

Faith or Failure?

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Life is about decisions. Some of them are insignificant, like what we're going to eat for breakfast in the morning. Others can have a lifelong impact, like our decision on whom to marry. We make those decisions as best we can, based on our understanding and the information available to us at the time. Sometimes that works well; sometimes it doesn't. However, our commitment to Christ adds another factor to our decision-making, one that should outweigh all the others combined. We must ask which decision will better glorify God.

Sometimes, this element is indeed pitted against all the others, when our knowledge and experience are screaming "No!", but God's word is whispering, "Yes." It's in moments like these that our faith is truly tested. Are we willing to turn our back on the wisdom of the world because we trust the promises of God, or do we listen to that wisdom instead?

Of course, God is faithful. No matter how improbable it seems, He never lets any of His people down. However, if we shrink back from the path of faith, He will abandon us too. This morning, then, let's be honest about what this choice truly entails. Let's study the consequences of choosing faith or failure.

The Syro-Phoenician Woman

In preparation for the Lord's Supper, let's begin this study by examining one of the most impressive characters in the gospels, a woman who showed more faith than just about anybody. We often refer to her as the Syro-Phoenician woman, and we find her story in Mark 7:24-30.

This passage opens by describing **THEIR SITUATION**. As the text presents it, both Jesus and the woman have problems. Jesus is facing one of the continuing problems of His ministry—His celebrity status. Wherever He goes, He is mobbed by people who want Him to heal them or a loved one. In an effort to get away from it all, Jesus goes to the region of Tyre, in Phoenicia. This is to the northeast of Galilee, on the shores of the Mediterranean. It's outside the boundaries of the Jewish nation entirely. It's Gentile country instead, and it's been that way for thousands of years.

Jesus has come here, quite frankly, to hide out. He isn't the Messiah of the Phoenicians. He hasn't been preaching to them. His ministry does not concern them. He comes here because He wants them to leave Him alone.

However, that isn't the way that things work out. Word gets around, and even among these people who do not fear God, there is one woman who comes to see Him. She's one of the natives of the area, not a Jew at all, and as far as we can tell from the text, has no prior dealings with the God of Israel. However, she has a problem too. Her daughter has an unclean spirit, all previous efforts to get rid of it have failed, and so she comes to Jesus with her need for help.

The text then recounts **THEIR CONVERSATION**. This woman is, quite frankly, a pest. She comes to Jesus, falls down at His feet, and begs Him to heal her daughter. He ignores her. In response to His non-response, she keeps asking. From Matthew's account we learn that the disciples get so sick of her that they beg Jesus to throw her out. He doesn't, which leaves us with some suspicions about why Jesus is allowing the commotion to continue. This exchange may have gone on for quite some time, with the woman pleading and Jesus ignoring her.

Finally, Jesus answers her as quellingly as He possibly can. His answer cruelly highlights the difference between Jew and Gentile. The Jews were God's children, His chosen people, and Jesus was sent to proclaim the kingdom to the Jews. His preaching was intended for their ears; His miracles were intended to heal their illnesses. The Gentiles, on the other hand, had nothing to do with Jesus, nor He with them. They weren't children. They were dogs. Even today in the Middle East, dogs are despised animals, and it was probably the same way 2000 years ago. It is an insulting comparison, but Jesus makes it anyway. This woman was a dog, her daughter was a dog, and as long as there were children to heal, Jesus wasn't going to waste His power on her.

When we take this answer at face value, it seems vicious, almost racist. However, when we think about the text for a little bit, it becomes evident that something else is at work. After all, Jesus didn't need to throw this crushing put-down at her. He could have had the disciples toss her out on her ear without speaking to her at all. His object, then, isn't to tell her "No". It's to test her, to see how badly she wants the healing that He has to offer.

The truth becomes evident in **HER ANSWER**. Jesus is the master of the ready reply, but the answer that this lowly Gentile woman gives to Him is worthy of the Lord Himself. Before we consider its content, let's think about how hard it was for her to give it. Let's think about all that she's been through. Because she is so desperate to save her daughter, she has humiliated herself before this foreigner. She's fallen down at His feet, cried out repeatedly for His help, only to be ignored. When finally He does speak, He compares her to a dog and her beloved daughter to a dog.

