

You Can Cast Mountains Into The Sea if You Believe

It is the morning of Tuesday, 29 March A.D. 33. Jesus and the disciples have left Bethany and are walking toward Jerusalem. Yesterday had been a busy day. Jesus had cursed a fig tree that did not have any fruit (Mark 11:12-14), cleansed the temple (Mark 11:15-18), talked with some Greeks about salvation and His death (John 12:20-36) that would occur on Friday (John 12:27-36a), presented the gospel to a large crowd (John 12:36), and then returned to Bethany (Mark 11:19). This study begins on the next day, Tuesday. It is a fascinating study because we will learn what Jesus meant when He said we can cast a mountain into the sea if we have faith and do not doubt. Our study is from Matthew 21:19b-22 and Mark 11:20-26.

Israel Was Without Faith. On Tuesday morning Jesus and the disciples had just seen the fig tree that Jesus had cursed the previous day and they noticed that it was withered. Mark 11:20-22 states,

As they were passing by in the morning, they saw the fig tree withered from the roots up. Being reminded, Peter said to Him, “Rabbi, look, the fig tree which You cursed has withered.” Mark 11:20-21 (NASB)

The Greek word for withered is *xeraino*. It simply means dried up. We know what a dry tree looks like. The trunk, boughs, limbs, and branches are dry and barren of leaves. All one sees is the dark and brittle bark. It is leafless and lifeless. Jesus had cursed the tree because it did not produce any fruit. Of



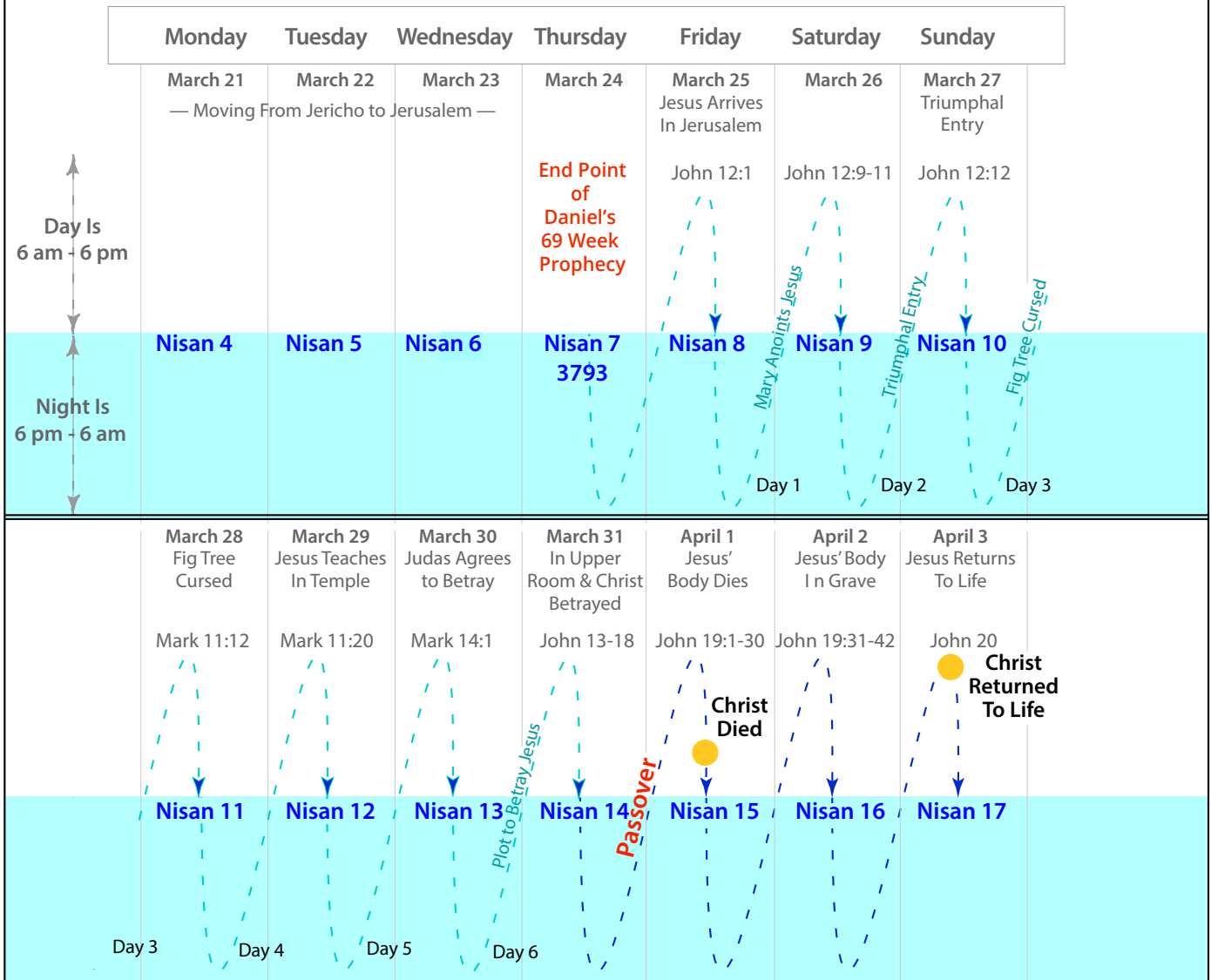
what value is a fig tree that does not fulfill its purpose? It cannot produce anything else such as apples, oranges, or cherries, for example. It had absorbed nutrients and water from the soil and then did not provide anything. It had depleted resources that another tree could have used to produce something of value, but this one did not.

