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Surprised by Jesus
By David Servant

An astounding fact: Although the scribes and Pharisees rigorously studied God's revelation of Himself in the Old Testament, when God appeared in human flesh and simply acted like Himself, they didn't recognize Him. In fact, they hated Him. Think of that for a moment! Here were men who could quote large portions of the Old Testament, who considered themselves extremely devoted to God, who were Israel's spiritual leaders, and who were anticipating a Messiah, but when God appeared on the earth, they wanted to kill Him. They were surprised by Jesus, to say the least.

Why were they so surprised? Simply put, He didn't act and talk like they thought God should. More specifically, He didn't keep their man-made traditions. What makes their surprise even more tragic is that Jesus didn't come to earth disguised or impersonating someone else. He came as Himself--as God. Jesus acted just as He had been acting for thousands of years as revealed in Scripture. When the scribes and Pharisees critically questioned Him about His words or deeds, He answered them from Scripture. He knew what He was talking about. He knew what He was doing. He played the part of God flawlessly, because He was God. Still they were utterly surprised by Him.

I suppose, however, that I shouldn't be too condemning of the scribes and Pharisees, because in times past, I've also been surprised by Jesus. There were certain stories about Him in the four Gospels in which He didn't always do or say what I thought He should. Sadly, instead of adjusting my understanding of Jesus to fit Scripture, I interpreted Scripture to fit my understanding of Jesus. In so doing, I rejected "Bible Jesus" in favor of "My Jesus." Let me give you one example.

You probably recall the story of Jesus' encounter with the Syrophenician woman whose daughter needed deliverance. That particular story always troubled me because Jesus did not seem to act like the loving person I knew Him to be, but rather, He seemed unkind and insulting. So I concluded that He was just play-acting, pretending to be an uncaring, bigoted Pharisee---and His act was all crafted to teach His watching disciples a lesson,

complete with a surprise ending that revealed His true feelings all along. My imaginative interpretation was certainly a stretch, and the text of the actual story certainly didn't support it. But I had to invent such an interpretation in order to keep believing in "My Jesus."

Since then I've come to realize that Jesus wasn't acting at all. Rather, He was playing the part of God perfectly, acting no differently than God had acted in the pages of the Old Testament. Let's consider the actual story verse by verse so I can explain:

Jesus went away from there, and withdrew into the district of Tyre and Sidon. And a Canaanite woman from that region came out and began to cry out, saying, "Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David; my daughter is cruelly demon-possessed." But He did not answer her a word (Matt. 15:21-23a).

First, take note that Jesus had temporarily traveled out of Israel and was in the district of Tyre and Sidon, a Gentile region. The woman who entreated Him was a descendant of the Canaanites, whom God had commanded the Israelites of Joshua's day to exterminate, and for justifiable reasons. They had a reputation for idolatry, child sacrifice, gross sexual perversion, and a hardness of heart that put them beyond redemption. With such a legacy, it is quite possible that the descendants of those who survived were not exactly paragons of virtue. Jesus' treatment of the Syrophenician woman certainly seems to verify this. No one can debate that He intentionally ignored her as she cried out to Him---which is exactly what God generally does when unrepentant sinners, Jew or Gentile, make requests of Him.

Readers who believe in "American Jesus"---Mr. Nice Guy---may object, but they should not forget that their New Testaments declare that "the eyes of the Lord are upon the righteous, and His ears attend to their prayer, but *the face of the Lord is against those who do evil*" (1 Pet. 3:12). If Jesus was truly God---as He claimed---then we should expect that "His face would be against those who do evil." We should expect that "His ears would not attend to their prayers."

Proverbs 15:8-9 expresses the same idea, perhaps even more strongly:

The sacrifice of the wicked is an abomination to the Lord, but the prayer of the upright is His delight. The Lord is far from the wicked, but He hears the prayer of the righteous.

Combining all that is said in those two verses, it would be safe to conclude that the prayers of unrighteous people are an *abomination* to God. When you think about it, it is audacious for *unrepentant* rebels against God to ask Him for help. We should be amazed that God has such patience with them that He doesn't immediately destroy them for their temerity. But God's mercy is astounding. Mercifully, He ignores the cries of the wicked--in hopes His silence will lead them to repentance.

There are other scriptures that confirm to us God's feelings about the prayers of unrepentant sinners. To rebellious Israel God said:

So when you spread out your hands in prayer, I will hide My eyes from you; yes, even though you multiply prayers, I will not listen. Your hands are covered with blood (Is. 1:11).

Has God changed since the old covenant? To the church, John writes,

Whatever we ask we receive from Him, because we keep His commandments and do the things that are pleasing in His sight (1 John 3:22).

Answers to prayer, according to John, have something to do with holiness. All of this is to say that we should not be surprised that Jesus ignored the cries of those who needed to repent. And the fact that He intentionally ignored the cries of the Syrophenician woman should certainly make us wonder if His disregard was based, not on His uncaring, but on her unworthiness.

In any case, she apparently continued shouting at Jesus as she followed Him and His disciples, and He continued to ignore her. Jesus' disciples became annoyed with her:

And His disciples came and implored Him, saying, "Send her away, because she keeps shouting at us." But He answered and said, "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel" (Matt. 15:23b-24).

