more. We can look to Christ and how His Father brought Him through suffering and death to life everlasting, and we can know for certain that, because we are joined to Christ, our Father will do the same for us.

In the name of Jesus, amen.