Earlier Jesus had taught us that believers who do not count the cost and are later unwilling to sacrifice for Him are like salt that is only good for the manure pile. That is, they are not good for anything to Christ because they are unwilling to suffer hardship. One preacher said that such

Christians are good only “for the crap pile.” The fig tree was good only for the furnace.

The dry fig tree symbolized the nation of Israel. God had chosen Israel because He loved the people (Deuteronomy 7:6). They were to be His

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witnesses to the world (Zechariah 8:2-3 Romans 9:1-5). But just like the withered fig tree, they did not produce any fruit. They indulged in a wide range of sin. They had hard hearts. God wanted soft and sensitive hearts. The fig tree symbolized the nation of Israel's insincere worship of God, the unrighteous religious leaders, and its vast unbelieving population. So Israel would kill Jesus in three days. Consequently, God would destroy it in A.D. 70 just like He did the fig tree.

Some think the fig tree symbolizes the temple, but the fig tree never symbolized the temple in the Old Testament.

There is no verse that connects the temple with a fig tree in all of Scripture either. Amillennialists, postmillennialists, and preterists teach the fig tree symbolized Herod's temple, but that is a choice not based on Scripture. They find the physical building to be spiritual. But in Revelation 21:22, we are told there will be a temple in the eternal state, the eternal heaven, and that temple is God the Father and Christ. It is not a building. We worship in spirit and truth and not by pews, offering plates, amplification systems, and glorified buildings. Yes, the temple had meaning as a place of worship, but otherwise it is meaningless. Israel represented

the people. The people of Israel were like the fig tree.

Israel was symbolized by a fig tree in the Old Testament in at least two passages (Hosea 9:10; Joel 1:6-7). The fig tree symbolized the spiritual deadness of Israel's religious leaders and consequently, the spiritual deadness of the nation. The leaders of a nation are examples to the people. That is the pattern revealed in Scripture. The people tend to imitate their leaders (Philippians 3:17; 2 Thessalonians 3:7; Hebrews 13:7). So, Israel was spiritually dead like a dry fig tree. On Friday, just three days away, the leaders of the nation would prove that point.

Mark 11:20-22 tells us the disciples were surprised when they saw that the fig tree withered from the roots. If they had understood the symbolism they would not have been surprised, unless they were too spiritually insensitive to connect the dots.

We are told in Mark 11:21 that Peter said to Jesus, "Rabbi, look! The fig tree which You cursed has withered." The Greek text for "look" is *idou*. A better translation would be "Behold!" That is, Peter had emphasized "look."

He wanted Jesus to look at the withered tree because He was so extremely surprised that the cursed fig tree had withered in just one day.

The Need for Faith. Then Jesus took this opportunity to teach the disciples about faith.

And Jesus answered saying to them, "Have faith in God." Mark 11:22 (NASB)

Jesus' words were simple. Have faith in God, and yet we struggle to trust Him. Earlier Jesus had already told the disciples that they had little faith four times. In Matthew 6:30, Jesus connected the disciples' worry with little faith. In Matthew 8:26, their little faith caused them to be afraid. In Matthew 14:31, the disciples had doubt and Jesus said they had little faith. Jesus has helped us understand that worry,

fear, and doubt are signs of little faith. The fourth sign of little faith is anxiety. That was revealed in Matthew 16:5-12. In that passage Jesus told the disciples how to have more faith. He told them to remember what He had done. He said,

". . . You men of little faith, why do you discuss among yourselves that you have no bread? Do you not yet understand or remember the five loaves of the five thousand, and how many baskets full you picked up? Or the seven loaves of the four thousand, and how many large baskets full you picked up? Matthew 16:8-10 (NASB)

The path to increasing their faith was to remember His miracles such as the time He fed five thousand men and the next time He fed four thousand people. It is amazing that He did not emphasize His great ability to multiply the

food in order to feed these people. Instead, He reminded them of how much food was left over after He had fed the people. There was more food afterward than there was before

He fed them! Jesus' miracles revealed that He is God. He could perform what is impossible for men. Jesus told them to have great faith. They needed to remember what He had already done. They had not yet learned the lesson from the incident with the Syrophenician woman who Jesus said had great faith (Matthew 15:21-28). Why? She would not leave Jesus alone no matter what happened to her, because she was convinced He could heal her daughter. The disciples still had not learned the lesson that Jesus can do all things. That was Job's declaration to God in Job 42:2.