At this point, it would have been so easy for her to walk away, to get fed up with the insulting treatment that this outsider prophet was meting out, to say to herself that no matter how sick her daughter was, it wasn't worth going through all of this, and besides, the guy probably couldn't do anything to help anyway. She could do that, but she doesn't. Instead, she delivers the greatest zinger that anybody ever unleashes on Jesus—when you feed the children, the dogs get to eat too. As I can testify from my experience as a father, this statement is factually true. When we were at my in-laws'

over Christmas, I think their Chihuahua gained about five pounds from all the food that Zoë and Marky dropped on the floor. When there are toddlers in the house, floor patrol for a dog is a pretty good living.

However, this is more than a factual statement. It's her final plea for what Jesus should do. He was sent first as prophet to His own people? Fine. Let Him heal them. She's not asking for the firstfruits. She merely wants the leftovers, because she thinks even the leftovers of His power will be enough to heal her daughter.

The story concludes with **THE RESULT** of this woman's bold reply. If indeed Jesus set this encounter up to test her, one gets the feeling that He got more than He was expecting. Though she is a foreigner, she's willing not merely to put up with an insult, but to accept the insult so that she can turn it around on Him. She would rather be a dog and get His healing than be a human and go without. Jesus, who is so quick with a riposte when faced with pride and self-righteousness, has no answer to make to such a forthright expression of faith. Instead, He promises her the healing she seeks, and when she returns home, she finds that the unclean spirit has been cast out of her daughter.

Before the Lord's Supper, let's allow this story to guide our thought in two main directions. First, it shows the compassion of Jesus, His willingness to extend grace to everyone. This woman was an outsider, but He healed her daughter anyway. Similarly, all of us were outsiders, but Jesus brought us near by His death on the cross, for no better reason than that He loved us and was willing to suffer to keep us from suffering.

Second, though, let's recognize that Jesus tests us the same way He tested the Syro-Phoenician woman. He offers His grace to everyone, but He extends it only to those who seek it. How badly do we want it? Are we like the woman, willing to sacrifice our pride to receive healing from Him? Or, like so many others, do we reject Jesus in our lives because we aren't willing to pay the price He demands for the blessing He offers? Let's consider these things as we partake.

Jeroboam

Our second case study this morning concerns Jeroboam, the first king of the divided Israel. However, the first time we meet him, he is not king, but merely the recipient of **GOD'S PROMISE**. Read with me from 1 Kings 11:37-38. In context, here's what has gone on: The heart of Solomon, the current king of Israel, has been turned away from God by his foreign wives. As a result, God sends the prophet Ahijah to Jeroboam, who at this time is one of Solomon's officials. Ahijah tears his cloak into twelve pieces and gives Jeroboam ten, predicting that he will become king over ten tribes.

That much was going to happen no matter what. Solomon's sin had set God's judgment in motion, and even though Solomon tried to kill Jeroboam to stop the prophecy, it was inevitable that he would become king. What happened after that, though, was up to Jeroboam. If he served God faithfully, not only would he get to become king, he would get to remain king. What's more, his descendants after him would also rule in Israel.

Even today, what happens to our children and our grandchildren is a big deal to us. 3000 years ago, it was even more of a big deal. Most people in the time of Jeroboam had only a shadowy conception of the life to come, so the only way they could achieve a kind of immortality was through the success of their descendants. Of course, none of them could ensure prosperity for their offspring, any more than we can for ours. Only God could do that. When God promises Jeroboam an enduring house if he obeys, it's the most important earthly promise that God could make.

However, once Jeroboam becomes king, he encounters **A PROBLEM**. The Scripture records his thought process in 1 Kings 12:26-27. He's just set up his capital city in Shechem, but the religious center of the Israelite faith is still in Jerusalem, the capital of Judah. Jeroboam imagines all of the people in his nation trooping down to Jerusalem to worship, restoring their allegiance to Rehoboam, king of Judah, and killing him. To human wisdom, this seems like a reasonable fear. All of Jeroboam's life to this point, Israel has been united, and everybody has worshiped in Jerusalem. He can't imagine a scenario in which people would worship in Jerusalem yet belong to a different, stable political entity. Against this reasonable fear, he has only the promise of God that his house will endure if Jeroboam remains faithful.

