

2. FROM FIGS TO MOUNTAINS!?

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“When the disciples saw it, they were amazed, saying, “How did the fig tree wither at once?” Jesus answered them, “Truly I tell you, if you have faith and do not doubt, not only will you do what has been done to the fig tree, but even if you say to this mountain, ‘Be lifted up and thrown into the sea,’ it will be done. Whatever you ask for in prayer with faith, you will receive” (Matthew 21: 20-22).

Before I posted the last article *Figs For Breakfast, Anyone?* I did something I rarely ever do. I wondered what the pastors and preachers have to say about this dramatised parable of the cursing of the barren fig tree? So I **Googled** away.

I listened to the first sermon for barely 10 minutes. I turned it off in dismay. The preacher introduced his message by saying that, **“Jesus walked up to that leafy fig tree knowing before-hand that there were no figs on it. After all”,** we were informed, **“as the great Creator of the universe, Jesus himself had made that tree, so already knew it was barren.”**

To be perfectly honest, I find this reading into the text more than disappointing --- it’s disgusting because it’s a denial of the real human Messiah. On this model, all we have is a Jesus who is pretending, putting on a show to make it look like he was behaving as a genuine human being. (I had no more stomach for any more sermons!)

What is this but God with a human suit on, as it were, thus reducing Jesus’ life to a charade! As ‘God in the flesh’ he put on convincing outward appearances! This doctrine makes Jesus into a hypocrite, a play-actor with a mask on.

What is this but the old **Gnostic** heresy condemned by the apostle John (who was by Jesus’ side as he was looking for some figs)? John was later to identify this deception this way;

Every spirit [i.e. prophet, preacher, pastor or every way of thinking] which confesses Jesus Christ has come in flesh is from God, while every spirit [prophet, preacher, pastor, or way of thinking] which does not accept that Jesus, is not from God. Indeed, it is the spirit of the Antichrist which you heard was coming, and which is already at work in the world (1 John 4: 2-3). (¹)

That gnostic preacher --- whose sermon I turned off --- reduced the man Jesus to the realm of abstract humanity. But contrary to his imagined metaphysical abstractions, we are not

¹ **“Has come in flesh”** does not mean arrived from a previous existence up in heaven. John is exposing the heresy of **Docetism** which drew a distinction between Jesus and Christ, between evil matter (i.e. the human body) and pure spirit (i.e. Christ from heaven). **Docetism** held that when the man Jesus died the eternal Christ withdrew from Jesus and continued ‘impassible, being spiritual’. **Docetics** and the broader category of the **Gnostics** were therefore threatening the historic Jesus because it taught that a heavenly Christ walked in the human body of Jesus. Contrariwise, John says the true historic Jesus Christ came **“in flesh”**. Our English Bibles insert the unwarranted definite article and want us to read, **“in the flesh”**. However, the absence of the definite article in the Greek text means the apostle is asserting that Jesus Christ was a real human being:- **“In flesh”** = a true human person as we all experience in our humanity.

left to speculate as to why Jesus walked up to the tree looking for figs for breakfast. He was hungry (!) --- And seeing in the distance a fig tree in leaf, *he went to see whether perhaps he might find anything on it ... [but] he found nothing but leaves ...* (Mark 11: 12-13).

The Jesus of the Bible did **not** know this was a barren fig tree before he went looking. *He went to see whether perhaps there were some figs there, and after a careful search he found nothing but leaves.* (²)

THE CONNECTION

Let us now go on to prove that Jesus was not God pretending to look for figs he knew were not there. Both Matthew and Mark follow the disciples' amazement before the shrivelled fig tree with Jesus telling them that, if they would pray in faith, then they would see even greater miracles --- they would command a mountain to be torn up and thrown into the sea and it would **be done**;

“Truly I tell you, if you have faith and do not doubt, not only will you do what has been done to the fig tree, but even if you say to this mountain, ‘Be lifted up and thrown into the sea,’ it will be done. Whatever you ask for in prayer with faith, you will receive” (Matthew 21: 20-22).

