

# Jesus Heals an Alien

*Isaiah 29:13-14; Matthew 15:21-39 (text)*

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Beloved brothers and sisters in the Lord Jesus Christ: One of the favorite passages in the Bible that atheists use to mock the Bible is God's command to Israel kill all the Canaanites who inhabited the Promised Land. They call it "genocide" and "ethnic cleansing. Richard Dawkins, the most well-known atheist today, calls the God of the Old Testament "the most unpleasant character in all of fiction." But this mockery is not confined to atheists. Many professors in "Christian" universities join in this ridicule. One of them, Peter Enns, does not believe that God commanded Joshua to exterminate the Canaanites. He says in one of his books,

God never told the Israelites to kill the Canaanites. The Israelites believed that God told them to exterminate the Canaanites. It is widely known that the Canaanites were not any worse in the ancient world than others, and that the biblical description of the Canaanites... is an exaggeration for the purpose of painting their enemies in a negative light... In modern language, propaganda... However immoral the Canaanites were, the real problem isn't what they did, but where they did it. They were contaminating the land that God set aside for the Israelites since the days of Abraham and so had to be exterminated.

It is true that all of the ancient Near Eastern world were as wicked as, if not more than, the Canaanites. Enns is right that if any other people group inhabited the Promised Land, God would have exterminated them instead. Therefore, God did not command Israel to exterminate all the ancient Near Eastern peoples, but only those who dwelt in Canaan. But where Enns errs is that later, all of these wicked ancient peoples were also destroyed by God one after another, including Egyptians, Assyrians, Babylonians, Greeks and Romans.

Our text begins with Jesus withdrawing from western Galilee to the district of Tyre and Sidon. Back in Matthew 4:12, Jesus began his ministry of preaching the gospel in Galilee. Here in Matthew 15:21, he ends his Galilean ministry and travels to an alien territory usually referred to as Canaan. Here a Canaanite woman came to Jesus pleading persistently to heal her demon-oppressed daughter. So Jesus rewards her faith by healing her daughter.

Today our theme is **Jesus Heals an Alien** under three headings: first, **An Alien from an Ancient Pagan Enemy**; second, **An Alien with Persistent Faith**; and third, **An Alien Rewarded for Her Faith**.

## **An Alien from an Ancient Pagan Enemy**

The woman who pleaded with Jesus was called a "Canaanite woman." Who were the Canaanites? In Numbers 13:29, Canaanites were described as people who "*dwelt by the sea, and along the Jordan*." So the Canaanites dwelt in the land between the Mediterranean Sea to the west and the Jordan River to the east (Num 33:51; Jos 22:9). Their northernmost area is Tyre and Sidon, and their

southernmost area is around Gaza. So Sidon is called the firstborn of Canaan (Gen 10:15). Tyre and Sidon are well-known for their wealthy merchants and traders (Isa 23:8).

However, in addition to their wealth, Canaanites were also condemned in the Old Testament for their wickedness. How were the Canaanites and all the ancient world wicked? Leviticus 18 catalogs their sins. They were idolatrous, worshiping idol-gods. They committed heinous sexual immorality such as adultery, incest, homosexuality, and even bestiality. And one of the most wicked religious practices was burning their children as sacrifices to a god called Molech. Therefore, God warned Israel before they entered the land,

*Do not make yourselves unclean by any of these things, for by all these the nations I am driving out before you have become unclean, and the land became unclean, so that I punished its iniquity, and the land vomited out its inhabitants. But you shall keep my statutes and my rules and do none of these abominations... lest the land vomit you out when you make it unclean, as it vomited out the nation that was before you (Lev 18:24-30).*

This wickedness incurred God's wrath against them, so he commanded Joshua to exterminate all of them. Why is God so "cruel," some would ask? Because the penalty for sin is death (Gen 2:17; Rom 6:23). If he allowed the Israelites to dwell among the Canaanites, his people will eventually be influenced by their wicked pagan practices. And this is what actually happened. When the Israelites conquered the Canaanite cities, they allowed the Canaanites to live with them as their slaves. And in time, Israel became like their pagan neighbors worshiping idols and committing heinous sexual sins. Therefore, God destroyed not only these pagan people, but also his own people Israel.

This is the environment in which the Canaanite woman was raised.

### **An Alien with Persistent Faith**

But though she lived in a faraway pagan city, she heard about Jesus preaching the gospel and performing great signs and wonders. Remember the story of Rahab in Jericho when the Israelites were approaching the city? Rahab told the two Israeli spies that her people had heard that the LORD dried up the Red Sea 40 years before, and on their way to Canaan, the LORD destroyed the powerful Amorites. So even before the Israelites arrived across the Jordan River, the city of Jericho was filled with fear of Israel. And even before the spies arrived at her house, Rahab already had faith that the LORD had given the city to Israel (Jos 2:9-11).

In a similar manner, the Canaanite woman already had developing faith even before Jesus arrived in her pagan city. In desperation, she comes to Jesus begging, acknowledging Jesus as "Lord, Son of David." She is only one of a few who acknowledges Jesus as God and Messiah. Out of the more than 5,000 people he fed earlier and the 4,000 he fed later, no one confessed the same. Among those few who acknowledged him were the leper in Matthew 8 and the blind men in Chapter 9.

