

# MOVING MOUNTAINS

The Practice of Persistent Prayer



**Dr. David M. Crump**



*introduction*

# Moving Mountains

The Practice of Persistent Prayer

**W**e all know that just because we want something, it doesn't mean that we will get it—even if we really want it and it is something that is good for us and for those around us. But we wish for things all the same.

Prayer feels different though. Prayer is not simply wishing. It is asking an all-powerful and all-loving God for good things. We often take our requests to God and expect that he will

answer. We ask for healings, for jobs, for friends to be saved. After all, Jesus said that if we have faith, we can ask for mountains to be moved. But people stay sick, jobs don't come, and friends stay away from God. What happened? Don't we believe?

Most of us wrestle with prayer, especially when they seem to go unanswered. We offer the following pages to help you walk through the sometimes difficult relationship of faith and prayer.

### *Our Daily Bread*

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*one*

## When Prayer Becomes a Burden

**T**he young woman entering my church office was a stranger to me, but it took only a moment to discern that she had been crying for a long time. Her sobs were more groans than sighs, deep groans that rumbled upward from the wellspring of a fractured heart. I sat waiting and praying, asking for wisdom. After a few moments, she told me why she had come to my door.

Only the day before, her best friend had died

of cancer in the prime of life, leaving behind a husband and several small children. But this young woman now found herself mourning not one but two shocking deaths, for she discovered that her own Christian faith had begun to die soon after her friend.

Both women had attended the same church. When the cancer had been diagnosed only a few months earlier, their pastor had organized an around-the-clock, 24-hours-a-day, 7-days-a-week prayer vigil. He told everyone that they would storm the gates of heaven, claim their sister's healing in the name of Jesus, and if they only had enough faith, then they would prove that the God who brings healing is still more powerful than the devil who breeds cancer.

So the church prayed.

Now, this broken, deflated woman stared at me through swollen eyes and asked, "Pastor, why did God lose? How can the devil be more powerful than Jesus?"

I believe in the possibility of miracles, but I am also wary of whose stories I believe. There are, after all, many imposters even within the church.

I had a good friend who had grown up in central



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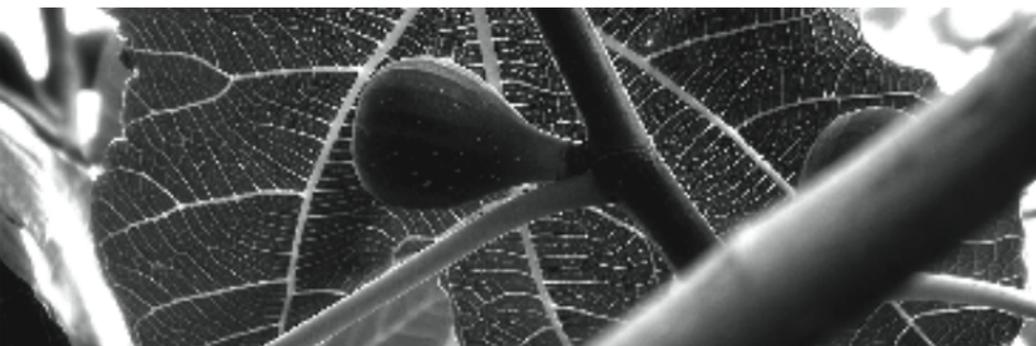
Africa. Her parents were missionaries in the bush, and she was well acquainted with difficult living conditions. I knew her as a sane, well-adjusted woman, not prone to fantasy or exaggeration. Yet, on more than one occasion, I heard her tell the story of how her family's vehicle had once run out of gas on a long cross-country trip. Her father had underestimated the length of the journey, leaving them stranded in the blistering African sun miles away from anywhere. While his wife and three children tried to find some refuge in the vehicle's shade, the young father prayed, knowing that his miscalculation had placed his family in a life-or-death situation. The spare gas canisters were empty, but they did have a large canister of water. Raising the water to heaven, he confessed his foolishness and asked the Lord to perform a miracle in order to save his family. He then poured it all into the gas tank. After loading up the family and climbing into the driver's seat, he turned the ignition. The newly baptized engine roared to life, enabling them to drive nonstop to the next village, where they promptly



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told anyone who would listen about their Lord's miraculous answer to their desperate prayer.

