

# Faith to Move Mountains

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**MARK 11:12-25**

*The next day as they were leaving Bethany, Jesus was hungry. Seeing in the distance a fig tree in leaf, he went to find out if it had any fruit. When he reached it, he found nothing but leaves, because it was not the season for figs. Then he said to the tree, "May no one ever eat fruit from you again." And his disciples heard him say it.*

*On reaching Jerusalem, Jesus entered the temple area and began driving out those who were buying and selling there. He overturned the tables of the money changers and the benches of those selling doves, and would not allow anyone to carry merchandise through the temple courts.*

*And as he taught them, he said, "Is it not written: "'My house will be called a house of prayer for all nations'? But you have made it 'a den of robbers.'" The chief priests and the teachers of the law heard this and began looking for a way to kill him, for they feared him, because the whole crowd was amazed at his teaching.*

*When evening came, they went out of the city.*

*In the morning, as they went along, they saw the fig tree withered from the roots. Peter remembered and said to Jesus, "Rabbi, look! The fig tree you cursed has withered!"*

*"Have faith in God," Jesus answered. "I tell you the truth, if anyone says to this mountain, 'Go, throw yourself into the sea,' and does not doubt in his heart but believes that what he says will happen, it will be done for him. Therefore I tell you, whatever you ask for in prayer, believe that you have received it, and it will be yours. And when you stand praying, if you hold anything against anyone, forgive him, so that your Father in heaven may forgive you your sins."*

Our passage has its parallel in Matthew 21:12-13, 18-22, but whereas Matthew offers a topical presentation, Mark's version is chronological and follows the actual order of the events as they happened. So, Mark 11:12-14, 20-25 corresponds to Matthew 21:18-22, and Mark 11:15-19 corresponds to Matthew 21:12-13.

In other words, Matthew separates what happened in Jerusalem and the temple with what happened at Bethany. He is careful to leave out the time markers that would render his topical account either inaccurate or confusing. On the other hand, Mark's version follows the actual order of events, carefully giving us a clear sense of the chronological relations between the events he is describing by including various time markers. In addition, corresponding to each event, he also indicates the direction of travel that the Lord and his disciples were taking. And so we find the following statements in chapter 11:

"As they approached Jerusalem..." (v. 1)  
"Jesus entered Jerusalem..." (v. 11)  
"...but since it was already late, he went out to Bethany..." (v. 11)  
"The next day as they were leaving Bethany..." (v. 12)  
"On reaching Jerusalem..." (v. 15)  
"When evening came, they went out of the city." (v. 19)  
"In the morning, as they went along..." (v. 20)  
"They arrived again at Jerusalem..." (v. 27)

Both Matthew and Mark offer us accurate accounts of what happened. Each approach serves the writer's purpose and makes a particular impression upon the reader. I choose to deal with Mark's account to take advantage of how his chronological arrangement contributes to the interpretation of verse 23.

#### **v. 12-14**

Our passage begins as Jesus departs from Bethany and heads toward Jerusalem (v. 12). He sees a fig tree in the distance, but when he reaches it, he finds nothing but leaves. At this, he says to it, "May no one ever eat fruit from you again" (v. 14). The incident perplexes many people, since it appears to them that the tree here receives overly harsh and even unjust treatment from our Lord.

Commentators typically offer two points of clarification.

The first has to do with the "complicated biology"<sup>1</sup> of the fig. There are two crops of figs gathered in this region. The earlier and smaller figs become ripe in May and June, and the later and larger ones become ripe around late August and September. New leaves begin to appear in March, and along with them would appear many tiny figs, called *taksh* in Arabic. They are eaten by people when hungry, and often gathered to be sold in the markets. These are not the true figs, but they grow only to a small size and then the majority would fall off.

This incident in our passage occurs at Passover time (14:1), about April, so it is "not the season for figs" (v. 13). However, this particular tree has leaves, and "When the young leaves are appearing in spring, every fertile fig will have some *taksh* on it, even though the season for edible figs (Mk. 11:13, AV) has not arrived. When the leaves are fully developed the fruit ought to be mature also. But if the tree with leaves has no fruit, it will be barren for the entire season."<sup>2</sup> So the abundance of leaves gives Jesus reason to expect fruit as well – that is, *taksh* – but when he reaches the tree, he finds nothing but leaves.

Then, the second point that commentators mention is that the fig tree merely functions as a symbol for something else, and the way Jesus treats it is intended as an acted parable. Hendriksen writes, "It is impossible to believe that the curse which the Lord pronounced

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<sup>1</sup> *New Bible Dictionary, Third Edition* (InterVarsity Press, 1996), p. 368.

<sup>2</sup> *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia, Revised Edition* (William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1982), p. 302. See the entire article on "Fig; Fig Tree" for more information.

upon this tree was an act of punishing it, as if the tree as such was responsible for not bearing fruit, and as if, for this reason, Jesus was angry with it."<sup>3</sup>

Right now we will not discuss what this symbolic interaction between Jesus and the tree conveys – that is reserved for later. At this time, our focus is on the typical ways in which commentators attempt to provide moral justification for how Jesus treats the fig tree. When it comes to this, we must declare that although both points are true, both of them fail as moral justification for Jesus' action.

Regarding the first point, although Jesus has reason to expect fruit on the tree because of the leaves, this in itself cannot justify cursing it just because the tree fails to satisfy such an expectation. Would these commentators say that anyone else in a similar situation would be justified in doing the same? Would they not appeal to the teaching of Scripture and say that one should exercise patience, gratitude, and contentment instead? We are not permitted to curse something just because it fails to meet what appears to be a "reasonable" expectation.