What is the connection between a blasted fig tree and a mountain **thrown into the sea**! How do we get *From Figs To Mountains!?*

WHERE HAVE WE SEEN THIS BEFORE?

This is not the first time Matthew has Jesus teaching this exact same lesson about praying to God in faith with no doubting. Remember when Jesus descended from the **Mount of Transfiguration** only to find a rather distressed father and some anxious disciples? In desperation that father pleaded on his knees before Jesus,

“Lord, have mercy on my son, for he is an epileptic and suffers severely; for he often falls into the fire and often into the water. So I brought him to your disciples, but they could not cure him” (Matt. 17: 14ff)

Jesus was quite peeved over the inability of his disciples to cast out that demonic spirit and he put it down to their **faithless and perverse** condition (v. 17). After Jesus had cast out the demon with the lad totally cured, the disciples asked Jesus why they had failed to get rid of that tormenting spirit. Jesus replied,

² This is not to say that if his Father had wanted to reveal the condition of the tree before he went up to it, that Jesus could not have been told there were no figs to be found. After all, his Father did reveal to Jesus many things that he could not have naturally known except by revelation from the Spirit of God. But such supernaturally given information does not automatically make Jesus to be God --- there are many examples in Scripture where God told his prophets things they could not have otherwise known by the natural senses. Evidently on this occasion Jesus did not receive any such heavenly “word of knowledge” that the tree was barren.

“Because of your unbelief; for assuredly I say to you, if you have faith as a grain of mustard seed, you will say to this mountain, ‘Move from here to there.’ and it will move; and nothing will be impossible for you” (v. 20).

So the disciples had already heard this same lesson earlier! Their previous inability to cast out the demon from that boy seemed like a massive obstacle towering over them, taunting them, mocking them, belittling their failure. Jesus likened their powerlessness to a mountain. He was using metaphor. Jesus assures them that the power of a godly faith will move huge obstacles that threaten to derail our work for him. (³)

As the disciples stood in amazement before the withered fig tree Jesus tells them that *it was cursed in **answer to his own prayer of faith***. Indeed, Jesus’ miracles were always by faith through prayers offered in humble submission to, and in expectation of, his Father’s help.

It should not be necessary to prove this.

Just go back a couple of days before Jesus cursed the fig tree when he called Lazarus up from the dead. Jesus prefaced that miracle by **lifting up his eyes to heaven** (demonstrating his own reliance upon God and acknowledging the source of the miracle) and praying out loud, “**Father, I thank You for having heard me. I knew that You always hear me, but I have said this for the sake of the crowd standing here, so that they may believe that You sent me**” (John 11: 41-42).

Just a few days later, we again find Jesus living out the very same example to the disciples as they stood before the cursed fig tree. When Jesus told them they should be able to move mountains he was asking them for no more than what he practised all his life. He always asked his Father with a faith that did not doubt ... as he walked in the will and calling of his Father. Jesus believed his Father always heard his prayers and that God would never let him down! (⁴)

WHY WAS JESUS HUNGRY?

Let’s back-track for a minute. Someone might wonder why Jesus was hungry in the first place. He spent the previous night in Bethany (Matt. 21:17). It is reasonable to suggest he was the guest in the house of Mary, Martha and the recently raised Lazarus. Knowing the sisters’ care and hospitality towards Jesus and his disciples, we cannot imagine they had

³ Note the similar expression in Luke 17: 5-6 where the disciples ask, “**Lord, increase our faith.**” This time Jesus says, “**If you had faith as a mustard seed, you would say to this mulberry tree, ‘Be pulled up by the roots and be planted in the sea,’ and it would have obeyed you.**” Thus, in each of the Gospels this lesson repeatedly occurs in different contexts, proving how often Jesus had to use common metaphors --- mountains and trees --- for the obstacles to faith. Also, the phrase **moving mountains** was a common Jewish expression of that day for removing huge difficulties. Indeed, Jewish rabbis who could, by sound teaching, clear up difficulties from their students’ minds were actually called **mountain-movers**!