We too have lives that are filled with reasonable fears. Christians who are married to non-Christians fear that if they are too insistent about putting God first, their marriages will suffer for it. Christians with school-age children fear that their children will suffer if they spend Wednesday nights going to church instead of doing homework and sleeping.

Beyond those things, there are fears that every one of us shares. We fear the alienation that may arise at school or in the workplace if we are vocal and insistent about our faith. We fear the diminution of ourselves, that if we turn the other cheek, return a soft answer for a harsh word, don't stand up for ourselves the way people in the world do, that we're going to get walked all over and end up ruined, miserable, and unhappy. The only thing that stands against all of these fears is the promise of God's word that if we seek Him, He will look after us in all of these things.

Make no mistake, friends. It's not absurd and irrational for us to experience these fears. Why would it be? Satan's no fool. He's not going to attack us with ridiculous fears. He's not going to try to get us worried that if we go to Sunday morning services, we'll be attacked by giant orange space aliens. Instead, he's going to plant fears in our minds that seem as plausible to us as Jeroboam's did to him.

The text next tells us about **JEROBOAM'S SOLUTION**. Consider 1 Kings 12:28. When presented with the choice between faith and fear, he picks fear. In earthly terms, this is not a dumb decision. The text makes clear that

Jeroboam talked to other people about what he should do. The alternative religion that he constructs is a rationally impressive one. It has twin worship sites in Dan and Bethel, impressive idols, new feast days, and it justifies itself to the people on the basis of convenience. Best of all, it works! The people forsake the temple worship in Jerusalem in favor of Jeroboam's golden calves. I'm sure that right up until the time that Jeroboam went to sacrifice on the altar, he was pleased with the success of his clever plan. The wisdom of the world couldn't have come up with a better one. The only problem was that in pursuing idolatry, Jeroboam did exactly what God warned him not to do.

In response to our fears, we too can set up any number of idols. This is much more common than we think. Usually, whenever we put anything ahead of God and so make it our idol, there is fear involved. The drunkard fears the sorrows of sobriety. The adulterer fears loneliness. The covetous man fears poverty. We take all those sins and put them on God's throne because we think that they will protect us from what we fear. In worldly terms, this often makes a great deal of sense. After all, lots and lots of money will make us secure, right? However, these worldly-wise solutions to our problems suffer from the same flaw as Jeroboam's—they don't take into account the promises of God.

Predictably, Jeroboam's apostasy provokes **GOD'S JUDGMENT**. The prophet Ahijah pronounces it in 1 Kings 14:10-11. Jeroboam was so determined to keep the kingship for himself and his sons that he departed into idolatry. Because of his evil heart, God promised to destroy the very lineage that Jeroboam wanted to maintain. Instead of becoming an honored line of kings like the descendants of David, they would be the prey of scavengers. Of course, it happened according to the word of the Lord. Shortly after his death, the entire household of Jeroboam was destroyed.

Often, a similar fate befalls us when we listen to fear instead of faith. Some examples of this are obvious. The drunkard finds more sorrow, not less. The adulterer becomes more lonely. However, what about the Christian parent who is so concerned about his children's future that he puts homework ahead of God? Too often, he ends up ruining his children's future because they don't learn the most important lesson of all. What about us when, provoked by fear of losing ourselves, we reply angrily and assert our rights? The result is not usually respect, but shattered relationships and diminished lives. When we don't trust God, we end up losing the very thing that we were too afraid of losing.

Samuel

The third story that we're going to consider this morning is in many ways the mirror image of Jeroboam's sad tale. It concerns the prophet Samuel and how he led the Israelites to victory despite their fears. Unlike the story of Jeroboam, it all appears in one place, so turn with me in your Bibles to 1 Samuel 7:3-13.

The first thing that this context describes is **RESTORATION**. Let's take a moment to recall what has happened in Israelite history immediately before these events. About twenty years ago, Israel had been led into battle against the Philistines by the two wicked sons of the high priest Eli, Hophni and Phinehas. They got absolutely clobbered because the wickedness of the people and their leaders had led God to abandon them. In fact, the Philistines even captured the ark of the covenant. God didn't allow the Philistines to hold on to the ark, but the Israelites profaned it and were punished too. As a result, the worship of Jehovah was essentially abandoned for 20 years.

