

## **Dogs**

Genesis 45:1-15

Matthew 15:21-28

Linda and I want to thank the church for the sympathy we have received following the death of my mother. She loved this church: you received her graciously on her visits and even threw a party for her and Linda's mom. I can honestly say that the consensus in the family is that we are all relieved she has gone. Not for our sake, but for hers. She faced yet another long, arduous rehabilitation from an injury, and she was losing her ability to come up with words and names. Most importantly, she was spiritually prepared. She longed to see dad again. She believed. We are grateful for her life, for the terrific example of perseverance she gave us. Praise God!

My mom's family got a dog when she was a teenager. Named Toby, he picked mom as his favorite human. He lived long enough for me to play with him during my boyhood. A long-haired, medium-sized fellow, like most mutts Toby had a gentle demeanor. When we would come through the door on our twice- or thrice-a-year visits to my grandparents, Toby would tilt his head at mom for a second and then leap at her. She would get down on a knee and he would lick her face until she made him stop. My parents came from the generation that tried to keep a stoic front but when my uncle called to tell her Toby had died my mom cried and cried.

Near the other end of her life mom would come to visit Linda and me at our lake house. More or less confined to a wheelchair, she liked to “walk” her chair like the Flintstones drove their cars, using her feet to propel herself from window to window, looking at the water and the woodpeckers and the cedar trees. At that time we had two cats and two dogs. They got along—more or less—and mom loved them all, but she had a favorite: Keela, the 65 lb. pit bull who raced from end to end of the place to bark at everything that dared pass. And when I say “bark” I do not mean “yipped” or “yapped”. Keela had a full-throated voice that scared delivery drivers and neighbors. But mom and Keela loved each other. No matter where mom paddled her chair, Keela stayed beside her. Mom would scratch her ears and talk to her. Keela would look at mom with such love it made your heart melt. When a bobcat wandered into our yard during one of mom's visits, Keela barked her head off and kept her body between mom and it—though of course it remained safely outside.

According to the Encyclopedia Britannica humans domesticated dogs between 12,000 and 32,000 years ago. This does not narrow it down a whole lot but even the shorter time span puts our relationship with our canine friends well before the dawn of history. The longer time span puts it close to the emergence of our species. Archaeologists have found canine bones mixed with human bones in graves dated at least 10,000 years old in modern China, Bolivia, Tanzania and France. Dogs have walked beside us for a very long time, indeed. Jesus lived about one-fifth of that time ago, approximately 2,000 years. But in the Palestine of his day the Jews had a different attitude about dogs. In fact, the Semitic peoples, the Jews and Arabs, to this

day often have that same attitude. They tend to see dogs as unclean scavengers, disease-carrying threats to their children, competitors for food resources.

Of course, the Jews of Jesus' day had a similar attitude toward the non-Jewish people who lived nearby. So when a Canaanite woman from modern Lebanon approached Jesus with the plea that he cast out the demon plaguing her daughter, his Jewish disciples would have wrinkled their noses in disgust. How dare she, a pagan, and maybe worse, a *she*—a *woman*—speak to the Master? They implore Jesus to dismiss her. At first, he tells her, "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel." This division of Jew and Gentile does not necessarily condemn Gentiles. He does not share the Jewish attitude toward non-Jews, he simply has the calling of focusing his resources, his time and energy, on the Jews. But she will not go away. "Lord, help me," she cries. He tries a second time, saying, "It is not fair to take the children's bread and throw it to the dogs." Now the implication grows harsher. By essentially calling her a dog he introduces the Semitic disdain for both dogs and Gentiles. She has no standing, no right to call upon him. She is a dirty foreigner.

Still this woman will not go away. She is desperate, as any mother would be. She says, "Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their master's table." Translation: "Yes, Lord, I admit I am no better than a Gentile dog. Yet I will accept even the least bit of your attention. I believe you have the power to heal my daughter. Will you not do it?" Jesus apparently does so. Note what exact thing about her moves him to so. "O Woman" he says, "great is your faith!" In Mark's version of

this story Jesus adds, “Seldom have I found such faith in Israel!” Approached by a foreign woman on foreign soil Jesus turns her plea into a lesson. He has not, in fact, come just for the lost sheep of the house of Israel, he has come for all who believe in him as the Son of God.