Regarding the second point, it is irrelevant whether or not the tree functions as a symbol of something else, or whether or not Jesus is acting out a parable. A person's action is not automatically justified just because it is symbolic. If it is wrong in itself, then it is wrong no matter what. I am not permitted to murder someone just as long as my intention is to make a point about something else. I am not permitted to steal from someone just because I am acting out a parable.

So both points fail to provide moral justification for Jesus' action. The real problem is that the commentators have assumed a man-centered reference point as they read the passage, and so they apply to divine actions and commands a human standard – a standard that is itself subordinate to and judged by divine actions and commands. The proper reference point ought to be God-centered, and that is the sovereign right and power of God. What God performs and what God commands are righteous by definition. Rather than requiring moral justification or explanation by our standard, the reverse is true – his actions and commands constitute the standard by which *our* actions are judged.

God and his creation are as the potter to the clay. He has the right to make whatever he wishes, then to smash it, make it into something else, and then smash it again. He can also command his creatures to perform that which is normally forbidden, such as when he told Abraham to sacrifice Isaac. Yes, Jesus is acting out a parable, but so what even if he is not? So what if God decides to destroy a tree just because it fails to bear fruit, although whether it bears fruit is wholly in God's own power? So what? Why does he need to explain this to anybody, or prove that he has treated the tree fairly? And by what standard of "the ethical treatment of trees" are we going to judge God?

Now, if you ask your fellow servant to do you a favor, some gratitude is always in order, and repayment is sometimes expected. But when God tells you to do something, must he say "please"? And after it is done, must he thank you? No, he does not "thank the servant

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<sup>3</sup> William Hendriksen, *New Testament Commentary: Mark* (Baker Books, 1975), p. 442.

because he did what he was told to do"; on the other hand, we must say, "We are unworthy servants; we have only done our duty" (Luke 17:9-10).

Confusion results when we forget the distinction between master and servants, and judge the master as if he is one of the servants. But there is no hypocrisy to speak of in the master, for in one sense, the same rules apply to both master and servants – that is, both operate by the master's rules, what the master considers as right and proper. A servant is in good standing as long as he obeys his master, and the master's integrity is intact as long as he operates by his own rules – in other words, as long as he approves of his own actions.

God can do whatever he wants with a tree, or to command someone to do whatever he wants to it – it is his tree. To even consider the need to provide moral justification for his actions is already to treat him as if he is a mere man. Problems in biblical interpretation and theological formulation occur when people look at God as if he is a creature, so that he must be judged like one. But no moral justification is necessary. The issue should have never been brought up at all. Scripture says that Jesus always performs the will of the Father, and that should be good enough for us.

Nevertheless, Jesus curses the fig tree for a reason, and Mark tells us about it also for a reason. The correct approach is not to look for moral justification, since that is unnecessary, but to look for intention or meaning, and this we will discover and discuss as we continue with the passage.

#### **v. 15-19**

When Jesus reaches Jerusalem, he enters the temple, probably into the Court of the Gentiles. This is the outer area of the temple, and the only place where non-Jews are permitted to worship. But worship is impossible, since the place has become a busy marketplace.

There we find the money changers, those who are selling doves, and those who carry merchandise through the temple courts. The money changers are there to exchange foreign money into the only currency accepted in the temple area. Many pilgrims come from far away. It would be difficult for them to bring their own sacrificial animals with them, and then risk that they would fail the temple inspection.

In a sense, these merchants are performing a needed service; however, the way they occupy the area is desecrating the temple site, and instead of promoting worship, the way they conduct business actually hinders it. It is likely that they are also taking advantage of the pilgrims, charging high prices for the animals and offering them unreasonable exchange rates.

As for those who "carry merchandise through the temple courts," they are using the temple area as a shortcut as they travel between the Mount of Olives and the city. Of course, their activities do not contribute to worship at all; rather, they are obstructing worship for the sake of convenience and commerce.

Hendriksen remarks that the Lord does not expel only the sellers from the temple, but the buyers as well.<sup>4</sup> They may appear innocent on the surface, and we may even say that they are victims of the greedy and irreverent merchants, but they are not entirely guiltless in that they are willing to tolerate this abomination in the temple. Is this not their God they have come to worship? Then they should be zealous to preserve the honor of his name and the purity of his temple.

Some commentators again become nervous at this point and scramble to offer some moral justification for this "fit of rage" that our Lord exhibits. But the answer is the same. There is nothing to explain, because there is nothing wrong with what he does here. Christ is the Lord of the temple, and indeed "greater than the temple" (Matthew 12:6), and this is what he thinks about what is going on with the place of worship. The culprit is the false impression that Jesus is always a mild-mannered, soft-spoken, and even an effeminate kind of person.

In the Gospel of John, as Jesus drives out the merchants from the temple and cries, "Get these out of here! How dare you turn my Father's house into a market!" his disciples remember that the Scripture says, "Zeal for your house will consume me" (John 2:16-17). True piety is always accompanied by godly zeal. You cannot be faithful and not zealous at the same time. You cannot call yourself spiritual and stay calm when God's name is blasphemed and his worshipers misled and abused. This is why the temple episode is so shocking to some readers – they have no zeal and do not understand zeal. They have a gentlemanly faith that cares more about social propriety than God's honor. To them, this is Christian character, and it surprises them when Jesus does not act as "Christian" as they do! But there is a time to be gentle, and a time to be harsh.

