

FAITH THAT MOVES MOUNTAINS

“If ye have faith as a grain of mustard seed, ye shall say to this mountain, Remove hence to yonder place; and it shall remove; and nothing shall be impossible unto you.” – Matthew 17:20

“For verily I say unto you, That whosoever shall say unto this mountain, Be thou removed, and be thou cast into the sea; and shall not doubt in his heart, but shall believe that those things which he saith shall come to pass; he shall have whatsoever he saith.” – Mark 11:23

“And the Lord said, If ye had faith as a grain of mustard seed, ye might say unto this sycamine tree, Be thou plucked up by the root, and be thou planted in the sea; and it should obey you.” – Luke 17:6

ON THREE DIFFERENT OCCASIONS Jesus made remarks much to the same effect. The circumstances were different. Those who heard the remarks were not always the same, though the Apostles were on hand each time. Even the geographical settings were varied.

What did he mean by these words? Can mountains literally be moved by wishing them so? Why do two of the texts refer to mountains while the third speaks of a tree? These are the questions we would like to examine together.

In general, most Christian expositors agree that the word “mountain” is used metaphorically in these texts. Rather than refer to literal mountains, they become a symbol of any massive barrier or hindrance that looms in our Christian path.

The expression is made even more powerful by the comparison of the “mountains” of difficulty with the smallness of faith—“as a grain of mustard seed,” one of the smallest of all seeds.

Important as is this vital lesson of the necessity for exercising even the smallest amount of faith to progress through the obstacles of life, more specific lessons appear by examining each of the occurrences of this phrase in context.

{photograph of Mt Tabor – The traditional “Mount of Transfiguration”}

THE MOUNT OF TRANSFIGURATION

The setting for the Matthew account is at the time of the descent of Jesus, with Peter, James and John, from the Mount of Transfiguration. It was on this mount that the three were thrilled to see a vision of their Master communicating with the dead prophets, Moses and Elijah.

That it was not a literal scene with two resurrected prophets is clear from Matthew 17:9 where Jesus himself styles it a “vision.” But it was a vision rife with meaning. Peter later says that on that occasion they were “eyewitnesses of his majesty.” (2 Peter 1:16-18)

The vision, then, was associated with his “majesty”—his “kingdom.” The enthralled disciples had been given a glimpse of the power and beauties of the long-anticipated reign of the Messiah. Then, descending the mountain, they found the other disciples in a state of consternation. They had just failed to cast out a demon from a possessed man. Inquiring as to the cause of their failure, Jesus replied: “Because of your unbelief,” and continued with the analogy of faith as a mustard seed being able to move “this” mountain to yonder place.

Notice the phrase, “this mountain.” What mountain? The mount he had just descended—the Mount of Transfiguration. And move it where? “To yonder place”—to where the man still possessed of the demon was slowly departing. In other words, by faith they could call on “kingdom power” to remove the demons. How often we are afflicted with evil spirits—the spirit of anger, the spirit of fear, the spirit of grief, the spirit of greed! How often we fail to drive out these spirits! Why? Because we lack the faith to move the mountain of Christ’s coming kingdom to our present circumstances. As Paul says in another place, we need to live “as in the day”—the Millennial day of His Kingdom.

WHAT IS FAITH?

“Now faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen.”
—Hebrews 11:1

From these words we deduce that faith is more than belief. Faith requires evidence. Faith without evidence is mere superstition.

Biblical faith is based primarily on the character of its author. The reliability of the Bible’s words is well attested by the amazing accuracy with which its predictions have come true.

Well has the poet said: “All I have seen teaches me to trust the Creator for all I have not seen.”

The best way to build faith is to reverently study the words of the Bible. Only by clearly comprehending what God has promised, can one intelligently believe in the fulfillment of those promises.

THE MOUNT OF OLIVES

The incident in the 11th chapter of Mark has quite a different setting. Rather than being in the north, in Galilee, this incident occurred on the Mount of Olives.

{Photo of Mount of Olives today}

The beginning of the chapter describes the Palm Sunday occurrence of the triumphal entry of Jesus into Jerusalem. In verse 12, it describes the events of the next day, in particular the cursing of a fig tree, that it bear not fruit.

The following day, starting with verse 20, finds Jesus and the disciples passing that same tree and it had already withered. In amazement, Peter calls attention to the fact. Jesus' answer was simple, "Have faith in God." Then he continued with the words of our theme, about how faith as a mustard seed would move "this" mountain into the midst of the sea.

Once again he particularizes—"this mountain"—but this time pointing not to the Mount of Transfiguration, but to the Mount of Olives. Why?

Throughout Scripture the fig tree has been identified with the nation of Israel. In Jeremiah chapter 24, the prophet identifies Israel as a basket of figs. It was in connection with the same series of events that Jesus wept over Jerusalem saying, "Your house is left unto you desolate." (Matthew 23:38) At the time of the uttering of those words, they appeared very impracticable. Though a tribute state to Rome, the Jews had gained a large measure of autonomy. Yet within the short space of less than 40 years the armies of Titus overthrew Jerusalem and the great Jewish Diaspora began.

In harmony with this, Jesus likens the entire Mount of Olives to that curse on Israel, and says that with faith they would see the entire nation cast into the wild, restless sea of world-wide dispersion.