*All Things Are Possible  
for Those Who Believe*



*two*

## Jesus and the Fig Tree

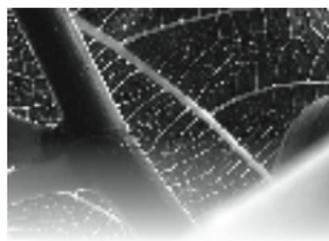
**E**ven though Gary was not a new believer, he had recently left another neighborhood church and was interested in learning more about the distinctives of our church. His questions during our class for new members offered a variety of opportunities for us to compare different perspectives on ministry, theology, and biblical interpretation. Gary was struggling with a long-term, debilitating illness that severely limited his ability to function. He had prayed for healing numerous times with a variety of church leaders and believed that his eventual

recovery was assured, if he would only persist in faithfully claiming it. How did he know this?

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 (MARK 11:23–24).

Gary’s understanding of the passage seems to be this: The power of faith can turn the impossible into reality for anyone willing to take the risk of true, believing prayer. According to this interpretation of the passage, asking God for the impossible is not something to be taken lightly, but neither is it out of the question for the true believer. Getting what we ask for, no matter how unlikely, is only a matter of time for anyone who persists, refusing all doubt. Gary had been suffering and praying for years. Despite the delay, he believed that he had already been healed and that some day complete physical health would be restored.

Gary’s reading of Mark 11 is not uncommon. I have heard similar claims about the power of faith-filled prayer many



*These verses do appear to offer a blank check to any request that can honestly be signed with the pen of mountain-moving faith.*

times. These verses *do* appear to offer a blank check to any request that can honestly be signed with the pen of mountain-moving faith. For many of us, however, such claims raise more questions than they answer: What about those who never see their long-requested, long-awaited miracles? Does the absence of a miracle suggest weak faith, or worse yet, doubt?

Any attempt to explain the New Testament's picture of the relationships between prayer, faith, and God's response must include taking a serious account of Mark 11:23–24 and related statements elsewhere in the Gospels—Luke 17 and Matthew 17.

## Synoptic Parallels

*He [Jesus] replied, "If you have faith as small as a mustard seed, you can say to this mulberry tree, 'Be uprooted and planted in the sea,' and it will obey you" (LUKE 17:6).*

Luke's saying has no particular relationship to prayer. In its context (17:3–10<sup>8</sup>) it is concerned with the faith needed to repeatedly forgive a brother or sister. In response to Peter's astonishment over this expectation, Jesus identifies such faith as a requirement of true discipleship. But here Jesus is not suggesting an amount of faith necessary, but a genuineness of faith. Forgiving repeated offenses is not a matter of faith's volume but of its authenticity. The comparison of faith to a mustard seed is not meant to suggest the amount of faith but faith's reality in a person's life. The lesson is not that we must "believe and not doubt" in order to see the

impossible accomplished, but that we demonstrate that we believe *at all* by a willingness to repeatedly forgive a repentant offender. Great faith is precisely what is not required in this instance.

↗ In Luke 17, Jesus said, “If your brother or sister sins against you, rebuke them; and if they repent, forgive them. Even if they sin against you seven times in a day and seven times come back to you saying, ‘I repent,’ you must forgive them” (vv. 3–4). In response to this, the disciples said to Jesus, “Increase our **faith**” (v. 5).

He replied, “Because you have so little faith. Truly I tell you, if you have faith as small as a mustard seed, you can say to this mountain, ‘Move from here to there,’ and it will move. Nothing will be impossible for you” (MATTHEW 17:20).

Matthew 17 also uses this mustard-seed saying independently of any reference to prayer. Although we might assume that prayer played some role in the disciples’ failed attempt to exorcise a demon-possessed boy, it is not explicitly stated in the passage. Matthew<sup>↗</sup> instead uses Jesus’s statement about mustard-seed faith to accuse the disciples of unbelief in their failure to exorcise the epileptic boy.