Commentators rarely agree on the interpretation of as complicated an event as this. Jesus leaves the Promised Land. His Jewish disciples follow him. A Gentile begs him to heal her daughter. At first he hesitates—on racial/ethnic grounds. She begs him again. Because she believes in him like few of his own people have done, he finally agrees to perform the miracle she desires. Later, the Apostle Paul will write that in Christ there is no male and female, no Jew and Gentile, but all who call upon his name have the same saving relationship with God. But his followers probably all believe that he has come as the Jewish Messiah, for the house of Israel alone. If he does not agree, if he has come for all who call upon his name, why does he put this poor woman through such an ordeal? Commentators do agree on this interpretation. They all write some version of, Jesus wanted to teach his followers a critical lesson: in him God has opened the gates to salvation to all the nations.

Joseph of Genesis lived about 1,800 years before Jesus, or about another fifth of the time since humans domesticated dogs on the short end of that time estimate. Joseph's brothers had sold him into slavery to a caravan en route to Egypt. But he rose from slavery there because he could accurately interpret prophetic dreams. The things he said they predicted tended to happen. Word reached even the pharaoh, who

had had troubling dreams. Joseph correctly discerned these dreams warned of a seven year famine and advised the pharaoh to store enough food to help the people survive. He did, and they did, and Joseph's reward was freedom and status and riches. Now that same famine has forced his father to send his brothers from the Promised Land to try to buy grain in Egypt. In our passage Joseph reveals himself to be their brother. They have not recognized him.

When caught doing something wrong, most dogs put their tails between their legs, drop their heads, and look at their humans only reluctantly with deeply guilty eyes. Not our surviving dog—who is in most respects one of the finest dogs I have ever known—but most dogs. How do you suppose Joseph's brothers feel after his big reveal? Guilty, for certain. They know what they have done to Joseph. Reuben, the eldest, told them it was wrong and secretly meant to try to save him. Even worse, they profited from their treachery by selling him for twenty pieces of silver: two apiece for each brother alive at the time, a hefty sum. But they must also feel afraid, even afraid for their lives. According to Genesis Joseph has risen to become the second-most powerful man in Egypt. Should he order their executions they *will* happen.

But Joseph quickly makes it plain he has nothing but love for them. As the years have passed he has seen God's hand in the whole saga. Did you notice the reason he gives his brother for why they sold him into slavery? He says to them, “God sent me before you to preserve for you a remnant on the earth, and to keep alive for you many survivors.” Joseph sees this story as just another episode in God's long-

term project of populating the Promised Land with the children of Abraham, Joseph's great-grandfather. Had they *not* sold him into slavery in Egypt, nobody would have seen the famine coming. Then the Egyptians would not have prepared for the famine. Then the starving Hebrews could not have bought the grain they so desperately needed. Then the children of Abraham may very well have disappeared.

Jesus said he came for the lost sheep of Israel, for the descendants of Abraham and Joseph. But his actions indicated he came for all who call upon his name. When we call upon his name we still receive healing and spiritual food. Let us be honest: we love our dogs because they love us. Unconditionally. Our current dog takes four pills each morning for arthritis and joint inflammation. But every time I come home she meets me at the door, tail wagging, banging her head against my thighs. *Every time*. Usually when I scratch her belly she emits what we call a Happy Grunt. She even tolerates the cat, who ambushes and antagonizes her, mostly I suspect because she knows we love the cat. I am reasonably sure she does not.

If animals can show such fidelity and obedience, can we not do the same? All parents eventually hear these words coming out of their mouths after their children ask, “**WHY???**” for the thousandth time: “Because I *said* so.” With a few exceptions God's Word comes to us loud and clear. Any infidelity or disobedience we commit comes through willfulness, not confusion. Please join me in resolving to do your best to love and to obey God unconditionally. Good things happen when we do. Blessings, in this world of life and death.