

There are two paths that Christians may walk down. There are two ways we may go through this life: the way of ease, or the way of the cross. Two ways. Scripture speaks of these two ways and also tells us which we should choose, and why.

Shortly before his death, Moses tells the people of Israel, “I have set before you life and death, blessing and curse. Therefore choose life, that you and your offspring may live.”

Jesus gives us instruction on this matter: “Enter by the narrow gate. For the gate is wide and the way is easy that leads to destruction, and those who enter by it are many. For the gate is narrow and the way is hard that leads to life, and those who find it are few.” And Jesus doesn’t just give instruction on this. He doesn’t just talk the talk, so to speak, but He walks the walk. He takes the hard way.

And He brings others with Him on that path. That’s what we hear about in our Gospel text today, a woman whom Christ brings with Him as He walks the path of suffering, the path of the cross. Though her path, and the path of all who follow after Christ is not the easy one, it is the path that leads to life. And so we follow Christ on it.

When we meet this woman, she is in a very hard place on her path in life. Her daughter is severely oppressed by a demon. What exactly this demon was doing to her daughter, we aren’t told, but it could not have been pleasant. Demons hate God, and they hate humans who are made in God’s image. They delight in nothing more than afflicting people, driving them to despair, leading them to destruction. They had a particular place of interest in the region of Tyre and Sidon, as that area for many years had been a leading center of worship for various false gods and the practice of child sacrifice, which demons revel in.

Now they are attacking this daughter and afflicting her, causing her much suffering and anguish. This suffering and anguish is felt also by the mother, watching her daughter, unable to help her. None of the local deities or their priests could have driven out the demon; after all, even Satan isn’t foolish enough to divide his kingdom against itself. Suffering combined with hopelessness. This woman is in an awful place.

But then there seems to be a glimmer of hope on her path. Jesus of Nazareth comes into the area. The reports are that this Jesus has power over the demons and drives them out of people all the time. Maybe there’s hope for the little girl after all!

The woman seeks out Jesus – not an easy thing in the time before social media or the internet or even photographs so you know who you’re looking for – and she comes crying to Him, “Have mercy on me, O Lord, Son of David; my daughter is severely oppressed by a demon.”

This is remarkable in several ways. First, a Canaanite woman would not normally approach a Jewish man, much less a rabbi; the two peoples despised each other and wouldn’t expect help or even want help from “those” people. And yet this woman does anyway, not worrying about social norms because of her love for her daughter and her trust in Jesus.

Second, the woman addresses Jesus as “Lord, Son of David.” That’s not the title of an ordinary rabbi. That’s how you address the Messiah. The people who are supposed to know these things, such as the Pharisees, reject Jesus and constantly work against Him; that’s why He’s left Judea and has come up to Gentile country. But this woman, she speaks a confession that few others have made.

It seems that she’s done everything right. She’s sought out Jesus, confessed Him to be the Messiah, and asked for Him to drive out the demons which are His enemy. What more could Jesus want? He should just heal her daughter now, right?

“But he did not answer her a word.” No offer to come back and help. No additional questions. Not a word. How can this be? Why would the loving Son of David, the Son of God, turn a cold shoulder to her? How can the One who said, “Let the little children come to me” now ignore the cries on behalf of one of those children? To our minds, to our reason, to our feelings, it makes no sense.

And it isn’t just this reading that makes no sense to those things. It may very well be your own experience on your path of life. Have you ever found yourself in a situation that seemed like that of this Canaanite woman? Someone you love is suffering, or perhaps you yourself are suffering, and you come to Jesus in prayer and you beg Him to be merciful and help... and nothing happens? You did everything right, didn’t you? Why wasn’t your prayer answered? Doesn’t Jesus care?

When we encounter this, our sinful flesh wants to respond in a number of ways, all of them bad. Sometimes we might get mad at Jesus and think we should treat Him the way we think He’s treated us. If He won’t listen to what we say to Him, then we won’t listen to what He says to us. If He doesn’t answer prayers in the way we think He should and in the time in which we think He should, then we’ll just quit coming to church. That’ll show Him!

Or perhaps this silence means that we’re on our own, that it’s up to us to solve our problems, find our own path, that we need to figure things out without His help. Maybe Jesus is just for Sunday mornings and the rest of my life is up to me, and so I’ll do whatever I need to do – or want to do – with my life.

Or perhaps Jesus didn’t hear my prayers because I’m not doing enough good works, and if I can just live a good enough life then Jesus has to answer my prayers.

Or maybe I need to find a different church or change up my religious practice so that I can feel on fire for God, and if I can get that feeling again, feel that I’m on the right path, then He’ll do what I’ve asked Him.

Or maybe God must not love me, and I fall into despair and just slide away. Or maybe something else.

You’ve no doubt experienced temptations like these, because Satan loves to come up to you when you think that God hasn’t heard your prayers and whisper that line of his into your ears: “Did God really say...?” Our sinful flesh’s doubts give Satan a foothold that he rarely fails to take advantage of.