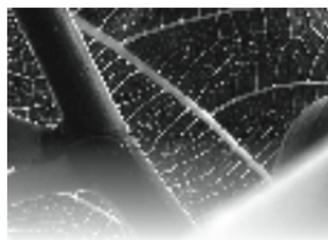
↗ **Matthew also omits Jesus’s summary statement** from the parallel in Mark 9:29—“this kind can come out only by prayer”—which is certainly an odd step if he had wished to link the quality or quantity of faith to the efficacy of prayer.

Our search for an explicit connection between faith and prayer leads us to Jesus's statements connected to his cursing the fig tree (MARK 11:23–24; MATTHEW 21:21–22). In these passages, the power of faith free of doubt is apparently connected to the outcome of petitionary prayer. ▀

▀ **Petitionary prayer** is simply prayer that requests something from God or asks him to do something.

## Mark's Composition

Jesus's cursing of the fig tree has raised more than a few eyebrows. English philosopher Bertrand Russell, author of *Why I Am Not a Christian*, claims that the distinct lack of virtue demonstrated in Christ's outburst was one of the reasons he considered Jesus a lesser figure than Buddha or Socrates.<sup>1</sup> Even among those more sympathetic to the New Testament, such words as “unedifying,” “problematic,” “objectionable,” “nonsense,” and “irrational and revolting” are not unusual, especially in light of the fact that “it was not the season for figs” (11:13). Jesus's treatment of an unproductive fruit tree certainly raises questions for any curious reader, particularly in this noticeably longer version in Mark.



*Jesus's treatment of an unproductive fruit tree certainly raises questions for any curious reader.*

Most notable in Mark's telling is the way that Jesus visits the fig tree twice over a period of two days, as opposed to once in Matthew's account. The initial cursing (MARK 11:12–14) comes before Jesus's demonstration in the temple (11:15–19). In Matthew, however, the cursing of the fig tree follows the clearing of the temple. In Mark, the withered tree is rediscovered the next morning (11:20–21), and the incident is used as an occasion for instruction on prayer (11:22–26). The account in Mark unfolds like this: fig tree (11:12–14), temple (11:15–19), fig tree (11:20–21), prayer (11:22–26).

## Jesus and the Temple

Most scholars agree that Mark intended his readers to understand Jesus's behavior as a prophetic warning of the eventual doom that will soon overtake the temple, its priesthood, and even Israel itself.

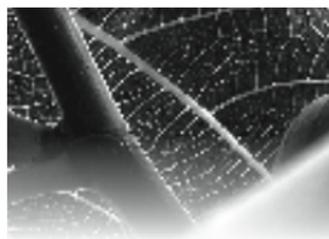
The cursing of the tree is symbolic of the temple's condemnation. This imagery is not new with Mark. The Old Testament often uses the image of the fig tree. It is a favorite prophetic symbol for the people of Israel. And the barren and withered fig tree, representing an unfaithful nation soon to be overrun by its enemies, is a common Old Testament image (ISAIAH 28:4; 34:4; JEREMIAH 8:13; HOSEA 2:12; JOEL 1:7, 12; AMOS 4:9; NAHUM 3:12; HABAKKUK 3:17). Quite often the center of Israel's faithlessness was its abuse of the temple services. It was not unusual for the prophets to use a withered fig tree as a warning

of the temple's destruction. In fact, the passage quoted in Mark 11:17 is just such a text. Jesus quotes the prophet Jeremiah who condemns Judah for hypocritically thinking that temple attendance would expunge the guilt of her idolatry:

Hear the word of the LORD, all you people of Judah who come through these gates to worship the LORD. . . . 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!" . . . But look, you are trusting in deceptive words that are worthless. . . . Has this house, which bears my Name, become a den of robbers to you? (JEREMIAH 7:2-4, 8, 11)

The lengthy judgment continues, and eventually Jeremiah incorporates a variety of images, including the withered fig tree: <sup>14</sup>

I will take away their harvest, declares the LORD.  
There will be no grapes on the vine.  
There will be no figs on the tree,



*The barren and withered fig tree, representing an unfaithful nation soon to be overrun by its enemies, is a common Old Testament image.*

and their leaves will wither.  
What I have given them  
will be taken from them. (JEREMIAH 8:13)

📖 For additional examples of **fig tree imagery** applied to the condemnation of the temple see Hosea 2:11–12; 9:10–17; Amos 4:4–13. These judgments are not elicited by the temple services per se, but by Israel's apostasy and subsequent abuse of the temple.

