

## The Syrophoenician Woman

*Mark 7: 24- 29 Jesus left that place and went to the vicinity of Tyre. But a woman whose little daughter had an unclean spirit immediately heard about him, and she came and bowed down at his feet. Now the woman was a Gentile, of Syrophoenician origin. She begged him to cast the demon out of her daughter. He said to her, “Let the children be fed first,*



*for it is not fair to take the children’s food and throw it to the dogs.” But she answered him, “Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children’s crumbs.” Then he said to her, “For saying that, you may go—the demon has left your daughter.”*

The day my daughter was born was the happiest of my life. Hers was a difficult birth, and the wise woman attending me ended up having to pull her out because she decided to come feet first, but like they say, once the child is in your arms you do forget the pain. She was a beautiful baby with a mop of dark curly hair and big brown eyes. She fed easily, and was no trouble at all strapped to my back as I worked in the fields alongside my husband. Sometimes in the evenings when I was just sitting there watching her, a vacant look would come into her face, and she would just lie there looking into the distance. Then she would just shake her head and smile at me. It didn't worry me at first. I just thought that she was day dreaming. I daydream sometimes, so why should my daughter not as well.

When I daydream, I dream of the sea. My father was a sailor, travelling on merchant ships around the Mediterranean sea. He would sail from port to port where kinsmen had businesses moving goods from one place to another. He loved the sea, and always respected it. You don't live long if you don't respect the sea. Whenever he came home he would sit around in the evenings and thrill my brother and I with tales of his adventures. He would tell us tales of fighting great monsters from the deep and of great battles with with the waves to bring his ship safely into harbour. Sometimes he would drink too much and then he would tell us about the danger, of the comrades swept overboard, and the food running out when the ship became becalmed. The sea for me was both beautiful and terrible.

Mother worked while Father was away, making Tyrian Purple dye, for which our city of Tyre is famous all over the world. She would go down to the seashore to a special place, where she knew that the murex shellfish lived. She would take with her a stick, and she would sit there prodding them until they released a squirt of the blue/black liquid which they use to sedate their prey, or confuse someone who is trying to catch them. Prodding them really annoys them, and after a while they release some of their liquid; just like milking a goat! It takes a lot of prodding of a lot of shellfish to get just a few drops in a small glass vial. But it is such a skilled and boring job that you can earn a lot of money doing it. The dye is so difficult to collect that only Emperors are allowed to use it, although some was sent to Jerusalem to dye materials used in the making of King Herod's new Temple.

As my daughter got older her episodes of day dreaming got longer and closer together, until one day I came back from collecting water from the well to find her lying on the ground rigid, her arms and hands contorted, and blood coming from her mouth where she had bitten her tongue. I knew what this was. I had seen it before, because it used to happen to my mother. I held her down until the rigidity went and she went limp and sighed. I held her in my arms as she slept. I would have liked to have kept what happened a secret, but nothing can remain a secret for long when you live so close by your neighbours. It wasn't more than a week later when she had another attack outside in the street playing with her friends. Before she had recovered it was all over the area, and mothers were pulling their children away and back indoors to keep them safe from my demon possessed daughter.

My husband was absolutely distraught. He is a big powerful man. It was one of the things that first attracted me to him. When he held our daughter in his arms for the first time, he could almost have wrapped them around her twice. She looked so safe cradled in those huge arms. I heard him whisper in her ear that day that he would always protect her and keep her safe. No demon would dare to come near her when he was around, so it must have happened when I was looking after her. It must be the same demon that was in my mother. It is all my fault. The worse thing is, that I knew what was going to happen to my daughter. It is what happened to my mother. One day she went out to gather the dye. She should have been back well before dark, but she didn't come. Dad was away at sea, so I sent my brother to find our uncle. He came with friends and flaming torches and they searched the seashore. They found her lying face down in a rock pool. The devil must have attacked her again, leaving her rigid, face down in the water and she drowned. Our uncle took us to his home until Dad returned from sea. He was devastated. He always said that he had fallen in love with mother the moment he first saw her. She said that he was very persistent. They both agreed that she had run away to join him on his boat, because her father would not let his daughter marry a filthy Phoenician sailor instead of a nice Greek farmer. Neither knew that the devil that had been with her all of her life would come with her to Tyre, and eventually kill her.

As time passed and the devil attacked my daughter more and more frequently and life became really difficult for us. If anything went wrong in the neighbourhood, we would get the blame for having brought evil into the place. On one occasion one of our neighbours almost caused a riot when he accused us of causing his chickens to die of some mysterious disease. My husband became more and more withdrawn from me and from our daughter. Some evenings he would just sit looking at her, almost hoping that he could see the devil enter her, so that he could fight it and save her. We tried taking her to the priests in the local temple, and they cast spells to get rid of the devil, but this seemed to enrage it more and our daughter became sicker and sicker.

