

**The Struggle of Prayer**  
**Reflections on the Canaanite Woman (Mt 15:21–28)**  
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Prayer is a struggle. I do not mean that it is a struggle to get ourselves to pray, though that is also true. We struggle to rise out of bed for morning prayers, to stay up at night to thank God for the blessings of the day, to detach ourselves from the easy chair, the TV or the internet, to combat our spiritual lethargy, to bring our mind back from distraction to the prayers we're uttering. All these are struggles, and common ones, but they are not the struggle *of praying*. They are the struggle of getting ourselves to pray.

In today's Gospel reading, the Canaanite woman does not have any trouble getting herself to pray. This is not her struggle. She *is* praying, crying out to Jesus, loudly and relentlessly: "Have mercy on me, O Lord, Son of David; my daughter is severely oppressed by a demon" (Mt 15:22). The disciples are so annoyed with her that they ask Jesus to heal her.<sup>1</sup> This woman is engaged in a struggle of quite a different kind, *the struggle of praying*.

In the case of struggling to get ourselves to pray, we are struggling *with ourselves*. We are fighting our passions: our laziness, our gluttony, our anger, our vainglory. The Canaanite woman is engaged in a struggle, not with herself, but with Jesus. He is ignoring her, and she is not letting him get away with it. Maybe we think this strange, but it is ubiquitous in the Psalms.

O LORD, ... Give ear to my voice when I call to you! (Ps 140:1 / 141:1)

Hear the voice of my pleas for mercy, when I cry to you. (Ps 27:2 / 28:2)

I say to God, my rock: "Why have you forgotten me? (Ps 41:10 / 42:9)

My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Why are you so far from saving me, from the words of my groaning? O my God, I cry by day, but you do not answer, and by night, but I find no rest. (Ps 21:2–3 / 22:1–2)

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<sup>1</sup> Most English versions translate the disciples' request as, "*Send her away*, for she is crying out after us" (Mt 15:23). But Ἀπόλυσον αὐτήν is better understood to mean "release/liberate her," meaning to heal her. The disciples were accustomed to seeing Jesus heal, and this is what they wanted Him to do. Whether out of compassion for the woman or from being annoyed is not explicit in the text. This reading makes much more sense of Jesus' ensuing response *to the disciples' request*, "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel" (Mt 15:24), meaning that He is rejecting *their* request to heal the woman. His reply to the disciples wouldn't make any sense if they had said, "Send her away." On this interpretation, see, St. Nikolai (Velimirovic), *Homilies*, vol 2, p. 175.

The psalmist is frequently feeling that God is not listening, not responding; that he is being ignored, just as the Canaanite woman was being ignored. The struggle in which she and the psalmist are involved is not a struggle with themselves, but a struggle with God: Why don't you answer me, God? Don't you love me? Don't you care for me?

Elder Aimilianos boldly describes the life of prayer:

[W]e initially experience prayer, when we begin to pray, as a wrestling match, a struggle. ... I begin a battle which will be painful, which will be endless ... *a battle with God Himself*. ... Let us suppose ... that we have begun to pray, and I feel that I'm engaged in this fearful wrestling-match with God, that I have entered the fray, and that I have gloved up and begun to strike God. He defends Himself, dodges, and resists. I do too, and the question now is whether I'll be the winner or Him. The only options are for me to be knocked down, covered in blood, or to beat Him, and hear Him say to me: "Now you've won." In other words, that He'll surrender Himself to me, as He did to all the saints, who did whatever they wanted with God. If I stop, I'll be a broken man, forever a failure. I can't say that I'm working, living, or praying, unless I win this fight.<sup>2</sup>

Don't these words sound preposterous, even scandalous—that prayer is a battle *with God*, and, even more so, that we have *to win this battle with God* lest we be forever a failure? We must defeat Him? Is this what prayer is, defeating God?

Elder Aimilianos has in mind patriarch Jacob's wrestling with God in Genesis 32 as a template for prayer (emphasis added throughout the quotes below):

Jacob arose and took his two wives, his two female servants, and his eleven children, and crossed the ford of the Jabbok. He took them and sent them across the stream, and everything else that he had. *And Jacob was left alone.* (vv. 22–24)

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<sup>2</sup> "On Prayer," in Elder Aimilianos, *The Church at Prayer* (Sebastian Press, 2012); emphasis added. Another recent Spiritual Father speaks similarly:

Once, when [Fr. Arsenie] was asked in an interview, "Why did you become a monk?" he gave a surprising reply: "So that I could wrestle with God and defeat Him!" ... This statement is extremely bold.... The Old Testament speaks about Jacob, who wrestled with God and vanquished Him (cf. Gen. 32:24–30).... When I stated that I am wrestling with God, I did not use a figure of speech.... Those of us who came to the monastery have fulfilled the words of Holy Scripture.... You've left everything, you've renounced the world, but now you have to deny yourself also! In the world, a man asserts his will in order to solve the problems that arise.... In the monastery, we have to deny our free will, so Whom are we fighting? We're wrestling with the Creator of free will! It's easy in theory, but in practice? ... (*Eternity in the Moment: The Life and Wisdom of Elder Arsenie Papacioc* (St. Herman Press, 2018).