Jesus didn't rebuke His disciples for their selfish request to send her away, *but neither did He grant their request*---an act of mercy on her behalf. If she overheard their exchange, it may have given her some hope.

I also wonder if she heard Jesus' statement that He was sent only to the lost sheep of Israel. It sounds like a declaration of favoritism, and it is. Like it or not, it shouldn't surprise us. It was a statement of fact. God had been showing favoritism to Israel for hundreds of years. Jesus was born in Israel. He was a Jew. He spent most of His time in Israel. That is where He was sent by His Father. It was to Israel that He initially sent His disciples (Matt. 10:5). We know, of course, that Jesus would eventually die for the sins of the whole world and ultimately in God's plan, the church would include forgiven Gentiles. But Jesus was sent, first of all, to the lost sheep of Israel. At least temporarily, Gentiles were a lesser priority.

But don't think that Jesus' statement was one of bigoted ethnic exclusivity. God-fearing Gentiles could become proselytes to Judaism (see Matt. 23:15; Acts 2:10; 6:5, 13:43, 17:4, 17). This Syrophenician woman certainly lived in close enough proximity to practicing Jews that she likely had some knowledge of their religion, and if she had had some spiritual hunger, she could have investigated more fully. She knew enough about Judaism to call Jesus "Son of David." She could have joined herself to Israel and submitted to their God. But she hadn't.

Moreover, it was not as if Jesus never did anything for non-Jewish people during His earthly ministry. He healed a Roman centurion's servant (see Matt. 8:13). That centurion, incidentally, was God-fearing (see Luke 7:4-5). Jesus also revealed Himself to a

Samaritan woman (John 4:7-26). It was obviously not His ironclad policy to ignore every Gentile! During His earthly ministry He confirmed what Peter later realized: "I most certainly understand now that God is not one to show partiality, but in every nation the man who fears Him and does what is right is welcome to Him" (Acts. 10:34-35).

Let's return to our story. If the Syrophoenician woman did hear Jesus' declaration that He was sent only to the lost sheep of Israel, she would have been reminded of her spiritual state and need for repentance in three ways. First, it would remind her that she was not "of Israel," not a God-fearing Gentile or proselyte to Judaism, and that by her own choice had resisted the truth that was so available to her.

Second, note that Jesus did not say, "I was sent only to the people of the house of Israel." Rather, He said, "I was sent only to the *lost sheep* of the house of Israel." It goes without saying that such lost sheep were *spiritually* lost, and Jesus was inviting them back into the fold by calling them to repentance (see Luke 5:32). His words would have thus reminded her of the fact that, if Jews needed to repent to have a relationship with God, how much more rebel Gentiles like her! In fact in her mind, she may have heard His words something like this: "I was only sent to the lost of Israel, and not to the lost among the Gentiles, of whom this woman is a prime example!"

There is a third way, perhaps more subtle, in which Jesus' statement would have reminded the Syrophoenician of her spiritual state and need of repentance. In her mind, the people of Israel were the folks who lived a little south of her whose ancestors dispossessed and massacred her ancestors. As I've already mentioned, that was by God's decree, and for good reason. God had mercifully waited for the Canaanites to repent for hundred years (see Gen. 15:16). They became wicked beyond redemption, and Israel's conquest of Canaan was God's means of His judgment upon them. If the Syrophoenician woman knew the history, she certainly understood God's view of sin and of the need for sinners to repent. I wonder if she knew the *rest* of Israel's history, as they backslid and were judged by God by being dispossessed by foreign invaders? If she did, then she certainly knew that God's favor really wasn't directed solely at Israel, but at the righteous. In any case, she was determined to receive the same mercy that the Israelites were receiving, and so she came right up to Jesus. Now she was no longer shouting from a distance, but bowing at His feet:

[But she came and began to bow down before Him, saying, "Lord, help me!" And He answered and said, "It is not good to take the children's bread and throw it to the dogs" \(Matt. 15:25-26\).](#)

At this point in the story, readers start scratching their heads, theologians dust off old commentaries, and atheists mock. Jesus compared the Syrophoenician woman to a dog! This is certainly not Mr. Nice Guy American Jesus. So we've again got a problem, just like the Pharisees had when Jesus healed people on the Sabbath. God isn't fitting into the mold we've made for Him.

But we really shouldn't be so surprised. This was the same person who called some people, to their faces, serpents and vipers, and referred to others as wolves, foxes, and

swine (Matt. 7:6, 12; 23:33; Luke 13:32). This was the same person who, in the Old Testament, called people cows (Amos 4:1), dogs (Is. 56:11), lusty horses (Jer. 5:8), and monsters (Ezek. 32:2) to name a few. Again, Jesus acted just like God, forthright and not always so polite. And in a nutshell, His statement once again reminded the Syrophenician of her unworthiness to have her request granted.