Jesus does not storm out of the temple and leave the scene, but he teaches the people from Scripture, and says, "Is it not written: 'My house will be called a house of prayer for all nations'? But you have made it 'a den of robbers.'" First, he quotes from Isaiah 56:7, where God designates the temple as a house of pray *for all nations*. Far from preserving the temple for its intended use, the Jews have made it "a den of robbers." The expression comes from Jeremiah 7:11. There the context has to do with a false confidence – a false sense of safety – in the temple of God:

This is what the LORD Almighty, the God of Israel, says: Reform your ways and your actions, and I will let you live in this place. Do not trust in deceptive words and say, "This is the temple of the LORD, the temple of the LORD, the temple of the LORD!"

If you really change your ways and your actions and deal with each other justly, if you do not oppress the alien, the fatherless or the widow and do not shed innocent blood in this place, and if you do not follow other gods to your own harm, then I will let you live in this place, in the

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid., p. 452.

land I gave your forefathers for ever and ever. But look, you are trusting in deceptive words that are worthless.

Will you steal and murder, commit adultery and perjury, burn incense to Baal and follow other gods you have not known, and then come and stand before me in this house, which bears my Name, and say, "We are safe" – safe to do all these detestable things? Has this house, which bears my Name, become *a den of robbers* to you? But I have been watching! declares the LORD. (Jeremiah 7:3-11)

The people in Jeremiah's time were oppressing foreigners, orphans, and widows; they were shedding innocent blood, and they were following other gods. They have made the temple "a den of robbers," but still they thought that they were safe. They appealed to the temple for protection and prosperity, but God told them that they needed to reform their ways, for only then would he allow them to remain and thrive in the land.

The relevance to Mark's passage is obvious. The temple is buzzing with people and activities, but there is no real worship, no genuine reverence. They use the place for their financial profit, for social advancement, and sometimes just for mere convenience. In the process, they are crowding out anyone who have come to offer sincere prayer and worship.

The point in Jeremiah is not that the people were using the temple to *rob*, but that they were using it as a robbers' *den* – a place of rest and safety for criminals. Likewise, although the merchants are probably "robbing" the pilgrims and worshipers with their high prices and unfair exchange rates, by alluding to this expression in Jeremiah, Jesus also condemns their false security in the edifice and the system of the temple. They are acting as if nothing would happen to them because they have the temple of God, and they refuse to reform their ways. But what if God abandons his own temple? We will consider this when we come to verse 20 and after.

How this part of our passage speaks to the contemporary church! Is the commercialism that is connected with today's Christianity any less blatant and shameless? A book may be theologically weak or even heretical, but if it proves to be popular, then it is repackaged as a daily devotional. After that comes a prayer journal that is meant to reinforce its message. Then come the study guides, greeting cards, posters, calendars, bracelets, backpacks, T-shirts, music recordings, board games, computer games, picnics, dinners, seminars, retreats, cruises, and so on, all riding on the book's popular theme.

Non-Christians laugh at the stupidity and hypocrisy in all of this, and as there is no substance to the movement, some of the followers eventually become disillusioned. But not to worry, for here comes another one. *This* one will change everything. As in the temple, it is clear that the buyers are at least almost as guilty as the sellers. They enjoy the commercialism. They love to imitate the unbelievers as long as they can put a Christian label on what they sell, buy, and do.

Do professing Christians show any more respect for God and concern for worshipers than these Jews in the day of Christ? Some of them use the church to gather business contacts or to sell their products. Others are there hunting for greedy and gullible people that they can swindle, "Christians" who are just too eager to jump on another scheme to get rich, or to save money by questionable or even illegal means. Sometimes the church leadership knows what is happening, but they are unwilling to do anything about it. But this is one of those things that their spiritual authority is supposed to address. They are supposed to protect the sheep from the wolves, as well as to rebuke the sheep for being worldly, greedy, and gullible.

As for favoring convenience over worship, there are numerous signs of this in today's believers. We will not mention the outrageous and the extreme, but how about something seemingly less significant like answering a mobile phone during a church gathering? It is bad enough to forget to switch off the phone, but if the person actually answers it and carries a conversation on it, however brief, we can tell that he has no respect for God or for the rest of us who wish to concentrate on the things of God. If the person calling is so important, invite him to church! If it is a business call, then he must choose between God and Mammon.

The temple area could not have turned into a marketplace without permission from the priests, who are probably receiving a handsome portion of the profits from the merchants' transactions. Jesus' action and teaching greatly upset these priests, not only because he has briefly disrupted the commercial activities, but because he has exposed their apostasy and undermined their authority. Thus he poses a threat to their economic welfare as well as their social standing.

Instead of being driven to self-examination and repentance, now they conspire to murder Jesus. They think that they have spiritual standing with God because Abraham is their natural ancestor, but he tells them elsewhere, "If you were Abraham's children, then you would do the things Abraham did. As it is, you are determined to kill me, a man who has told you the truth that I heard from God. Abraham did not do such things" (John 8:39-40).

Although they are Abraham's natural descendents, spiritually speaking, they are nothing like him, but they are like those of their ancestors who killed the prophets that were sent to them. Jesus perceives their hypocrisy, and says to them in Matthew 23, "Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You build tombs for the prophets and decorate the graves of the righteous. And you say, 'If we had lived in the days of our forefathers, we would not have taken part with them in shedding the blood of the prophets'" (v. 29-31). But they are exploiting the temple for financial profit and plotting murder against the one who opposes them. Contrary to their claim, they are exactly like the apostates in times past, whom God punished and exiled from the land.

With this mention of Israel's past sins and exiles, we are finally ready to consider the fig tree's significance, which I have already hinted at several times so far. And this ushers us into the next section of our study.