Against all these temptations, though, there is the response of faith. This is what the Canaanite woman shows. Like the blind beggar outside Jericho, who kept crying out to Jesus when they told him to be silent, this woman continues to cry out to Jesus.

She even comes and kneels before Him – a posture of worship. Through trials on her way, first with her daughter’s suffering and now at her Lord’s silence, she is led to confess with both words and now actions. Her plea, “Lord, help me,” is joined to her bowing at Jesus’ feet, confessing that He alone is her help.

Jesus then speaks words that, without faith, sound insulting. “It is not right to take the children’s bread and throw it to the dogs.” Is He calling her a dog? Why would He callously say such a thing to a suffering woman?

Yet remember, Jesus as God knows her heart and mind. He knows that she has faith, for faith is given by God Himself, and He knows what words to speak to increase the faith that is already present. In saying what He says, Jesus is having her recall the words Scripture says about how God cares for His creation, His people. He is directing her back to the bread which fell from heaven in abundance, and God’s promises to bless all nations – even the Canaanites – through His people.

By the Holy Spirit working in her heart, this woman recalls those promises and trusts in them, which leads to her response: “Yes Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters’ table.” She recognizes that God provides for all, and that even the crumbs from God are enough. God never has to take away His gifts from one person in order to have something to give to another – He is the God whose power and blessing are infinite.

She may very well also be confessing the reality of who Jesus is here. He, the bread of heaven, has been pushed away from Jerusalem and Judea, the children of Israel, coming to land among the dogs, the Gentiles.

Through these trials, through her verbal wrestling with Christ, like Jacob centuries earlier, she has been blessed. Her faith has been grown, her confession made stronger, her witness borne out to all who heard this exchange.

This is how God works with us, forming us and strengthening us through trials. In these things, we are forced to rely upon Him. When we cry out, “Lord, help me,” we are brought to realize that there is no one else who can help. Any other path will only make things worse.

As we are drawn closer to Him through the struggles He sends us, He refines us, burning away our idols and sinful desires, as Scripture compares with precious metals being refined by fire. In our trials, He also calls us to worship, to gather together as His people, both so we can support each other as brothers and sisters in Christ and so we can hear His promises and receive His gifts to strengthen us in times of difficulty.

One of the great Psalms of lament, Psalm 73, speaks of this very thing. In that Psalm, Asaph, the author, speaks about how he is crushed and despairing at how the wicked seem to prosper and the righteous suffer. He says that he feels like he’s kept the faith for nothing; “All in vain have I kept my heart clean and washed my hands in innocence. For all the day long I have been stricken and rebuked every morning.”

Then comes the turning point, the shift in the Psalm. Asaph writes, “But when I thought how to understand this, it seemed to me a wearisome task, until I went into the sanctuary of God; then I discerned their end.” It was in His coming to the sanctuary to worship that he found deliverance.

Now he doesn’t say that all his troubles went away the moment he walked in the doors; they were probably still waiting for him when He left. But through hearing the words of the Lord – the accounts of God’s care and promises of His love – and through worship and prayer, His spirit had been put at ease. The Lord was in control, and He would be preserved.

When we gather in worship, the Lord does the same thing for us. He reminds us of His love for us, a love not just in word but in deed and in truth. His love, like His words to the Canaanite woman, can appear harsh if not understood by faith.

The crucifix in our sanctuary, and the event which it recalls to us, is an example of this. Without faith, the cross becomes divine child abuse, a vengeful God having His own Son tortured and murdered for no good reason. Why would you have an object representing that in your church or home or around your neck?

Yet when seen through the eyes of faith, our Lord’s Passion and cross becomes a source of great comfort and assurance. When you are struggling with pain and affliction, you can look at your Savior and know that He has known suffering, too.

When you cry out to God and it seems like you get no answer, you can look at Him hanging there and know that He too cried out to His Father, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” and been answered only with silence.

When you have to watch those you love suffer and can’t do anything about it and it tears you up, you can look at the cross and remember that the Father had to watch His Son, His beloved Son, His innocent Son, suffer and die, and He couldn’t stop it or else all of humanity would perish forever.

When your path takes you through times of suffering, you can look at the cross and remember that your Savior has walked that path, too.

Yet the Father heard the cries of His Son, and on the third day raised Him from the grave, just as He had promised. Jesus heard the cries of the Canaanite woman, and He delivered her daughter from the demonic affliction, just as He knew He would do before she first cried out to Him. God hears your cries, and already He knows how He will answer them, how He will deliver you.

He brings you down the path of suffering, not because He enjoys watching you suffer, but because He knows that that path is the only one that will lead to your salvation. Christ alone is the way to the Father, and as His path led to the cross, so too will the path of those who follow Him. Yet after the cross comes the empty tomb, the Resurrection, the final destination of all who walk in Him.

In the name of Jesus, amen.