

Reminiscere  
5 March, Anno Domini 2023  
Matthew 15:21-28

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

Dear children of Jacob,

When you pray for stronger faith, you are praying that the Lord would attack your faith, test it, refine it in the fire. Because faith is trust, the only way trust can be made stronger is to remove the other things that faith rests on - your smarts, your health, your safety and security, your job, your family, your faith. Sometimes the test of faith is for God to seem to remove even the true object of faith, Himself and His promises, forcing faith to hold fast even when it seems there's nothing to hold.

Behold your father Jacob. Jacob wrestled all night long with God. And though Jacob prevailed, though he strove with God and man and was the victor, and though God blessed him, Jacob was given a reminder in his flesh that would follow him every day of his life from then on - the Lord put his hip out of its socket and he was forced to walk with a limp the rest of his days. Was it cruel of God? Or was it a great act of mercy that God, after attacking Jacob in the night and challenging his faith in the promises of God, after blessing him with a faith even deeper and stronger than before, left Jacob with a constant reminder that the promises of God are sure, that God had in fact blessed father Israel? That limp wasn't simply a reminder of the wrestling; it was also a constant reminder of the blessing and the faithfulness of God, that nothing, not even God Himself, can upend God's promises. Your individual crosses, tailor made for you by your heavenly Father, are reminders of God's great mercy which is rooted in the cross of your Savior.

The Canaanite woman was forced to endure great insults from the mouth of Jesus. She wasn't a child. She was a dog. No one would forget receiving such harsh rebukes from the Lord. But, like Jacob, she would not let Jesus go. She would not let God be anything other than exactly what He promised He was - merciful and the helper of the helpless. And what greater gift could the Lord bestow upon her than an even greater faith, an even greater trust and confidence in His mercy and His steadfast love? Isn't that what we all desire, or at least ought to desire - that day by day we are so deeply caught up into the promises and blessings of God that we are able to fully recognize the evil desires of our flesh and the temptations

swirling about our heads and resist them? Do you not desire to so trust in the love and mercy of your heavenly Father that no earthly struggle or suffering causes you doubt or fear? Do you not desire to speak the Word of God with all boldness and confidence before the mightiest among men and bravely receive the martyr's fate if the Lord so wills it? The desire to hear "O Christian, great is your faith!" from the mouth of Jesus is good. Nothing is more pleasing to God. But know that if your desire is to walk with the faith of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and the Canaanite woman, understand that such a faith comes at a very high cost to your flesh that will leave it not just reeling, but dead. St. Paul had to bear the thorn in his flesh so that he wouldn't become puffed with pride after having been caught up into the third heavens and the immediate presence of the risen Christ.

Strong faith is repugnant to your flesh, to the world, and to Satan. Strong faith is an all out assault on these enemies. Strong faith counts all, ALL, in this world as dross. Jesus said "Whoever finds his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it." (Mtt. 10:39) Strong faith fears losing nothing, not even life itself, because strong faith desires nothing but God Himself and believes that God has given every good and perfect in Christ. The quest for strong faith is a quest to truly keep the First Commandment - to fear, love, and trust in nothing, save the Triune God alone. Strong faith grasps hold of God's promises like a bulldog and will not let go, no matter how hard God shakes, no matter how He disciplines, no matter what He takes away. Strong faith believes that God MUST be faithful and merciful. Strong faith believes that God will, just as He promised, NOT remember the sins of your youth nor your many transgressions because of the Blood of Jesus. It simply will not be any other way no matter what your conscience, the devil, the world, even God Himself may say to the contrary.

Have you suffered the Lord's silence? Have you prayed for healing, for peace, for deliverance and not received it? Has the guilt of your sin loudly declared that you are an outsider, a sinner? Has the remembrance of your sin made you acutely aware that you don't deserve to be at this table receiving the food of dear children? If so, rejoice! This is the Lord's doing. The Lord is tempering you, forging your faith like iron so that you abandon any and all notion that YOUR faith is sufficient, that YOUR works are good. YOUR faith is weak, imperfect, filled with doubt and hampered by self-reliance. YOUR works are filled with sin and greed. God cannot have you trusting in these things because they are idols. So in love He will take the hammer of the Law and crush your idols into dust. With surgical precision, He will cut deeply to remove them from your heart, leaving none of the cancerous cells behind. It will hurt. It will leave scars. Your flesh, your mind, your heart - they will all resist because the Lord is taking what is precious to them.

Resisting sin and temptation is hard. It is painfully hard because you are having to tell yourself no - no, I will not despise prayer or the preaching of God's Word for fun, for money, for rest, for family; no, I will not fantasize about my neighbor's wife; no, I will not withhold my time, my talents, or my tithes from the Lord; no, I will not forsake the needs and care of my family for my plans and what I want; no, I will not fear though the earth give way and the mountains are thrown into the heart of the sea, though ten thousand should rise against me, though my body be filled with an incurable and even fatal illness. In all these things we are more than conquerors through faith in Christ Jesus.

In this life, faith is constantly at war. There isn't rest here on this side of glory. Satan will not grow tired. Your flesh will not give up. The world will daily continue to press the attack. Death's grim shadow will not cease to hang over you. And the moment you rest on the strength of your faith, the moment you think you are a good Christian, is exactly the moment when you are weakest and the most vulnerable to attack. The strongest faith is the one that always knows how weak and vulnerable it is.

Pray for strong faith. Pray for the faith of Jacob and the Canaanite woman. That prayer is like the sweetest incense rising up into the nostrils of God and be sure that He will grant it. But in doing so, be prepared because the answer to that prayer will be the suffering of being exercised and pushed and strained. It is not easy. The crosses that are laid upon you are given for the sole purpose of driving you back to Christ, back to His Word, back to confession, back to the promises of Baptism, back to His table because these are the means, the only means, by which you are strengthened in faith toward God and fervent love toward one another. Your Father disciplines you and tests your faith because He loves you and desires you to have the peace that passes all human understanding, the peace that is able to rest though ten legions of hell assail you, though Satan uses even your dreams to assault and overthrow you, though every earthly prop gives way.

Battle always leaves marks and scars. Blessed are you if you bear them for they are the marks and scars first born by Jesus in His flesh. Those marks and scars are the beautiful reminders of the steadfast love of the Lord for you that will endure forever and that will grant to you the eternal victory over death and the grave and grant you a happy entrance into the eternal joy of God.

In the Name of +Jesus.

Pastor Ulmer

(We stand.) The peace of God which passes all human understanding keeps you hearts and your minds through faith in Christ Jesus our Lord.