Now, though, Samuel has grown up and is ready to be a leader for the people. He encourages them to abandon their wickedness and seek the Lord, and that's precisely what they do. The first step to their deliverance from the Philistines is their repentance, and once they repent, God is ready to bless them again.

Today, more than 3000 years later, what's funny is not how much has changed, but how little. Typically, unless the people involved tell me, I don't have a particularly good idea how any of the members of the Joliet church are doing spiritually. I can tell if people aren't coming to services like they ought, but I am clueless about all the private struggles and private battles. In that private area, I'm sure that some of you are doing pretty well in your striving against sin, but others of you aren't. In fact, some of us may be at the point of despair, ready to chuck the whole serving-God thing.

One of the morals of this story, though, is that restoration is always possible. No matter what a mockery we have made out of our service to God, we can always repent and return, and if we do, He will bless us. Because of the power of the blood of Jesus, spiritual renewal is never more than a resolution and a prayer away.

This story too, though, is marked by the presence of **FEAR**. At this time, the Philistines had the Israelites under their thumb, crushed and paying tribute. They didn't like it when the Israelites started gathering, because it might well mean that the Philistines would have a revolt on their hands. Once the overlords get word of Samuel's assembly, they send out an army to break it up. The people hear of this, and they are terrified. After all, the Philistines are professional warriors, they aren't, and the last time they went to battle against the Philistines, they got curb-stomped. 20 years later, nothing has changed about the physical capabilities of the two sides, so worldly wisdom predicts the same outcome.

Likewise, friends, there's a lot of reasonable fear involved when we contemplate returning our lives to God. We fear the loss of the pleasures that enslaved us, the loss of the friends who participated in our wickedness, and the disapproval of those who learn about the double lives we've been leading. Sometimes, we're afraid of making things right, and we don't even know why. Here too, the devil is playing on our fears to try to keep us from pleasing God.

However, instead of scattering because of their fears, the Israelites **TURN TO GOD**. They beg Samuel to intercede for them, and in response, he begins to offer a sacrifice. In short, they make trusting God and showing that trust their first priority. To worldly wisdom, this is a terrible idea. Worldly wisdom would tell the Israelites to scatter, to put their faith in their own abilities to escape, to go back to worshipping idols and hoping the Philistines would leave them alone. If not that, worldly wisdom would at least tell them to line up into some semblance of an army, but they don't.

Similarly, the steps that we take to find God, whether as part of a continuing journey or as the reversal of a journey away from Him, aren't going to make much sense in the eyes of the world. Don't we have enough on our plates already? How can we possibly spare the time to attend more church services, or pray more, or read the Bible more? Aren't our friends, who have already seen the mockery we've made of our faith, going to start laughing at us when we tell them that this time we mean it? And yet, it is in those times, when the wisdom of the world is insisting so loudly that righteousness is a bad idea, that righteousness is most important. That's when we must show that we trust God.

In 1 Samuel 7, the result of the faith of Samuel and the Israelites is **VICTORY**. The Israelites are still standing around the sacrifice and the Philistines are marching up to slaughter them when God stuns the trained soldiers with thunder from heaven. Even the peasant rabble that the Israelites call an army is able to rout them. They chase the valley-dwelling Philistines back down out of the hills, and to commemorate the victory, Samuel takes a stone, sets it on end, and names it "Ebenezer". In Hebrew, this means "the stone of help". That's why, in "O Thou Fount of Every Blessing", the beginning part of the second verse reads, "Here I raise my Ebenezer; hither by Thy help I've come." It's a reference to the monument that Samuel set up to commemorate how far God had helped him chase the Philistines. After this battle, the Philistines realize that they have to be scared of the Israelites again and leave them alone until the time of Saul.

Today, friends, if we will simply trust God and seek Him with our whole hearts, we will be amazed at what He will do in our lives. All of those obstacles that seem so insurmountable are nothing more than an illusion. Satan doesn't really have the power to keep us from serving God. He doesn't really have the power to hurt us in any meaningful way. The best he can do is convince us not to bother trying to be righteous. Once we call his bluff, he's got nothing.