#### **v. 20-21**

In Mark's account, Jesus' visit to the temple (v. 15-19) is placed between the cursing of the fig tree (v. 12-14) and the withering of the fig tree (v. 20-21), or more precisely, the disciples' realization that the fig tree has withered. The order is chronological, so it does not *demand* an explanation; nevertheless, it naturally produces an effect that we must not ignore.

Imagine that you are watching a movie. As a new scene begins, the camera closes in on a tiny yellow flower growing out of the cracks at the edge of the pavement. Suddenly, you hear loud tire screeches...the camera backs away from the flower...a car speeds into sight and breaks hard by the pavement. Several men rushes out of the car, and at the same time, the camera focuses on the face of a young man, perhaps the protagonist. His expression exhibits fear and resolve at the same time. Someone behind him pushes him out of the car and says, "Let's get to it."

What is happening? The young man has never known crime before, but through various circumstances and decisions, he has joined up with the wrong crowd. Now they burst into a grocery store by the road, pull out their weapons, and yell, "Give me all your money!" Seconds later, the leader emerges from the store and looks around, then runs toward the car, followed by the rest.

The camera closes in on the flower again. Have we forgotten all about it? How beautiful it is. Look at the bright color, and the shape of the leaves. You marvel that it manages to thrive on even such a rough terrain. Just then, one of the escaping robbers steps on the flower as he is running toward the car. When he picks up his foot, you notice that the flower has been crushed, and its stem ripped from the base.

The flower's significance is obvious, and the more context that you have been given, the more obvious it would be to you. It represents the young man, the protagonist of the story. Its life and beauty is like his hope and innocence. By sandwiching the robbery between the life and death of the flower, the man becomes identified with the flower, and what happens to the flower is what happens to the man. In fact, in this case the flower "acts out" something that is happening in the heart of the man, something that, despite the robbery, remains less obvious on the outside.

Likewise, by placing the temple episode between the cursing and the withering of the fig tree, Mark identifies the temple – or by implication, the temple system of worship and the Jews' unique privilege of having the temple of God in their midst – with the tree. What happens to the fig tree is what happens to the temple. That the fig tree has been repeatedly used to represent Israel in the Old Testament makes the symbolism even more obvious and unmistakable (Hosea 9:10; Joel 1:7; Zechariah 3:10).

With this in mind, let us review the story again. When Jesus approaches the fig tree on his way to Jerusalem (v. 12-14), he finds on it only leaves but no fruit, and so he curses it,

saying, "May no one ever eat fruit from you again." This immediately generates tension in the reader's mind: Why does Jesus do this?

Again, the question is not, or at least it *should not* be, "What is Jesus' moral justification for doing this?" since no moral justification is needed. A tension requiring moral justification for Jesus' action would only be a tension between the reader's unbiblical assumptions against the perfect righteousness that Jesus always exhibits as he performs his Father's will. Rather, the intended and legitimate tension is generated by the distance between question and answer – that is, it seems that Jesus does not *have to* curse the fig tree, so why does he do it? He must have a reason. The incident must have some meaning to it. But what is it?

Without relieving this tension that he has created, Mark rushes us forward to the temple at Jerusalem. There Jesus finds a center of religion that is buzzing with activities, but even a causal inspection reveals that they do not constitute or contribute to true worship. More than that, these activities in fact make true worship impossible, and would prevent any sincere seeker from using the temple for its intended purpose. In other words, like the fig tree with leaves but no fruit, there is much noise and movement at the temple, but no spiritual substance. There is an appearance of religious dedication, but there is no reality and no power to it.

At this point, the tension generated by the cursing of the fig tree remains fresh in the reader's mind, since he still does not know what has happened to it. But if he has been paying attention, by now he ought to understand why Jesus curses the tree earlier. Just as he responds with a curse – a pronouncement of *final* destruction – to the tree with only leaves but no fruit, so he will destroy a religious system that appears active on the outside, but that is lifeless and faithless on the inside.

The juxtaposition of the fig tree and the temple, while the tension created by the cursing of the fig tree is still fresh in mind, leads the reader to perceive the two incidents as one unit. Then, when he comes to verses 20 and 21, he finds out what has happened to the fig tree. The tension is resolved, and as he has identified the fig tree with the temple in his thinking, now he cannot shake the impression that what has happened to the fig tree is also what will happen to the temple. In addition, the fact that the fig tree is actually *destroyed* (withered from the roots) suggests that Jesus' action at the temple represents something that is greater than it appears, something more destructive and more final – that is, the destruction of the temple itself.

As if the point is too subtle, Mark would pound on it again and again, and with increasing clarity. Take as an example the parable at the beginning of chapter 12, just a few verses after our passage. We cannot examine it in full, but the ending is sufficient to illustrate the point: "What then will the owner of the vineyard do? He will come and kill those tenants and give the vineyard to others. Haven't you read this scripture: 'The stone the builders rejected has become the capstone; the Lord has done this, and it is marvelous in

our eyes'?" (v. 9-11; also Matthew 21:43).<sup>5</sup> The message is becoming very explicit: "Then they looked for a way to arrest him because they knew he had spoken the parable against them" (v. 12).

By the time we reach chapter 13, figures of speech have been replaced by plain explanation. In the first two verses, we are told – directly and without symbolism – that the temple would be destroyed: "As he was leaving *the temple*, one of his disciples said to him, 'Look, Teacher! What massive stones! What magnificent buildings!' 'Do you see all these great buildings?' replied Jesus. 'Not one stone here will be left on another; every one will be thrown down'" (v. 1-2).