⁴ When Jesus said to the disciples, “**I tell you, whatever you ask for in prayer, believe that you have received it, and it will be yours**” his verb is in the aorist tense which locates the receiving as an already accomplished fact in the unrepeatable past ... $\epsilon\lambda\alpha\beta\epsilon\tau\acute{\epsilon}$ = you received [it]!

neglected to give him the customary breakfast before he began walking towards Jerusalem (about 2 miles away) if indeed he had lodged in that hospitable house that night. (⁵)

Be that as it may, we can speculate two reasons for Jesus' hunger on the road. Either he had left Mary & Martha's house before the rest of the house was up and about for breakfast. Note that he came to the fig tree **early in the morning**, which in the Greek usually means at first light, at dawn, at daybreak (**Matt. 21: 18 NASB**). (⁶)

Or, the other possibility is that Jesus had been up before dawn praying, as seems to have been his regular habit. Given the momentous events of the week in front of him, I am inclined to this possibility, especially given Jesus' own explanation that the fig tree had shrivelled up by the instrumentality of his prayer of faith.

ANOTHER TANTALIZING POSSIBILITY! WHAT IS "THIS MOUNTAIN"?

It's fair to say that we have all recoiled at the magnitude of Jesus' high bar for faith here. I don't know about you, but I have never had the faith to say to any literal mountain, "Be thrown into the sea"!

To be perfectly honest, I don't read of Jesus' disciples even after Pentecost ever doing it either. They didn't seem to take Jesus literally. And we have already seen from the incident of the lad tormented by a demon which the disciples could not cast out, that Jesus is talking about moving metaphorical mountains, seemingly insurmountable obstacles in the path of our duty --- challenges which are impossible to move by any natural human powers.

I think there is likely another deeper application of Jesus' teaching about moving, "**this mountain**".

Remember how in our first article *Figs For Breakfast, Anyone?* we laid out the case that our Lord's cursing of the barren fig tree was a dramatised parable and a prophecy all rolled up into one action? Jesus's miracle portrayed how God's judgment was hanging over rebellious and apostate Israel. Like a barren tree, as it were, the nation which was rejecting her promised Messiah-King was about to wither and to be cut down.

I therefore think it a logical conclusion to see that by coupling the cursing of the fig tree with his teaching about casting **this mountain** aside, Jesus still has his eye on the big picture. Jesus always had his eye on God's Kingdom and his part as Messiah in God's promised plan.

We have already noted how many Old Testament prophecies Jesus was conscious of fulfilling in the last week of his life before his murder. Perhaps there is an Old Testament prediction that Jesus is thinking about when he says, **this mountain** will be thrown into the sea?

⁵ Some commentators however think it more likely Jesus and his band camped outdoors because the Greek word "lodged" *αὐλιζομαι /aulizomai* properly means to camp out in the open air, to bivouac.

⁶ *πρωια /proia* = daybreak, dawn, first light, early morning.

Could Jesus be referring to Zechariah's apocalyptic vision concerning **the Mount of Olives** in **Zechariah chapter 14**? Not a few scholars think so, for the Mount of Olives figures prominently during that last momentous week before his death. (⁷) One of Zechariah's prophecies has already been alluded to (that their King would present himself to Israel in humility and in peace by riding on a young male donkey).

Note well how Zechariah also predicts that a day will come when the Lord will stand on **the Mount of Olives** and how it will ...

[B]e split into two from East to West, forming a great valley, with half of the mountain moving North, and half moving South (Zech. 14: 4).

At this future seismic event, the people in Jerusalem **will flee** along that flat land and then, says the prophet, **the LORD my God will come, and all the holy ones with Him (v. 5)**. On that **unique day living water will flow out from Jerusalem, half to the eastern sea [the Dead Sea] and half to the western sea [i.e. the Mediterranean] (v. 8)**.

Indeed, on that day, **the whole land, from Geba to Rimmon south of Jerusalem will be like Arabah [i.e. turned into a plain] (v. 10)**.