Warnings about the faithless temple and images of barren fig trees are an easy prophetic association. Since the temple was the heart of the nation, there was no confusion in applying the fig tree imagery to both temple and nation. As goes the temple, so goes the nation, and so too goes the priesthood and its temple leadership.

## The Fig Tree, Temple, and Prayer

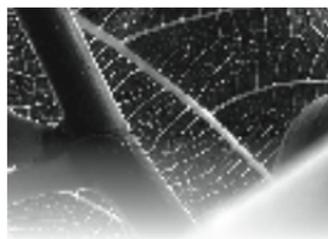
Besides the relationship of the fig tree with the temple, Mark gives us another relationship to consider. The disciples' eventual rediscovery of the withered tree (11:20–21) becomes the occasion for Jesus's teaching on the effectiveness of believing prayer (11:22–26). This new association transforms Jesus's curse into an example of petitionary prayer, and the withered tree becomes its miraculous result. The encouragement "have faith in God" (11:22) refers back to Jesus's words in 11:14: "May no one ever eat fruit from you again." Jesus had spoken in faith, and the fig tree turned into an example of effective prayer

from someone who believes that anything is possible with God. Jesus's miracle takes on a dual symbolic significance because Mark associates the fig tree with both the temple and the lesson on prayer. Mark's double association creates a dual role for the fig tree: negatively, the withered tree symbolizes the eventual destruction of the Jerusalem temple; positively, the tree also represents the power of prayer offered in faith.

One more result of the way Mark relates these elements should be recognized before we can make proper sense of faith's role in effective prayer. The fig tree associates the rejection of the temple with prayer. It becomes a "metaphorical clamp to hold [these] two ideas together."<sup>2</sup> Jesus condemns the temple for its failure to become "a house of prayer for all nations" (MARK 11:17, QUOTING ISAIAH 56:7).

To Jesus, the presence of a market in the temple's Court of the Gentiles demonstrates the temple leaders' failure to fulfill their divinely given responsibilities.

Like a fig tree in full leaf but devoid of fruit, the temple, bustling with priestly activity, was all show,



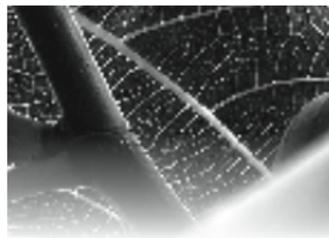
*Jesus's miracle takes on a dual symbolic significance because Mark associates the fig tree with both the temple and the lesson on prayer.*

with no true fruit for God.<sup>3</sup> As a consequence, the temple, which was supposed to be functioning as a house of prayer for Jew and Gentile alike, would soon be destroyed (SEE MARK 13) and replaced by a new community of prayer that would be drawn from all nations (11:22–26).

The connection between temple and prayer would have been crucial to Mark's readers. The temple was God's dwelling place; thus, prayer was typically offered toward the capital city. It was believed that prayer

was more effective, if not guaranteed, because Yahweh communed with his people at Mount Zion. Solomon's dedication prayer for the first temple (1 KINGS 8:22–61) emphasized the direct connection between God's inhabiting the temple and the efficacy of Israel's prayers:

Hear the cry and the prayer that your servant is praying in your presence this day. 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. (1 KINGS 8:28–30)



*What assurances could the disciples have that God would continue to hear the prayers of his people?*

This connection between temple and prayer is reiterated throughout the passage (8:33, 35, 38, 42, 44, 48). Religious literature produced during the period of the second temple, the temple known to Jesus, continued to show the vital relationship between temple and prayer. In fact, this connection was so important that the destruction of the temple in AD 70 caused some rabbis to wonder if prayer was still possible for Israel. The temple's destruction meant the withdrawal of God's presence. ▀