Jesus even specifies the time as to when this would happen, saying, "I tell you the truth, *this generation* will certainly not pass away until *all these things* have happened" (v. 30). The parable in chapter 12 has informed us that, because the people would kill the son of the vineyard's owner (v. 6-7), "He will come and kill those tenants and give the vineyard to others" (v. 9). Later, as the Jews were calling for Jesus to be crucified, they said, "Let his blood be *on us* and *on our children!*" (Matthew 27:25). In this manner, they cursed their own generation and prophesied its doom.

History tells us that things happened exactly as Jesus predicted in the year AD 70. The Romans marched into Jerusalem, and destroyed the temple along with its system of worship. Multitudes of Jews were slaughtered, but the Christians were saved, since Jesus had said, "...let those who are in Judea flee to the mountains" (13:14). The believers obeyed, and they were preserved.

In any case, historical verification is infinitely inferior to divine inspiration. The word of God is infallible, so that even if we were to possess no extra-biblical references, on the basis of the Gospels alone, we could be just as certain that the temple was destroyed within one generation of Jesus' prediction. That historians agree with the Bible adds nothing to it, since it is already perfect and complete; rather, it is the Bible that lends credibility to any historian who agrees with it.

#### **v. 22-25**

Peter says to Jesus in verse 21, "Rabbi, look! The fig tree you cursed has withered!" Then, in verses 22-25, it appears that instead of saying something relevant in response, Jesus suddenly changes the subject and begins to teach about faith, prayer, and forgiveness. However, although these verses indeed discuss faith and prayer, they can in fact make very good sense when interpreted within the context of the destruction of the temple. Since we have been involved with the temple theme all along, we will first examine these verses from this angle, and then we will discuss the specific applications that they have for faith and prayer.

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<sup>5</sup> "Therefore I tell you that the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people who will produce its fruit" (Matthew 21:43).

When Solomon dedicates his temple back in 1 Kings 8, he prays, "May your eyes be open toward this temple night and day, this place of which you said, 'My Name shall be there,' so that you will *hear the prayer* your servant prays toward this place. Hear the supplication of your servant and of your people Israel when they pray toward this place. Hear from heaven, your dwelling place, and *when you hear, forgive*" (v. 29-30).

Notice the connection that he makes between the temple and prayer, and the temple and forgiveness. In the mind of a Jew, this is the house of prayer, and the place where he offers sacrifices for his sins. But some have so tied worship, prayer, and forgiveness to this place and its system that it has produced in their thinking not only a false conception of piety, but also a false sense of security. Recall the passage from Jeremiah, where the prophet rebukes the people for oppressing the foreigners, the poor, the orphans and the widows, and for following false gods, and yet they think that no evil would befall them because they have the temple of the Lord.

This returns us to a question that we brought up earlier: But what if God abandons his own temple? How then will the people's prayers be answered? And how then will they find forgiveness for their sins? Verses 12-21 tell us that theirs is a religion with only leaves but no fruit, and rather than tolerating it any longer, God has pronounced a final curse upon it. Within one generation, the temple and its system would be destroyed, and the Jews would be either killed or scattered. What would become of true worship? How will man find contact and favor with God?

Jesus answers, "Have faith in God."<sup>6</sup> No one has ever been justified on the basis of obedience to the law, but the basis of a right relationship with God has always been faith and nothing else. As Hebrews 11:6 says, "And without faith it is impossible to please God, because anyone who comes to him must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who earnestly seek him." It does not say that you must please God or come to him through the temple system, but as Paul explains, "So the law was put in charge to lead us to Christ that we might be justified by faith. Now that faith has come, we are no longer under the supervision of the law" (Galatians 3:24-25).

The issue had always been faith, and that was the problem with the Jews. Even though they were going through the motions of prayer and sacrifice, they remained in unbelief. "Therefore," Jesus tells them, "I tell you that the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people who will produce its fruit" (Matthew 21:43). Of course, the kingdom of God itself cannot be destroyed, but now the administration of grace is no longer tied to the Jewish temple, but to the Church of God, a temple made without hands, made up of those who are circumcised in the heart by the Spirit (see John 4:19-24).

In addition, the truth is that all the elements of temple worship remain, but now we have them in their full manifestation instead of in the form of types and shadows. There is

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<sup>6</sup> The alternate translations, "Have the faith [faithfulness] of God" and "You have the faithfulness of God," are also consistent with the interpretation that I offer below. The verse would then refer to the fact that our spiritual condition depends on God's faithfulness rather than on the temple system. The emphasis on our faith toward God is retained in verses 23 and 24.

Jesus our mediator, Jesus our sacrifice, and the heavenly Holy of Holies, to which we have ready access by faith in Christ through the Spirit of God.

The passage indicates that even though we no longer have a temple – that is, the building – our prayers are not weakened. Even without the temple, faith can still go so far as to move mountains (v. 23), and to receive "whatever" it asks for in prayer (v. 24). As for forgiveness, although the system of animal sacrifice has disappeared, the true sacrifice has come and remains, which is Jesus Christ the Lamb of God. Thus forgiveness belongs to anyone who has faith – not the mere appearance of piety, but a true faith rooted in a heart that has been transformed by God's grace, and that can now freely extend forgiveness to others (v. 25; also Matthew 18:21-35).

As for faith and prayer, although the context of verses 22-25 is the false piety of the Jews and the destruction of the temple, these verses make several points about faith and prayer that are true in themselves and in the larger context of biblical teaching.