This is an apocalyptic vision, and the nature of apocalyptic writing is that literal details must not be overly pressed. But Zechariah's apocalyptic imagery points to a future earthquake of cosmic proportions just before the dawning of God's New Age Kingdom. Evidently this earthquake will completely alter the landscape around Jerusalem. ***The Mount of Olives seems to be cast in the sea. The whole area will be levelled out!*** (⁸)

Who can fail to see Jesus' vision and faith as he stands before the withered fig tree --- picture of God's rejection of apostate Israel --- and then proceeds to talk about **this mountain** being removed and levelled out and cast into the sea? This is nothing but Jesus, as always, living according to his Father's promises about the glorious future dawning of the New Messianic Age.

Jesus believed that one day God was going to replace the failed governments of this Evil Age with His own righteous Government. **The government will rest upon the shoulders of His Son (Is. 9: 6)**. Will you join in exultation with me by saying, "Hallelujah. Let it be according to your faith, O Lord Jesus, because your Father always hears your prayers!"

SEISMIC SHAKINGS

Just as an interesting aside here, I find it beyond coincidental that Matthew goes on to describe the effects of the disturbances of that final Paschal Week this way;

When Jesus entered Jerusalem, the whole city was stirred up and asked, "Who is this?" (Matt. 21: 10). That word **stirred up** is variously translated in our English versions as **moved, agitated, shaken, trembled** and **in turmoil**. In fact, it's the Greek word from which

⁷ See for example, **Matthew 21: 1; 24:3; 26: 30**.

⁸ I have described these cosmic events in more detail in the three articles titled, *An Enthralling Prophecy*. You'll find them in the sub-section *Prophecy & End-Times*.

our word *seismic* derives, and we know that refers to earthquake activity. It would be very possible to translate this way ... **the whole city quaked and asked, "Who is this?"** As always, the detail and the harmony and the colour of the holy Scriptures never ceases to amaze.

PERSONAL APPLICATION OF THE PRINCIPLES OF PRAYER FOR OUR OWN LIVES

It would be inadequate to leave things there, marvellous as they are. Since the inspired Scriptures are given to make us **wise for salvation, equipped for every good work** as God's children in the world, we conclude with a few brief thoughts on prayer (2 Tim. 3: 15-16).

If we would move *From Figs To Mountains* in our own experiences, then we must know the joy of praying confident prayers that *work*. Two main lessons emerge here. (⁹)

1). **All prayer must be offered in expectant faith.** As they stood before the shrivelled up fig tree, Jesus instructed the disciples to **"Have faith in God"** and, to prove it by **not doubting in your hearts** that God **has already given** you your request (Mk. 11: 22f).

But we must not confuse the kind of faith Jesus is talking about with the foolish idea that we may go to God expecting Him to rubber stamp every whim. Where true faith controls there will be no indiscriminate asking. True faith in prayer always comes from the Spirit's leading. Whenever we are engaged in the Master's business we may ask with confident belief for any mountain we face in the line of duty to be gone.

James says we not only **do not have because we do not ask God**, but that we also do not receive **because we ask with the wrong motives** (James 4: 2-3).

2). **Prayers will be answered when they come out of hearts which are gracious towards others.** As the disciples marvelled at the shrivelled fig tree Jesus said, **"And when you stand praying, if you hold anything against anyone, forgive him, so that your Father in heaven may forgive you your sins"** (Mk. 11: 25). The bitter, unforgiving heart closes heaven's ears.

It's a universal spiritual law: God treats us the way we treat others. He shows mercy to the merciful. Later, the apostle Peter was to write that this begins at home, with our marriages. When a wife displays a reverent and gentle spirit towards her husband, and when a husband lives considerately and treats his wife with respect and esteem, then **nothing will hinder your prayers** (I Peter 3: 1ff).

Oh heavenly Father, may we follow the daily example of your beloved Son Jesus by also praying with an expectant faith that never doubts the promises of God. So often we dishonour you by a wavering faith. Thank you for forgiving us. We ask now for grace to move *From Figs To Mountains* so that your kingdom may grow. We believe we have already received our requests in Jesus' Name and for Your glory. Amen.

⁹ For three sermons I preached on how to pray powerfully and effectively, see the subsection *Practical Christian Living*.