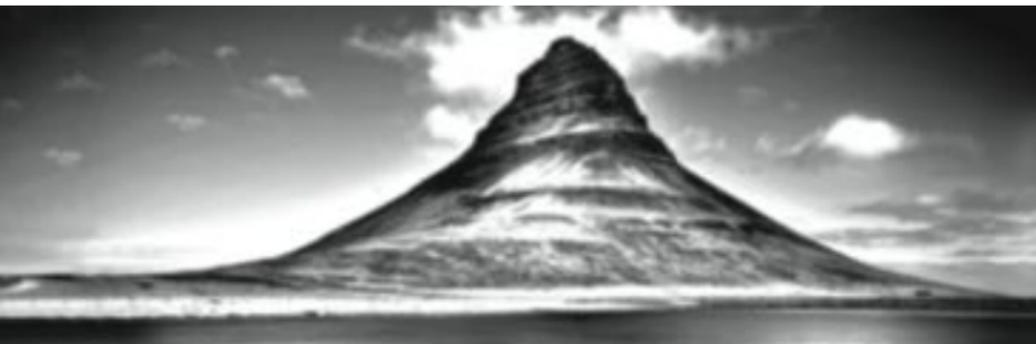
▀ *Rabbi Eleazar (early second century) surmised that since the temple had been the chief means of approaching God, its loss meant that the gates of heaven had been closed: "From the day on which the Temple was destroyed, **the gates of prayer have been closed**, as it says, "Yea, when I cry and call for help, He shuts out my prayer" (Lam. 3:8). R. Eleazar also said: Since the day that the Temple was destroyed, a wall of iron divides between Israel and their Father in Heaven."*<sup>4</sup>

If the temple was connected to the very possibility of praying, Jesus's warning of the temple's impending destruction would have raised the question, *If the temple is gone, how do we pray?* What assurances could the disciples have that God would continue to hear the prayers of his people? Mark presents Jesus's answer. His followers are destined to become the true house of prayer for all nations; they become the new temple.

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<sup>1</sup> Bertrand Russell: *Why I Am Not a Christian and Other Essays on Religion and Related Subjects* (New York: Allen & Unwin, 1957), 19.

- <sup>2</sup> Dowd, S. E., *Prayer, Power, and the Problem of Suffering: Mark 11:22–25 in the Context of Markan Theology*. (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1988) 53.
- <sup>3</sup> Evans, C. A., *Mark 8:27–16:20*. Nashville: Nelson, 2001, 154; and Geddert, T. J. *Mark*. (Scottsdale, PA: Herald, 2001) 266.
- <sup>4</sup> Babylonian Talmud, (*Berakhot* tractate 32b), 22.



*three*

## **Moving Mountains**

**T**hese considerations for the meaning of Mark 11:22–24 remind us that there is often more to reading and understanding Scripture than first meets the eye. Passages should not be wrenched out of context, and correct understanding of literary contexts is tied to understanding historical contexts. Though the task of historical understanding may seem difficult, it results in clearer, more accurate interpretation of the Bible, making it well worth the extra effort. In fact, such work is unavoidable for any student of God’s word who is genuinely interested in knowing and responding to what God asks of us.

With this end in mind, we have one more

“mountain” of historical background to climb before we are on solid footing to explore Mark’s theology of petitionary prayer. The spectacle of mountains performing back flips into the Mediterranean Sea is a dramatic depiction of God’s doing “whatever we ask” in prayer (11:24), if we believe and do not doubt (11:23). But how are we to understand this imagery? How do we explain such a hyperactive landscape?

Many argue that the mountain being moved is not only a metaphorical representation of the power of faith; it also refers to the temple mount, Mount Zion, which will symbolically be removed when the temple is destroyed by Rome.<sup>5</sup> Thus Jesus highlights the contrast between old and new; the failed house of prayer in Jerusalem will be removed to make way for the new house of prayer embodied in the community of his disciples.

Others argue that the removal of this mountain should be understood in the context of ancient debates about the limits of divine power. Today we ask whether it is hypothetically possible for God to create a stone too large for him to lift. In the ancient world a similar question was whether God could create a mountain too heavy for him to move. God’s ability to dislodge mountains was figurative language asserting his power to do the impossible. Mark highlights this conviction elsewhere by reminding the reader that “all things are possible with God” (10:27; 14:36).