In verse 21, Peter marvels that the fig tree that Jesus has cursed has withered, even from the roots. Jesus apparently wishes to push his disciples' thinking further and tells them that if a person has faith, he can even command a mountain to be uprooted and to be cast into the sea, and it will happen. From what we understand about the location of the group as this is spoken, "this mountain" is the Mount of Olives and "the sea" refers to the Dead Sea. For our purpose, it matters little which mountain or which sea Jesus is pointing to. However, that Jesus is referring to a particular mountain carries some significance, as we will see below.

Commentators of all varieties and persuasions immediately scramble to assert that Jesus' statement is not to be taken in the literal sense, but that the mountain is symbolic of some difficulty or obstacle (Zechariah 4:6-7). Although I agree that the mountain represents something more than just the physical mountain referred to in the statement, and indeed to "move mountains" is a common rabbinic expression, I would insist that we must first take the statement in its fullest literal sense, and then acknowledge those things that the literal mountain symbolizes.

It is sheer foolishness to think that if something is a symbol for something else, then the symbol *itself* has no literal status. The Passover lamb represents Jesus Christ, the true and final sacrifice, but there is indeed a physical lamb at the Passover Feast. Verse 23 itself is couched in the context of the cursing of the fig tree. For certain, the fig tree represents something else, but there really is a fig tree, which Jesus curses, and which then withers from the roots.

How, then, can we say that because the mountain is a symbol for difficulties and obstacles, therefore the mountain is not literal? The same commentators would say that Jesus is pointing to the Mount of Olives as he makes his statement. So, when he says "*this* mountain," does he mean *this* mountain or not? Or does he mean, "If you have faith, you can say to *this* mountain, but not really *any* mountain"? No, if X is a symbol for Y,

then a statement using X to make a point about Y would apply to X *and* Y, not Y minus X.

There is the claim that the statement is a hyperbole, a deliberate exaggeration to get a point across. I do not object to the idea that Jesus sometimes uses hyperbole as a rhetorical or literary device to communicate a teaching; however, verse 23 cannot be thus interpreted. In fact, to understand it as solely hyperbolic would produce blasphemous implications.

Let me explain. To suggest that it is hyperbole to say that through faith we can command even a mountain to move implies that we can accomplish lesser things through faith. That is, if moving a mountain is an *exaggerated* picture of the power of faith, then it means that faith can still perform lesser things than moving a mountain.

However, notice that Jesus says, "Have faith *in God*," and not "Have faith in yourself." What is accomplished is done in utter trust and dependence on God, through the power and energy of God. When we have faith in God for something to be accomplished, such as to move a mountain, it is really God who performs the task.

Therefore, to say that this statement is mere hyperbole is to say that it is an exaggeration of what God can accomplish, so that even God cannot uproot a mountain and throw it into the sea. Otherwise, the interpretation implies that anything that is accomplished by faith is in fact our own doing, so that a faith that moves a mountain is an exaggeration because *in ourselves* we cannot move a mountain. The former denies God's omnipotence; the latter amounts to deism. I will leave it up to you to decide which one is worse, but suffice it to say that both implications are wrong. And because both implications are wrong, the position generating them must also be wrong. The statement cannot be mere hyperbole.

Then, more than a few commentators suggest that verse 23 refers to precisely the type of miracles that the Jews demanded from Jesus, and which he refused to perform. First, from reading the Gospels, I question whether the Jews ever required from Jesus a miracle of *this* magnitude. It might have never crossed their minds to demand something like this. Second, Jesus did perform tremendous signs and wonders – in fact, more than what was demanded of him. He walked on water, calmed the storm, and here he cursed the fig tree and caused it to wither. Not all the great miracles were performed only before his disciples, for he also raised Lazarus from the dead before many witnesses and multiplied the fish and the bread before thousands of people (John 11:19, 45; 6:10). Neither did he refuse to perform miracles before his critics. For example, he publicly healed a man with a shriveled hand before the Pharisees and the scribes (Luke 6:7-10).

What Jesus did refuse to do was to perform miracles – great or small – *on demand*, especially when the challenge came from hardened unbelievers, who already knew he could work miracles, and who were not looking for reasons to believe, but for reasons to convict him of some crime. So, since Jesus did perform very great miracles, and since he even did many of them in public and before hostile skeptics, we conclude that what the

commentators say about Jesus refusing to perform great miracles is misleading, and in fact outright inaccurate.

Then, there is the silly observation that there are greater miracles than moving a mountain, such as the conversions of human hearts. Of course conversion is greater. As the Chinese proverb, loosely translated, says, "A kingdom is easy to change, but a person's nature is hard to move." But this point works against their position, for if the greater miracles like spiritual conversions happen every day, then what is there to prevent the much smaller miracles like moving mountains from occurring? It is absurd to say that because there are greater miracles, therefore the much smaller ones *never* happen and are never meant to happen.

Another way that some have challenged a literal interpretation of verse 23 is just to ask, "What good is it?" Why would someone ever need to move a mountain, and to do it by a verbal command? But the question is irrelevant to the discussion. We are considering whether it *can* happen, not whether we ever *need* something like this to happen. Many things that we never need to happen are nevertheless possible. Still, no commentator can show that a need for such a miracle would never come up in all of human history.

In Matthew 21, when the disciples ask, "How did the fig tree wither so quickly?" (v. 20), Jesus replies, "I tell you the truth, if you have faith and do not doubt, not only can you do what was done to the fig tree, but also you can say to this mountain, 'Go, throw yourself into the sea,' and it will be done" (v. 21). Note that he says, "*not only* can you do what was done to the fig tree, *but also* you can say to this mountain...."