Critical to our prayer life, to our struggle with God, is to be *alone* with him. We must be detached, as the ascetic fathers so often remind us, from every worldly concern in order to engage in this struggle of prayer. We must enter the prayer closet and close the door to all distracting influences in order to be in a position to experience the penetrating gaze of our heavenly Father (Mt 6:5–7).

And a man wrestled with him *until the breaking of the day*. (v. 24)

The “man” with whom Jacob wrestled, as we will see below, is God himself, a pre-incarnate manifestation of Christ. Our wrestling match with God typically occurs at night, in keeping vigil or watch, as the Scriptures call it. Jesus Himself struggled in prayer at night: “And being in agony (ἀγωνία—*agonia*), he prayed more earnestly (ἐκτενέστερον—*ektenesteron*). Then his sweat became like great drops of blood falling down to the ground” (Lk 22:44). *Agonia* is a contest, a struggle for victory, and is often used for rigorous gymnastic exercise. *Ektenes* (Ἐκτενής) expresses notions like straining, extending; earnestness, zealousness. Praying at night intensifies our aloneness, our separation from the things of this world, our fragility and vulnerability, our engagement with the hostility within us. (See also, Mt 14:23–35; Mk 1:35; Lk 6:12; Heb 5:7; cf. St Paul, Acts 16:25.) Night, of course, is not the only context in which the struggle of prayer occurs—the Canaanite woman is struggling with Christ in the daytime, but even in the light of day her life is immersed in such extreme darkness that she is completely blind to the world around her—except to Christ with whom she is wrestling.

When the man saw that he did not prevail against Jacob, he touched his hip socket, and *Jacob’s hip was put out of joint* as he wrestled with him. (v. 25)

Jacob was wounded in this fight, but not defeated. So, too, the Canaanite woman is wounded, but with words: “It is not good to take the children’s bread and throw it to the little dogs” (Mt 15:26). “Dogs” was the derogatory term Jews used for gentiles. The Canaanite woman was locked in a battle with God Himself every bit as much as Jacob had been, and she was receiving the blows of being ignored and belittled by the God of all, by her Creator. She is wounded, but not deterred. It is essential that we become wounded by God if we are ever to defeat Him, for *it is precisely by those wounds that we are freed from the constraints that hinder our prayer*.

Then he said, “Let me go, for the day has broken.” But Jacob said, “I will not let you go unless you bless me.” (v. 26)

Jacob prevailed in this wrestling match, but he had not yet received what he wanted: a blessing. After wrestling the entire night, he would not rest until he received what he wanted. Victory is not obtained until we have what we want.

And he said to him, “What is your name?” And he said, “Jacob.” Then he said, “Your name shall no longer be called Jacob, but *Israel, for you have striven with God and with men, and have prevailed.*” Then Jacob asked him, “Please tell me your name.” But he said, “Why is it that you ask my name?” (vv. 27–29)

Here we have a revelatory interlude. Jacob has not yet received what he wants, but he is given a name that discloses his combatant: God. “Israel” means “to prevail with God.” With what authority does this “man” grant Jacob a new name? What does it mean that he has striven *with God* and prevailed? Jacob wants to know, but he is not given an answer to these questions because prayer is a mystery. We battle with the One who loves us beyond measure and thus cannot be contained in any of our conceptual categories. He is simply the One who loves us so much that he is willing to be defeated by us.

And there he blessed him. (v. 29)

Finally, Jacob receives what he wanted, a blessing. As Elder Aimilianos explained, Jacob heard God say, “Now you’ve won.” So, too, with the Canaanite woman; how does the contest end? “Let it be to you *as you desire.*” And her daughter was healed from that very hour (Mt 15:28; emphasis added). Jesus did not say, “your daughter is healed,” but rather, “Now you have won; you have defeated me; you can have what you want—what you have been fighting for.” The blessings of God, his replies to our requests, do not come until we have prevailed in contentious prayer. Only then do we hear the words, “Now you’ve won.”

So Jacob called the name of the place Peniel, saying, “For *I have seen God face to face, and my soul was saved.*” The sun rose upon him as he passed Penuel, *limping because of his hip.* (Gen 32:30–31)

Jacob does not have a name for his combatant, but he knows that he has seen God face to face, that this struggle was for the deliverance of his own soul, and that he will forever be reminded of this transformative encounter by the wounds from the battle—his limp.