So, which of the two possibilities offers greater insight into Jesus’s words? I suggest that we hold both. After all, Mark uses the fig tree as a symbol

of both the destruction of the temple and the power of believing prayer. For similar reasons, the mountain is connected to both the destruction of the temple and the power of believing prayer. The disciples' speaking to this mountain (11:23) compares to Jesus's having faith in God and speaking to the fig tree (11:14, 21). In other words, the very same divine power that withered the barren tree and will destroy the temple is available to praying disciples. The mountain's dual significance holds two important lessons for Mark's readers.

↪ S. E. Dowd insists that **we must choose between these options** and energetically rejects the first two in favor of the third. Once we are convinced, however, that Mark created a dual reference for the fig tree, I fail to understand why he could not have done the same with this mountain imagery.

First, it provides comfort to a persecuted Christian community. Its primary opponents will not be allowed to permanently hinder their community life. ↪ Although Jesus's disciples can anticipate that the hostility vented against their Savior will continue to be directed toward them (MARK 13:9; MATTHEW 10:17; LUKE 12:11; 21:12), the temple's destruction symbolized the power of the disciples' faith in God to overcome any and all opposition. The final outcome of the "war of faith waged against the mountain of unbelief" is not in doubt.<sup>6</sup> Jesus began the age of fulfillment in which the coming of God's kingdom demands the removal of every mountain that blocks

the path and the raising of every intervening valley (ISAIAH 40:3-5; 45:2; 49:11; 54:10; ZECHARIAH 14:4-5).

Initially, **opposition to the church** arose from the Sanhedrin spearheaded by the priesthood and its temple leaders (ACTS 4:1-22; 5:17-42; 6:12-15; 7:54-60; 22:5; 23:1-4, 14-15; 24:1; 25:15; 26:10, 21), but it eventually came to include the synagogue at large (8:1-3; 9:23, 29; 12:1-4; 13:45, 50; 14:2-5, 19; 17:5-9, 13; 18:6, 12-17; 19:9, 33; 20:3; 21:27-36; 23:12-15; 24:9; 25:7, 24).

The second lesson flows from the first. Faith in Jesus puts the disciples in touch with the miraculous power of God. We are invited to pray in the confidence that all things remain possible for our Creator. No request is ever too great. No need is beyond the reach of God's ability. The same power by which Jesus healed the sick and was finally raised from the tomb is available to Christ's new community. ▮

We have no reason to hesitate in believing that **miracles are still possible**. Anyone who places arbitrary, naturalistic limits on what a disciple can reasonably expect of God in this world should stop to consider whether that person's God is the same deity that Jesus turned to when he said to the fig tree, "May no one ever eat fruit from you again" (MARK 11:14).

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<sup>5</sup> Telford, W. R., *The Barren Temple and the Withered Tree: A Redaction-Critical Analysis of the Cursing of the Fig-Tree Pericope in Mark's Gospel and Its Relation to the Cleansing of the Temple Tradition*. (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1980) 110-115.

<sup>6</sup> C. D. Marshall, *Faith as a Theme in Mark's Narrative*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989) 169.



*four*

## Two Conditions

### Faith

**T**he question of faith is crucial to all of Jesus's teaching. But it is especially significant in this passage. Its significance is highlighted by the threefold repetition "have faith in God" (MARK 11:22), "does not doubt . . . but believes" (11:23), and "whatever you ask . . . , believe that you have received it" (11:24). Clearly, faith is essential to answered prayer, but in precisely what way? And even more basic questions tug at us here: What is faith? How is it defined? How may we recognize it when we see it? Or must we simply wait to see if our prayers are answered and then draw our own conclusions?