Regarding Matthew 21, one commentator has the nerve to say that although the fig tree that Jesus curses is literal, when he says in verse 21 that the disciples can do the same, the fig tree has become symbolic, just as the mountain is symbolic. It would be easier to assert that the fig tree that Jesus curses is symbolic as well, and that somehow the disciples witness a symbolic fig tree that symbolically withers away. It is easier still just to throw the Bible away and become a non-Christian. There is really no allowance for a solely symbolic interpretation of either the tree or the mountain.

It seems that the most common reason for asserting a symbolic interpretation of Mark 11:23 is just plain unbelief. These commentators fail at the very thing that the verse promotes – the idea that great things are possible when a person believes in God and relies on his power. But their interpretation amounts to a veiled declaration that what Jesus says is false.

For some people, another reason to soften or spiritualize the verse is to prevent its abuse. In our time, there is a teaching that is popular in some charismatic sects. In fact, it is so prevalent that we can even call it a movement. Supposedly derived from Mark 11:23 and similar verses, it says that if a person believes, then whatever he says will happen, and the diligent application of this teaching could bring anyone health and wealth. Commentators are afraid to say anything that would encourage such a teaching. However, to illegitimately soften or spiritualize a biblical verse is a misguided way of solving the

problem of abuse. Moreover, the verse *does* say that if a person believes, then whatever he says will happen. It is futile to counter abuse by denying what the verse clearly and literally means.

The proper way to counter abuse is not to change the meaning of the verse, but to criticize the false teaching where it truly deviates from Scripture. To illustrate, I will raise two points about the teaching in question. The first has to do with the nature of faith, and the second has to do with the source of faith, or how faith is generated. These two points do not cover all the erroneous ideas espoused by the teaching, but our present purpose is to arrive at a correct positive understanding of verse 23, nothing more.

First, this false teaching conceives of faith as a force that is powerful in itself. Sometimes it is less esoteric and amounts to a christianized version of the self-centered doctrine of "positive thinking." Its proponents are not always consistent in this, but when they do speak from such a perspective, they do not refer to faith as a person's belief and reliance on a proper object – as in God, his promises, and so on – but that belief *itself* is the power that produces the desired effects. Attacking this misconception of faith will at the same time check the abuse of verse 23.

Second, the false teaching appeals to Romans 10:17 ("faith comes by hearing") and asserts that faith is produced by hearing the words of Scripture over and over again. One way to do this is for a person to repeatedly speak some selected biblical verses to himself. For example, a sick person can say, "By his stripes, I am healed" (see 1 Peter 2:24) several hundred times a day. He might doubt the statement at first, but he will eventually become convinced that it is true, and then by the principle taught in Mark 11:23, physical healing will follow.

When they attempt to oppose this teaching, many people end up attacking Scripture itself. They would criticize the principle that a Christian can command things to happen by faith. But this principle is *exactly* what Jesus teaches. Adherents of the false teaching are right to complain that it is sheer unbelief to suggest that Jesus does not literally mean what he says in verse 23. All Christians should affirm that if we have faith, then we can command a mountain to move, and it will happen. Jesus demonstrated it on the fig tree, and then he said that we can do the same and even more, if we have faith. So unless we are willing to sacrifice the inspiration of Scripture due to unbelief, this principle is not subject to debate.

What is wrong with the false teaching is not their understanding of the principle, but in their understanding of faith. First, they erroneously conceive of faith as a force – that the power resides in belief *as such* – instead of understanding faith as the belief in divinely revealed propositions that require God's conscious exercise of his power to make good. Second, they falsely conceive of faith as something that they can produce within themselves by repeatedly listening to biblical propositions.

The first misunderstanding makes their definition of faith altogether non-Christian. This point alone is sufficient to refute their doctrine concerning Mark 11:23. But the second



point is even more relevant to our main purpose, which is to attain a correct positive understanding of the verse. To review, Jesus teaches the principle, "if we have faith, then we can move mountains." Commentators have focused on qualifying the "we can move mountains" portion of the principle. But I suggest that we should focus on the "if we have faith" portion instead.

Here is the answer, then. The Bible says that faith comes by hearing the word of God. From this, the false teaching in question has inferred that faith *always* comes when a person hears the word of God. But the verse does not say any such thing. In context, the verse is talking about the preaching of the gospel. As Paul writes, "How, then, can they call on the one they have not believed in? And how can they believe in the one of whom they have not heard? And how can they hear without someone preaching to them?" (Romans 10:14). But nowhere is it suggested that *everyone* who hears the gospel will believe and thus be saved.

Salvation comes when a person believes the gospel, and a person can only believe the gospel when he finds out what the gospel is and what it says. Thus someone must go preach the gospel so that people might hear it. But the point is not that everyone who hears the gospel will become a Christian. Still less is Paul suggesting that the more a person hears, the more faith he is *guaranteed* to receive. The false teaching in question confuses how faith is usually facilitated or "delivered" (hearing) with what actually causes a person to believe what he hears.

So what causes a person to believe the word of God when he hears it? The Bible teaches that both faith and unbelief are controlled by God. It teaches in numerous places that a person refuses to believe because God actively works in his mind to harden his heart (John 12:39-40). So a person can hear the word of God every day for half a century, but unless God sovereignly grants him faith to believe what he hears, he will remain in unbelief.

The kind of conviction that comes from nothing more than prolonged repetition could very well be the effect of brainwashing, for a lack of a better term. It is true that there can be a relationship between continuous exposure to the Bible and an increase of faith, but right now I am referring to mere repetition without the work of the Spirit. If the kind of faith that the Bible talks about can come this way, then the most effective form of evangelism would be to kidnap the unbelievers and lock them into a room where the Bible is played on loud speakers all day and all night. There would be no need for prayer, for persuasion, or for the Holy Spirit.