So, too, with the Canaanite woman. Jesus touched the hip of her soul so as to injure her with his distance and insults, to sear in her the wounds of his presence, of his love, of their face to face encounter. And so it *always* is when struggling with God in prayer; it is always for the purification and salvation of our own soul. Whatever we want, what we relentlessly beseech God for, will be accompanied by the transformation of our own soul for, in this wrestling match, we will have experienced God face to face, and “we shall be like Him, *for we shall see Him as He is*” (1 Jn 3:2; emphasis added).

How did the Canaanite woman prevail? How did she conquer Christ and obtain what she longed for—the healing of her daughter? What was her response to Christ’s insult? “How dare you call me a dog. I am a human being. I have the right to be treated with respect. How dare you speak that way to me.” No, not at all; this is *our* response, not hers; it makes sense to us; but her response scandalizes us: “Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their master’s table” (Mt 15:27). What profound humility! What great faith! Her love for her daughter was so all-consuming that nothing else mattered; she would endure anything to have her daughter healed. *Nothing* was going to defeat her—not even God himself. She willingly emptied herself of every human dignity out of love for her daughter. Wounded by love, by love for her daughter, and all the more so by Christ’s paradoxical love for her (Song of Solomon 2:5; 5:8).<sup>3</sup>

In the course of this battle we learn to go deeper into our own soul, to set aside every extraneous care, to focus solely on what matters. This is how prayer is when we cry out to God from the depths of our hearts. “Deep calls out to the deep” (Ps 41:8 / 42:7). And again, “Out of the depths I cried to you, Lord; O Lord, hear my voice! Let your ears be attentive to the voice of my pleas for mercy!” (Ps 129:1-2 / 130:1-2). The depth within us calls upon the depths of God Himself. There is no shallowness in God, and he looks to take us into the depths of our own hearts for communion—a face to face encounter that cannot occur in shallow waters. Elder Aimilianos describes it beautifully:

What’s important is that we bring forth prayer from out of the depths. The one who strives to pray will understand these things and distinguish between them: he will know when he speaks with his mouth, when with the heart—or with the spirit, because, in the end, it’s not the heart which should speak, but the spirit in the heart. Little by little he becomes aware of these things, he distinguishes between them, he learns them. Just as I’m able to recognize you because I’ve seen you so often, the same thing happens here. The lips might move, or they may not move at all. What matters is that a cry should come forth from the depths which, like a loud roar, like an earthquake, will shake the heavens and finally force God to answer, and say to us, “Why do you cry to me?” (Ex 14.15). (“On Prayer” in Elder Aimilianos, *The Church at Prayer*, Sebastian Press, 2012; emphasis added.)

The innermost abyss of our hearts calls out to the very depths of God. The depths are *downward, to a place of lowliness, a place of humility. We defeat God by becoming humble—or rather, by being humbled.* 1 Pt 5:6 is typically translated, “*Humble yourselves* under the mighty hand of

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<sup>3</sup> Notice also that the Canaanite woman is effectively saying to Christ, “even dogs are treated better than you’re treating me.” In this way, she continues the battle with Christ, with the weapon of humility in her uncompromising insistence that he grant her request.

God ...,” but it would be more accurately translated, “*Let yourselves be humbled* under the mighty hand of God.” Becoming humble is not something we do to ourselves—that would be to obtain it by pride. It is, rather, cultivated in us as we allow ourselves to be humbled by God, wounded by him out of his great love for us, in the midst of the struggle.

In this state of humility, we come to the place where he is, where he has been waiting for us; we are finally with him:

*Come to me*, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and *humble in heart*, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light. (Mt 11:28–30; emphasis added.)

“I am humble of heart.” He will not be defeated by our pride. “God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble” (1Pt 5:5; Jam 4:6). He will not come to where we are in our sense of self-importance, our arrogance, our self-assured piety, our clever comments, our insightful guidance; He will, however, patiently wait for us—in silence and in insults and in trials—until we *descend* into the abyss of our own hearts; until we lay aside everything that makes us anything in the eyes of this world, in our own eyes; until we have totally emptied ourselves and become nothing but the slave of all—humbled under His mighty hand, for this place of humility is *where* He is; indeed, it is *who* He is (Phil 2:5ff). And when we are where he is, there we will defeat him; then, and only then, he will grant us whatever we desire just as he said to the Canaanite woman: “O woman, great is your faith! Be it done for you *as you desire*.”<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Compare: “I, the unworthy one, bring a most humble song, and cry to You as did the woman of Cana, “Jesus, have mercy on me.” I have no daughter, but my flesh, which is cruelly possessed by sin and burning with rage; so heal me, who cry to You: Alleluia!” (Kontak 11 from the Akathist to the Lord Jesus Christ)