Mark 11:22 opens a *Pandora's box* of complex questions about faith. First, this verse is noteworthy because the expression translated “have faith in God” is unique in the New Testament. Jesus asks disciples to place their faith in God’s power and to remember that the outcome of prayer is dependent on God’s ability not ours. Precisely *what* the disciple is to believe about the power of God is that “with him all things are possible” (10:27; 14:36). The disciple is told to believe, first, “*that* what he says happens” (11:23), and, second, “*that* you have received” “whatever you asked for” (11:24). Generally, in Matthew, Mark, and Luke the language of faith signifies trust or confidence in the power of God demonstrated through Jesus and/or his disciples (MATTHEW 8:10, 13; 9:28–29; MARK 2:5; 5:34, 36; 10:52; LUKE 1:45; 17:19; CF. ACTS 27:25; ROMANS 4:17–21).<sup>6</sup> The encouragement to “believe that” refers to the fact that God has the power to perform the current request.

In other words, Christian prayer presupposes a very specific worldview, one that affirms that if certain prayers are not answered, it is not because the requests are beyond God’s ability. When we pray, we must come to God confidently believing that “with him all things are possible.” He is the Creator who can restart whatever has stopped, terminate whatever has begun, or redirect anything in process. Faith in this context requires that we embrace the conviction, especially in prayer, that God can still work miracles.

Potential answers are not affected by the volume or strength of our faith. This is apparent for two reasons. First of all, translations that render Mark 11:22 as a

conditional statement: “*if* you have faith in God,” are following a less likely translation of the original Greek. Those few translations that translate “if” may be influenced by Luke 17:6. Also, the phrase following in Mark 11:23 begins with “amen” or “truly,” depending on the version of Scripture. Together, these two considerations indicate that Jesus did not say, “*If* you have such faith, *then* your prayers will be answered.” Rather, he makes a straightforward exhortation, “Have faith in God! Pray. You will be answered!” The volume or quality of faith is not at issue.

## The Condition of Doubt

Similarly, the reference to doubt in Mark 11:23 does not establish a link between possible answers and the quality of one’s faith. Jesus says, “Do not doubt, but believe.” The “but” serves to link the two verbs (“doubt” and “believe”) as alternatives. The command is “not A but B.” In other words, choose. You can have A *or* B, doubt *or* faith, but not *both* simultaneously. In this context, there is no suggestion that faith and doubt make up varying degrees of our belief. To have faith is to refuse to doubt.

The phrase “not doubt” is not intended to describe an especially strong faith, a faith strong enough to see miracles, as opposed to a weak faith that is haunted by doubt and cannot see miracles. Rather, not doubting is the very definition of faith. A faith willing to ask for miracles, however tentatively, is the faith that will one day see miracles. The doubter suspects that God does not have the power to do the

impossible. Allowing doubts to shape our behavior is to reject the worldview promoted by Jesus. Consequently, the doubter fails to pray—or at least refuses to ask God for miracles. After all, many people pray daily, but they seem to have no real confidence in God’s ability or at least his willingness to act in ways that go beyond the natural order of things. According to 11:22–24, such prayers are not prayers of faith but of doubt. Prayers that do not anticipate at least the possibility of the miraculous are prayers made in unbelief.



*Allowing doubts to shape our behavior is to reject the worldview promoted by Jesus.*

## **Are There Any Guarantees?**

We should not ignore the two promises guaranteeing God’s affirmative response to faithful prayer in Mark 11:23–24. In each verse, the possibility of miraculous answers to any and every prayer is apparently held out to anyone who asks in faith: “Whoever says to this mountain, ‘Rise up and be thrown into the sea’ and does not doubt in his heart but believes that what he says will happen, *it will be done for him*. . . . Whatever you ask in prayer, believe that you have received it, and *it will be done for you*” (MY TRANSLATION). Do not these words assure us that, as long as the request is made with genuine faith, anyone (WHOEVER) is

free to ask for anything (WHATEVER) and that person is guaranteed a positive response from God? It certainly sounds that way. Caveats intended to moderate such a wholesale promise have already been unmasked as illegitimate readings of the passage. There are no conditional (IF/THEN) clauses, no evaluations of greater or lesser faith (WITH OR WITHOUT DOUBT), only a straightforward promise that God will continue to perform the impossible for those who believe and ask.

Yet, it's a simple fact of life that many people have desperately sought supernatural intervention in their lives only to be sorely disappointed. How are we to understand Mark's seemingly blanket assurance that prayers for miracles will always receive positive answers? Several factors must be taken into consideration.