Some commentators tell us that the word that Jesus used for "dog" is the Greek word for "pet dog" rather than "wild dog." Perhaps that helps soften it a little bit. But if someone called me a dog, meaning either a wild dog or a pet dog, I would be offended---unless of course it was *God* who said it. Then I would say to myself, "David, you are a dog in God's eyes. If you want to get your prayers answered, you had better do something to improve what He thinks of you. You probably ought to repent." Isn't that what you would think? Now consider the Syrophenician woman's response:

[She said, "Yes, Lord; but even the dogs feed on the crumbs which fall from their masters' table" \(Matt. 15:27\).](#)

She didn't object to or argue against His appraisal. She agreed with it. *"You are right; I am a dog."* That was a humble confession of her true moral state, at least up until that moment. But she didn't stop there. She described herself as a dog requesting crumbs from the table of her *master*. That was also a confession. Bowing before Jesus, admitting she was a dog, she asked her *Master* for crumbs. It seems to me that she was finally at the place where Jesus wanted her, which would explain why He didn't grant her request when she first asked, but why He did then. She had changed. Jesus was no longer just a miracle-working Jew. He had become her Master.

[Then Jesus said to her, "O woman, your faith is great; it shall be done for you as you wish." And her daughter was healed at once \(Matt. 15:28\).](#)

After first experiencing divine unresponsiveness and disapproval, she procured, by her faith, Jesus' full attention and commendation. She was no longer a dog to be ignored, but a woman of great faith whose daughter instantly received a miracle from heaven. She did just what Jesus had been hoping she would do, and what He is hoping that every sinner will do---she repented. She made Him Lord.

Coming Surprises

Let me conclude by returning to my original topic. There are many today, like the scribes and Pharisees of old, who are actually rejecting the God they claim to love. They've replaced the God who has revealed Himself in Scripture with someone else who is more to their liking. When some folks talk about "my Jesus," it's literally true. They've replaced "Bible Jesus" with their own version of Jesus---a person whom I often refer to as American Jesus. They've substituted biblical truth about Jesus with man-made ideas, which reveals that their hearts are actually far from God:

[This people honors Me with their lips, but their heart is far from Me. But in vain do they worship Me, teaching as doctrines the precepts of men" \(Matt. 15:8-9\).](#)

Jesus warned that there would be many people who would make the tragic error of replacing Bible Jesus, who is holy, with American Jesus, who is not. They will one day be very surprised by the real Jesus:

Not everyone who says to Me, "Lord, Lord," will enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of My Father who is in heaven will enter. Many will say to Me on that day, "Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in Your name, and in Your name cast out demons, and in Your name perform many miracles?" And then I will declare to them, "I never knew you; depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness" (Matt. 7:22-23).

American Jesus would never say such a thing, proven by the plain fact that He doesn't say any such thing from most American pulpits. Very few preachers would dare give a sermon on Jesus' words in Matthew 7:22-23. In fact, American Jesus frequently preaches the exact opposite of what Bible Jesus preached in Matthew 7:22-23. American Jesus is more likely to tell us that anyone who says obedience to the Father is required to enter heaven is preaching a false gospel of salvation by works.

Moreover, in contrast to what we just read from the lips of Bible Jesus, American Jesus is often much more focused on prophesy, demons, and miracles than he is on holiness (as he was, for example, in Lakeland, Florida a few months ago).

American Jesus rarely if ever calls anyone to repentance, as it is unnecessary for salvation, whereas Bible Jesus called everyone to turn from their sins because doing so is a necessity for salvation.

American Jesus never gets angry because he is "love," while Bible Jesus sometimes makes a scourge of cords, and then uses it to scatter those who love money more than God, and who use God to make money (see John 2:15). Bible Jesus violently overturns their tables, spilling their profits on the ground so they cannot be recovered.

American Jesus doesn't care much about the poor. Yet Bible Jesus indicated that our sacrifices for the poor among His family will mark us for salvation or damnation in His foretelling of the judgment of the sheep and the goats (see Matt. 25:31-46). The goats will be quite surprised that it won't be American Jesus sitting on the throne of judgment. They'll be shocked, as Bible Jesus foretold, when He condemns them to hell, something American Jesus would never do to anyone who claims to be a Christian.

American Jesus is nothing like the wrathful God of the Old Testament. He wouldn't hurt a flea. He who has seen American Jesus has definitely *not* seen the Father. Bible Jesus, however, is one with His Father (see John 10:30). He is coming back to wage a righteous war:

And I saw heaven opened, and behold, a white horse, and He who sat on it is called Faithful and True, and in righteousness He judges and wages war....From His mouth comes a sharp sword, so that with it He may strike down the nations, and He will rule them with a rod of iron; and He treads the wine press of the fierce wrath of God, the

Almighty (Rev. 19:11, 15).

The truth is, those who love American Jesus hate Bible Jesus, because they are opposites of one another in so many significant ways. Their hatred for Him is proven by their utter disdain for any preacher who actually preaches about Bible Jesus. One can't help but wonder, *If Jesus were to return to the earth today as He did 2,000 years ago, might He be crucified by professing Christians?*

For whoever is ashamed of Me and My words, the Son of Man will be ashamed of him when He comes in His glory, and the glory of the Father and of the holy angels (Luke 9:26).