At first, Jesus ignored the woman, saying nothing, so his disciples thought said to Jesus to send her away. Jesus replied to his disciples that God has sent him to seek only the lost sheep of Israel. But the woman persisted, and the exchange between Jesus and the woman teaches us the importance

of persistent prayer. The woman knelt before him and again asked him for his help. But Jesus answered her that he came to bless the children of Israel, not dogs like her. Jews then were racists. Devout Jewish men opened their morning prayers by saying, “Blessed are you, Lord, our God, ruler of the universe, who has who has created me a human and not beast, a man and not a woman, an Israelite and not a gentile.” They called non-Jews “dogs”—unclean, wild dogs in particular. Even Jesus referred to the Canaanite woman as a dog. However, Jesus uses a word that refers to a pet dog, not wild, dirty stray dogs. It’s a term of endearment, similar to how we treat our pet dogs and cats today with loving care, almost like human beings.

Why would Jesus use this racial slur? No, he was not a racist. We see in his exchange with the woman that his purpose was to test her newfound faith. He ignored her at first, but she did not go away. His disciples had no compassion on her, but she did not get bitter. Jesus said he did not come to save Gentiles like her and even called her a dog, but she did not get angry. Instead, she answered, *“Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table”* (15:27). She humbly acknowledged that she was a dog! Here we see a hint that this pagan woman knew of God’s promise to Abraham that not only Jews, but all the nations of the earth will be blessed because of Abraham’s true faith (Gen 12:3). And her faith is so great that she believed that even if she gets only crumbs in heaven, it is still infinitely better than filet mignon in hell.

It was then that Jesus acknowledged her persistent and humble faith. Her faith increased from believing what she has heard from others, to believing the words of her Lord and Savior himself in a personal encounter. Here, we again see the three aspects of true faith. She has knowledge of who Jesus is: Lord and Messiah. But more than knowledge, she acknowledges and agrees that Jesus was the true Lord and Messiah. And not only does she have knowledge and agrees with the facts. She also has complete trust in Jesus as Lord, Messiah and Savior. He is the only one who can save her daughter from the demon. He is the only one who can save her from her pagan gods who cannot see, hear or speak, and therefore, cannot save.

But we must also remember that this woman’s faith did not come from her own heart. All unbelievers are dead in sin, so their minds and hearts are dead (Eph 2:1; 5; 4:18). No amount of persuading, pleading and repeating the gospel of Christ’s life, death and resurrection to save them from their sins will work. Not until the Holy Spirit himself gives them new hearts and new spirits that they will awaken from their dead condition (Ezk 36:26-27). Lydia, the seller of purple cloths, was saved only when *“the Lord opened her heart to pay attention to what was said by Paul”* (Acts 16:14). Faith, therefore, is a gift of God, not something that we create by our own will (Eph 2:8-9).

We also see from this conversation that God often uses our afflictions and sufferings to draw us to him. For unbelievers and outsiders like the Canaanite woman, he drew her through her daughter’s affliction. For believers like you, he wants to draw you closer to him when your lives seem to be going downhill, when your cherished relationships sour, or when it is difficult to make ends meet, or when you are in great physical pain, or even when sufferings make you bitter.

One last thing we should remember in this text is that Jesus and the Christian faith are not racist. In fact, Christianity is the most inclusive of all religions. When Jesus said that his mission was to seek Jews who were lost in sin, he was referring only to the first part of his ministry. It was not the time yet to expand his ministry outside of Israel. God has an appointed time for that part of his mission, and that time came after he was crucified on the cross and was raised from the grave. At that time, his mission to save his people from their sins was completed. And who are his people? Before he ascended into heaven, he commanded the Twelve to preach the gospel to all nations, promising to be with them to the ends of the earth, from Jerusalem and Judea, into Samaria, and to the ends of the earth (Acts 1:8). And when he returns, he will gather all true Christians in a great heavenly feast, *“a great multitude that no one could number, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages”* (Rev 7:9). Aliens and outsiders, those who do not belong to Israel, will be there.

### **An Alien Rewarded for Her Great Faith**

Jesus reserved his praise of “great faith” for non-Jews. He praised the Roman centurion’s faith, *“with no one in Israel have I found such faith”* (Matt 8:10). He never praised his disciples that they have great faith. In fact, he rebuked them four times in the Gospel of Matthew, *“O you of little faith!”* (8:26; 14:21; 16:8; 17:20)

Therefore, Jesus praised the persistent, great faith of the Canaanite woman, *“O woman, great is your faith! Be it done for you as you desire.”* And with just his word, the woman’s daughter was healed instantly (15:28). He does not go to the woman’s house to touch her daughter. He just said a word of healing. We see this even in the Old Testament. God created the heavens and the earth through the Word, Christ the Son of God (Gen 1:1-2; Col 1:16).

Today, we have wifi. We connect to people all over the world without a direct line. We connect to satellites circling the earth and moving through the planets without wires. We can control our lights, our thermostat and appliances through our wireless phones. Jesus healed the woman’s daughter instantly and by a wireless connection. But his wireless healing is infinitely better—he does not have to have Internet or a smart phone. He uses his Word, and by the Holy Spirit, he can send his commands anywhere, anytime and instantly without a fraction of a second delay. He is able to do this because he is infinite God.

**B**eloved friends, picture this: In heaven, you will not be alien dogs, but kings who will reign for eternity (Rev 5:10). You will be counted among God’s chosen, holy nation (1 Pet 2:9). You will not be given crumbs, but will eat rich food and choice wine in a heavenly feast.

So when you suffer and are desperate like the alien woman, take heart, because God has promised *“that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us”* (Rom 8:18), and, *“No eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the heart of man imagined, what God has prepared for those who love him”* (1 Cor 2:9). Because Christ has prepared for you a glorious place in heaven where we will dwell with God and him forever (Psa 23:6).