

Think About It ...

1. The story of the Canaanite woman is told to prepare people spiritually for what season in the Church?
 - A. Christmas
 - B. The Transfiguration
 - C. Great Lent
2. The name of the place “Canaan” means:
 - A. those who hunt
 - B. made ready for humility
 - C. beseiged
3. Who was attacking the people of Tyre and the surrounding area?
 - A. the people from Sidon
 - B. the Babylonians
 - C. Satan
4. What is the best definition of “humility”?
 - A. admitting that you have made mistakes (sins)
 - B. thinking that your sins are not as “bad” a other persons’
 - C. telling other persons that they are wrong or “bad”
5. The Orthodox Church teaches that sins:
 - A. must be punished very strongly
 - B. are a spiritual sickness that Jesus can heal
 - C. are never your own fault

Who was Blessed Theophylact?

Blessed Theophylact (also known as St. Theophylactus) of Ochrid was an Orthodox biblical scholar and theologian. He was born on the Greek island of Euboia some time between 1050 and 1060. As a young man, he was consecrated as bishop and sent to Ochrid, where he became the Metropolitan of the Orthodox Church in Bulgaria and served for twenty-five years. (Ochrid is now under the jurisdiction of the Serbian Orthodox Church.) Blessed Theophylact studied and wrote commentaries on the New Testament, including the Four Gospels, and he also wrote sermons and other types of teachings. His writings have been studied by Orthodox persons for centuries. He died in Thessalonica in 1107 or 1108. The Orthodox Churches of Serbia, Bulgaria, Greece, and Russia consider him a saint and commemorate him on December 31.

St. Michael's Orthodox Church, Jermyn, Pennsylvania

The Faith of the Canaanite Woman a lesson in preparation for Lent



“Since Paradise resembles that table, let me, through Your grace, eat of the ‘crumbs’ of its fruit which fall outside”
(St. Ephrem the Syrian, Hymns on Paradise)

The Gospel of Matthew 15:21-28

Then Jesus went out from there and departed to the region of Tyre and Sidon. And behold, a woman of Canaan came from that region and cried out to Him, saying, “Have mercy on me, O Lord, Son of David! My daughter is severely demon-possessed.” But He answered her not a word. And His disciples came and urged Him, saying, “Send her away, for she cries out after us.” But He answered and said, “I was not sent except to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.” Then she came and worshiped Him, saying, “Lord, help me!” But He answered and said, “It is not good to take the children’s bread and throw it to the little dogs.” And she said, “Yes, Lord, yet even the little dogs eat the crumbs which fall from their masters’ table.” Then Jesus answered and said to her, “O woman, great is your faith! Let it be to you as you desire.” And her daughter was healed from that very hour.

Blessed Theophylact Explains Faith and Humility

Today’s Gospel reading is not at first easy to understand, even by many adults. However, an Orthodox theologian, Blessed Theophylact, has explained it by giving background into the history and culture of the time that the events happened.

Jesus had been teaching in the region where **Israelite (Jewish) people** lived. There the Pharisees (Jewish scholars) argued with Him and would not accept His teaching. Then He went to a region where **Gentiles (non-Jewish people)** lived, which included the cities of Tyre and Sidon, which were in the region called Canaan.

The people of Canaan were called Canaanites. They were looked down on as “unclean” and compared to dogs, because the Gentiles at that time were **pagans** who sacrificed the blood of animals to idols.

“**Tyre**” means “besieged” (under attack). “**Sidon**” means “they who hunt,” and “**Canaan**” means “made ready by humility.” Theophylact explained that the Gentiles at that time were “besieged” by sins because the devil was misleading them. When Satan misleads people, it is said that he is “hunting” for souls, to take them away from knowing God. But the Canaanite woman showed that sinful persons can be “made ready by humility.”

This Gospel lesson teaches that by **humility**, we are made ready for the kingdom of God. It is a lesson **in preparation for Lent**, a time of self-examination and **repentance from sins**.

The Canaanite woman’s daughter was sick. The woman asked Christ for **mercy**. She wanted her daughter to be healed. But she asked for mercy for herself too, because she was suffering a different kind of sickness. Sickness can be not only something physical. The Orthodox Church calls our sins a **spiritual sickness**. Sin causes people to suffer, just as people suffer from physical sickness. Only Christ can heal it.

Jesus did not at first answer her. And the disciples asked Him to send her away. They did not hate her, but her crying in public was disturbing and they wanted to have compassion on her.

Christ did not answer, so that He could reveal **the importance of faith**. He said, “I was sent only to the Jews, who are lost sheep.” He said this in order to show more fully the faith of the woman, who was not a Jew.

Then she worshiped Him, saying, “Lord, help me.” But He wanted to test her understanding. So He answered that it is not right “to take the children’s bread, and to cast it to dogs.” Historically, “the children” referred to the Israelites (Jewish persons) and “dogs” was a term used to describe Gentiles, who at that time were sinful pagans.

And she answered wisely, “**Yea, Lord: yet even the dogs eat of the crumbs which fall from their masters’ table.**” The “dogs” represent sinful persons. And the “master” refers to Jesus Christ. She knew that (as a pagan) she was sinful. And she also knew who Christ is and that He has the power to heal us from physical and spiritual sickness.

Then Jesus answered and said, “O woman, great is thy faith: be it unto thee even as thou wilt.” And her daughter was immediately healed. Christ showed that because she had **faith and humility**, she obtained her request. She did not demand it. So, too, if we wish to obtain Christ’s healing, we should imitate the way of the Canaanite woman, with faith and humility.

Theophylact has explained, “The Canaanite woman is also a symbol of the Church gathered from among the Gentiles ... **worthy of the Bread**, I mean, the Body of the Lord.” If we remember from an earlier lesson, one of the symbols used to describe Jesus Christ is that He is the “Bread of Life.” Christ’s mercy is the **forgiveness of sins**. When we go to Confession, we repent. That is, we are sorry for our sins and pray for **spiritual healing**, which is the strength to not repeat them. And the “Body of the Lord” is the Eucharist that we receive in **Holy Communion**.