But again, the resulting conviction would be the result of mere brainwashing, and the profession of faith a mere parroting of what has been heard, similar to how an insane person might mindlessly mutter some of the phrases that he overhears or that are fed to him by others. There would be no genuine belief in the promises of God, but the conviction would serve only as the lifeless and thoughtless replacement to the person's previous beliefs that have now been forcibly short-circuited by the process. The person might feel convinced, but there can be no power and no salvation in this kind of "faith."

True faith is a gift from God (Ephesians 2:8). In 1 Corinthians 12:9, Paul refers to the kind of faith that is a special manifestation of the Spirit. From its mention in 1 Corinthians 13:2 – that is, in the context of spiritual manifestations – we understand that it is *this* kind of faith that moves mountains. Just as faith to believe the gospel for salvation is sovereignly granted by God to whomever he chooses, this special manifestation of faith is also granted "just as he determines" (1 Corinthians 12:11).

This biblical understanding of faith returns the fulfillment of Mark 11:23 to the sovereign hand of God. In the process, it destroys the false teaching in question without compromising the principle taught by Jesus – that if we have faith, we will have whatever we say. The difference is that whether we have faith, or whether we have this kind of faith, is entirely up to God. He might deliver it to us by means of his word, but hearing his word does not guarantee this kind or level of faith.

Our faith depends on the work of the Spirit, who applies the word of God to our hearts and convinces us of its truth, giving us confidence of its effect, power, and relevance. The above commentators would be relieved that I have provided a legitimate way to explain how what Jesus says would *not* happen. But I have also explained how it *could* happen – it will happen when God grants the faith. So it remains for the commentators, or those who think like them, to assert that God will *never* grant this kind of faith. However, there is no biblical evidence for this, and if God would never grant this kind of faith *even in principle*, then this would render Jesus' statement pointless. Thus it appears that the suggestion, that God would never grant this kind of faith even in principle, once again comes from nothing other than unbelief.

To recapitulate, verse 23 teaches that if we have faith, we can even command a mountain to move, and it will happen. Whether we will have this kind of faith is up to God, and at any time, it is possible that he will grant this kind of faith. It is from this same perspective that we can derive a correct understanding of verse 24. In that verse, Jesus refers to "whatever you ask for in prayer." Commentators again pile qualifications upon qualifications upon this, until they drown the verse deep into uncertainty and unbelief, making it practically useless for the readers. Of course any scriptural promise must be understood within the larger context of the Bible. However, this verse is clearly positive in intent, and should be expounded from a positive angle.

Larry Hurtado notes that Mark places great emphasis in calling Christians to follow Jesus' ministry, and we should understand this teaching about faith in such a context.<sup>7</sup> He adds, "Here Mark presents Jesus as an example of faith, and his readers are not only to admire Jesus' faith but also to imitate it."<sup>8</sup>

We should support this perspective, since it is true that the Bible stresses faith as something that glorifies God and furthers his purpose. However, it is possible to press too

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<sup>7</sup> Larry W. Hurtado, *Mark*, New International Biblical Commentary (Hendrickson Publishers, 1989), p. 185.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

far even this legitimate point, since the Bible also describes faith's crucial role in drawing on God's resources for our own success and preservation. We must not hesitate to exercise faith in God to meet our personal needs, as if to say that God's resources are required for ministry but optional for our everyday living. A Christian should look to God for everything, even his daily bread (Matthew 6:11).

Perhaps it is best to acknowledge that faith in God can work for both our own benefit and for the advancement of his kingdom, and these two are seldom in conflict when we place the former within a broader concern for the latter. In other words, our faith for self-preservation and various benefits must be shaped by and subordinate to our concern for God's kingdom.

Another aspect of faith has to do with persistence. Throughout the Bible, faith is sometimes portrayed as a quality that performs single and instantaneous acts of greatness, but at other times it is portrayed as a persistent and stubborn conviction that produces consistent speech and action over long durations. One only needs to read through Hebrews 11 for examples of both facets of faith. It is through "faith *and patience*" that we inherit God's promises (Hebrews 6:12). This is an important reminder for all those who venture out in faith for the work of the kingdom. Our trust is in God's word, which never fails, and not in immediate or short-term results.

Then, verse 25 cautions us against an extreme individualism in our faith. We cannot love God and at the same time hate our brothers and sisters in Christ. We cannot have faith toward God and at the same time harbor resentment toward others. Strong faith thrives in an environment where God's people live in love and harmony, but strife will suffocate it. As 1 Peter 3:7 says, "Husbands, in the same way be considerate as you live with your wives, and treat them with respect as the weaker partner and as heirs with you of the gracious gift of life, *so that nothing will hinder your prayers.*"

Jesus tells us that faith can move mountains. This is not a teaching for us to explain away or for us to drown under a thousand qualifications. Instead, it serves to confront our unbelief and encourage stronger faith in us. It enables us to attempt new things, attain greater heights, and stretch our imagination. We must not shun or deny this faith. We must covet it!

Lord, we believe, help our unbelief! Increase our faith, so that we may "encourage the exhausted, and strengthen the feeble" (Isaiah 35:3, NASB). And if it pleases you, grant us a faith that can even uproot a mountain by a mere word of command. Lord, grant us this faith – now in the form of an explosive power, now in the form of a persistent trust – so that we may cast aside all obstacles and perform exploits in your name, for your glory and for the good of your people. Amen.