First, perhaps the simplistic nature of the saying is a rhetorical device intended to heighten the seriousness of cultivating faith in divine possibilities, particularly in the face of our tendency to disbelieve. The concrete images of mountains and fig trees have sometimes been made into metaphors for the broader reality that God is still at home in his world, living, moving, and even rearranging the furniture regularly. The withered fig tree illustrates the promise of moving a specific mountain—an image that suggests how deeply believers should expect the miraculous. Likewise, the apparent guarantee of every mountain being moved by any and every prayer is an encouragement to look for miracles, no matter

how many rocky peaks we must climb. Cynicism is the enemy of faith, the root rot of prayer.

Second, the emphatic assurances of Mark 11:23–24 are made with the future tense of the verb “to be.” It is not unusual for the future (“it will be”) to be used as an imperative (“it must be”). In fact, this is the usual way of reading these verses. But they can also be read for what they are, the future tense. One possible way to understand this promise is that Mark intends to remind his readers that the final fulfillment of all God’s miraculous promises awaits the fulfillment of his kingdom. After all, the context for this promise of miraculous intervention is the inbreaking of the kingdom of God, the beginning of the “end of the age” with Jesus, and his coming death.

Jesus’s death demonstrates that sometimes the mountain first crushes before it is removed. It will be gone, but not just yet. Miracles do not always happen precisely as we had hoped. Often the promises of faith appear only as vague images on the horizon of a distant tomorrow. Our requests have been heard and answered, but the arrival of pertinent answers is subject to the time frame of God’s “already/ but not yet” kingdom—Jesus has come, but he is yet to come; Jesus brought the end, but we await the end; Jesus brought salvation, but we wait to be fully saved. Pray for miracles, believing that your petitions have been heard and that God has already responded, but some answers arrive sooner than others—some in our lifetimes, others at the end of the age.

Some will balk at these suggestions, insisting that

the verbs retain their imperatival sense and that this is a promise of answers given now. This view, however, leaves us with the frustrating questions of apparently unanswered prayers and of miracles that never arrive: How can the assurances of Mark 11:23–24 fit the believer's real-life experience? Can any of us honestly say that we have literally received every miracle we have ever requested? Did our desperation make any difference?

Final answers to such questions require that we first look at the connections between faith, prayer, and the divine will, especially as they unfold throughout the ministry of Jesus. His life offers the greatest example of human existence directed by faith in God's ability to perform the impossible.



**No, I did not try** to explain these interpretive issues to my friend Gary as he shared the thinning optimism of his prayers for healing with my evening Bible study class. Perhaps I should have, but I doubt it. He was continuing to pray; he still believed in God's power to perform miracles, and I had no way of knowing what God's future plans might entail. I would have been more inclined to do so had I detected some whiff of spiritual exhaustion or a cancerous cynicism about prayer in general. For those are the principal dangers of the typical misunderstanding that Gary brought to this passage. Prayer is not magic, and there is no blanket promise,

no faith formula, to guarantee God's granting any and every petition *if only* the one praying will *believe*. I pray that that much is clear.

According to Mark 11:12–26, prayer is the expression of faith, and faith is the only means of relationship with God. The way a person talks with God and what one is willing to ask of him reflect on the reality or the illusion of that person's faith commitment.

The unbelieving temple leaders of Jesus's day were replaced by (and find fulfillment in) the tenacious community of believing disciples. We—members of the Christian church—will never surrender true faith in Jesus Christ. We will never give up believing that the Father of our Lord has made us members of the family of God. No amount of opposition from any source, religious or secular, will be able to hinder the ever-expanding circle of salvation engulfing this world through the invincible kingdom of God. The principal expression of such faith are the continued prayers that our heavenly Father work in those ways that only he can work. Prayers offered with the knowledge that each new moment may easily provide the long-awaited miracle. We may not be able to predict particular outcomes, but we do live as those who know that our heavenly Father “is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine” (EPHESIANS 3:20). 🌿

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<sup>7</sup> Rudolph Bultmann, “Πιστεύω” Vol. 6 in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*. Edited by G. Kittel and G. Friedrich. Translated by G. W. Bromily, (Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 1968), 206.



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