Then I began to hear stories from passing merchants of a Rabbi from Nazareth, in Israel, who was going from village to village healing the sick and casting out devils. If my daughter had not been afflicted, I would not have believed them, but for the first time these stories gave me a glimmer of hope that our daughter might yet be spared. Then I heard that he appeared to be making his way in our direction, Walking from Nazareth, his home town with a group of friends and followers, they had skirted round Mount Carmel until they reached the coast at Haifa. From there they ambled up the coast road to Acre, and then carried on to Nahariyya, Naqoura, Rachidiyeh and every village in between. As they travelled, the stories of the miracles that Rabbi Jesus performed travelled in advance of him. A journey which they could have been made with two or three days of hard walking was taking weeks. The more I heard, the greater the fever of anticipation I got into. In the end hearing that he was only a couple of hours walk away from me, the longing to meet with him got the better of me, and I set off from our home in Old Tyre.

I crossed the causeway built by Alexander the Great from the old city set on a rock just off the coast, to the town of Ushu on the mainland, which is where the land we farm is. To the north of the island and the causeway is the harbour full of beached boats, which is where my father's boats would come back to, after his long voyages. The harbour to the south of the island is not as deep nor as big, so it is used by the smaller local fishing boats as opposed to the big merchantmen in the north harbour. From Ushu I turned south down the coast road keeping the Mediterranean sea on my right. I suppose that I must have noticed the deep, deep blue of the water, and the white of the sandy beaches. I must have walked through groves of citrus trees and through fields of corn and barley, but I don't remember them. I must have smelled the salt on the air and the seaweed on the shore, but they are such familiar smells that they didn't penetrate my consciousness at all. I was just focussed on finding the Rabbi. One thing that I hadn't considered when I left home in such a hurry was whether I should have brought my daughter with me, for the Rabbi to lay his healing hands on. As my enquires brought me nearer and nearer to where the Rabbi was, I slowed down unable to make up my mind how to proceed.

Even with my dawdling I soon came across a large group of people sitting on the sand of a beach listening to a man sat on a rock. It was a calm day, with little wind, but the sea always makes a noise as it reaches the shore. We ought to have had

difficulty hearing what was being said, but he spoke so clearly, that even at the back of the crowd I could hear every word. He spoke about Yahweh, the God of the Israelites. I suppose that many of those listening were of the twelve tribes of Israel. He spoke about how Yahweh had chosen them, how much he loved them and wanted them to follow him, and let him be their God. The more I heard, the more I despaired. If his message was for his people, then his God would not be healing my daughter. When he finished talking, he began moving among the crowd. Mothers were lifting children to him, for him to bless, and men and women were telling him about their diseases and he was laying hands on them. I watched as person after person changed before my eyes from a worried, pain-ridden person, to someone whole and complete again. I couldn't quite believe what I was seeing. Then I saw him lay his hands on a child near me, after I heard its mother telling the Rabbi that it was possessed by demons. At that moment I missed my daughter so much, and wished I had brought her with me, so that maybe she would be healed as well.

Then Rabbi Jesus was standing in front of me, as I sat on a rock at the back of the crowd. There was a smile on his face. Something about him just made me open my mouth and spew out all my fears and longings for my daughter. The Rabbi's followers, hearing my accent tried to move the Rabbi on, and eventually as I wound down and stopped to take a breath, the Rabbi began to turn away from me, saying that there was nothing he could do for my daughter, because I was not one of the chosen people of Israel. 'The children had to be fed first', he said. He couldn't throw the children's food to the dogs. At that moment a fierce anger came over me. I had not walked all this way, I had not watched all these healing miracles going on in front of me to be so casually dismissed. I stood up and grabbed his arm as he turned away, and forced him to look at me again face to face. To this day I don't know how I said it, or where the words came from, but I just said to him ' Even the dogs under the table can feed on the crumbs'. A really startled look came over his face, as if no one had ever challenged him like this before. He turned back to me, and looked long and hard at me. I met his gaze unwaveringly. Then a really beautiful smile came over his face, and he said 'You are right, you and your daughter deserve better. Go home now. Your daughter is healed'.

It seemed an eternity before it registered what he had just said to me. I had no proof, yet that my daughter was healed, but I just knew that she was. I turned back to where he was still standing looking at me, and I just threw my arms around him and gave him a hug, and whispered 'Thank you' in his ear. Then I turned and ran. I didn't run all the way home, but I certainly got home a lot faster than I had got to the Rabbi. Despite the speed at which I travelled, I noticed that the light seemed brighter, the trees more beautiful, the air more scented with fruit blossoms and the sea even bluer than before. It was early evening when I burst through the door of our house, and stopped in astonishment as I saw my husband and daughter playing a game with sticks on the floor of house, laughing and joking in a way I had never seen before. I picked my daughter up, and hugged her tightly to me, and then asked my husband what was going on. He told me that soon after noon, our daughter had had a great

attack and fallen on the floor. So bad was it, that he thought that she was going to die, but unlike any other time there was a great aura around her, and when the attack finally finished, she got up and started to dance around for joy, because she said that she had felt the demon leave her, for good. This was exactly the time when the Rabbi had told me that my daughter was healed.

It was too late that day to do anything apart from eat some fruit and olives, as I hadn't prepared anything before I left, but the next day I prepared a great feast and invited all our friends and neighbours to come and celebrate our daughter's miracle healing. Many times during that day, and the days since I have told people about Rabbi Jesus and the great powers given him by Yahweh, the God of the Israelites.