Again the lesson is simple and powerful for our day. How many times we read the Scriptures and note the prophetic indications of things yet future. But, as we scan the news we frequently are inclined to say, "Impossible!"

Yet, on the other hand, if God predicted a matter, can he not bring it to pass? Is not the answer as simple as the one Jesus gave Peter—"Have faith in God." Not only was the mountain of Israel cast into the sea, but, as predicted, all of the mountains of present earthly government shall fall before the oncoming and incoming kingdom of the "Prince of Peace."

THE SYCAMINE TREE

The third instance happens in the city of Jerusalem, outside of a Pharisee's house. (Luke 14:1) There were no mountains nearby to which Jesus could liken the miracle-working power of faith, but there was another object at hand—a sycamine tree.

The discussion of chapters 14 through 16 of Luke deal with the murmuring of the Pharisees over Jesus' attention to the publicans and sinners. (See Luke 15:2) In response to their criticisms, he gives them a series of five parables often referred to as the Parables of the Lost—the Lost Sheep, the Lost Coin, the Lost Inheritance (Prodigal Son), the Lost Stewardship and the Lost Destiny (Rich Man and Lazarus).

Jesus summarizes the lesson to his disciples as one of forgiveness in Luke 17:3, 4:

“Take heed to yourselves: If thy brother trespass against thee, rebuke him; and if he repent, forgive him. And if he trespass against thee seven times in a day, and seven times in a day turn again to thee, saying, I repent; thou shalt forgive him.”

This concept of repetitive forgiveness for repetitive offenses was a difficult one of the disciples to accept. Their response was most natural, *“Lord, increase our faith.”* His answer to this petition was the same repeated lesson of the faith that was as a grain of mustard seed. Only this time it was not a mountain, but a tree that was to be moved, and this time it was not to be cast into the sea, but to be planted in the sea.

It is noteworthy that it was not just any tree, but a particular tree—the sycamine tree--that was used for the illustration. Many make the mistake of confusing the sycamine tree with the more familiar sycamore tree. Rather, it is a tree native to the Middle East that is similar to our mulberry tree.

One of the peculiarities of this tree is the rapidity with which it grows new branches when old ones are lopped off. This unique feature forms a beautiful illustration of Jesus' lesson. If we had faith, as a mustard seed, we would exemplify the same characteristic as this tree. When cut, we would quickly recover, and thus be able to forgive.

This concept of faith looking at personal affronts as mere challenges for greater growth is one that we all need to plant deeply in the restless sea of our turbulent minds in times of anger and upset.

FAITH GIVETH THE VICTORY

Very advisedly did the Apostle John write in 1 John 5:4, *“This is the victory that overcometh the world, even our faith.”*

As faith grows and develops it must control the evil passions that threaten our spiritual peace by moving the mountain of Christ's kingdom into the present realities of life. Faith must also never shorten God's hands to perform all that he says, but continue to rely on the great Creator to fulfill all his declared work. And faith must give the personal

courage to take the stumbling stones of personal offenses, and make them into the stepping stones of challenge and greater growth.

When faith reaches its fruition, how obvious it will seem that the doubts of human-mindedness need to give way to faith in the realities of a God-controlled life.

THE MUSTARD SEED

The mustard seed is almost incredibly small; one of the smallest of all tree-producing seeds. Yet it produces one of the most rapidly-growing trees in the Middle East. And, though not a giant among trees, it grows to rather stately height and fullness.

The first lesson, therefore, that Jesus draws is that even a small amount of faith is powerful. The poet has well said:

*“Satan trembles when he see
The weakest saint upon his knees.”*

But the lesson of the mustard seed is deeper than this. The mustard seed can produce such a large tree for the same reason that any seed can develop its predicted fruitage—the entire genetic structure of that which it will become is found in its make-up.

So it must be with our faith. Blind belief does not have the component parts of growth, nor does a faith that believes but is not motivated to action. As a seed can produce nothing more than what is genetically in the seed, so the Christian can only have a productive faith if it is a complete faith—more than the confidence of mere credulity or superstition.

A BIBLE STUDY ON FAITH

- 1. What is faith? *Heb 11:1; 1 John 5:4*
- 2. What is the importance of a proper faith? *Heb. 11:6*
- 3. What is the relationship between faith and knowledge? *Rom. 10:17*
- 4. How is faith “the gift of God?” *Eph. 2:8*
- 5. Is faith in Christ necessary to salvation? *Acts 4:10-12; John 3:16, 36*
- 6. What is the immediate result of faith in Christ at the present time? *Rom 5:1*
- 7. How is Jesus the “author and finisher of our faith?” *Heb 12:2*
- 8. Is a simple confession of faith necessary? *Rom 10:10*
- 9. What is “the good fight of faith?” *1 Tim. 6:12*
- 10. What does it mean to “walk by faith?” *2 Cor. 5:7*
- 11. Why are trials of faith permitted? *Jas 1:3, 4; 1 Pet. 4:12, 13*
- 12. What are some of the present rewards of faith? *1 Cor. 2:9, 10*
- 13. What is the future inheritance of faith? *1 John 3:2; Rev. 2:10*