**I know that You can do all things,
And that no purpose of Yours can be thwarted.
Job 42:2 (NASB)**

This gives us a principle. Our faith grows as we remember

that miracles are actually God altering His own laws to routinely provide blessings for us. Miracles are not unusual events.

Before we continue, we need to think about the statement “the power of prayer.” If we are not careful, we might think that great faith is like the muscles in our arm that do more as they become stronger. But faith is not a muscle and it does not possess great power. Faith does not force God to do anything. Consider Job’s statement, “You can do all things.” The “you” referred to God and not Job or us. This was Job’s admission of his inability to do all things, but God can do all things. That gives us another understanding of the often quoted verse,

**I can do all things through Him who strengthens me.
Philippians 4:13 (NASB)**

When the apostle Paul wrote this verse, it was his humble admission that he cannot do all things, but he could through God who enabled him.

We do not have any power. God has all the power. A search of the Scriptures reveals that the phrase “the power of faith” never occurs in the Bible. Faith and prayer do not contain power. But James 5:16-18 tells us that God is more likely to respond to the prayer of righteous man. Then when He does respond, we can think of His response as “doing all things through Him.”

Hebrews 11:6 teaches us an important lesson. First, it says,

By faith Enoch was taken up so that he would not see death; AND HE WAS NOT FOUND BECAUSE GOD TOOK HIM UP; for he obtained the witness that before his being taken up he was pleasing to God. And without faith it is impossible to please Him, for he who comes to God must believe that He is and that He is a rewarder of those who seek Him. Hebrews 11:5-6 (NASB)

Notice that Enoch pleased God in two ways and that is why God took him to heaven prematurely. First, Enoch had

faith in God. Second, Enoch was seeking to know God in a deeper way. As a result, he is listed in Hebrews 11, the great chapter of faith. Enoch is in the hallmark of faith. Abraham is listed in Hebrews 11 along with other great men of faith. Romans 4:5 says Abraham was righteous. The point is that God responds to those who have faith and seek to know Him in a deeper way. That is the so-called power of faith. He rewards us according to our faith.

What follows reveals that Jesus took the opportunity to teach the disciples about faith, how to have great faith. For the disciples needed another illustration of great faith.

The Principle of Faith. Then Jesus said,

“Truly I say to you, whoever says to this mountain, ‘Be taken up and cast into the sea’ . . . it will be granted him.” Mark 11:23 (NASB)

But to which mountain did Jesus refer? When He said this mountain, He may have pointed to a mountain. While we do not know to which mountain He pointed, if He pointed to one, it must have been a mountain near Jerusalem since He was walking to Jerusalem. Since there are seven mountains in the region of Jerusalem, He could have pointed to Mount Scopus which was the highest of the seven mountains. Maybe He pointed to the Mount of Olives, or the Mount of Corruption which was east of the old city of Jerusalem. The remaining four mountains are Mount Ophel, the old Mount Zion, the New Mount Zion, and the mountain on which the Antonia Fortress was located. Whichever one He pointed to is not important. What He said next was important.

So what did Jesus mean by saying we could take up and cast a mountain into the sea if certain conditions are satisfied? The key is to understand this statement is a cultural issue. The rabbis of Jesus’ day often referred to one who as being a “rooter of mountains.” This was an expression of honor. Someone who had great understanding of the Torah, great spiritual insight, or was a great spiritual leader was called by the rabbis to be a “rooter up of mountains.”¹ This helps us understand Jesus’ statement in

¹ John Lightfoot. Commentary on the New Testament From The Talmud and Hebraica. Hendrickson Publishing. 1989. p. 283.

this context. He simply meant that one who could pick up and cast a mountain into the sea was a person of great faith.

We have already learned from James 5:16-18 that such a person is a righteous person. He or she lives by faith (Romans 1:17; Galatians 3:11; Hebrews 10:38). They believed in Christ and became a Christian. Then they walk by faith. They believe in God day-by-day with every step in their journey. But Jesus' point is that a man or woman of great faith can accomplish much. Then Scripture reveals he or she is a righteous person. So, Jesus was not saying we should be able to literally move mountains, but one who has great faith is able to accomplish much.

Evidences of Great Faith. But what are the signs of being a rooter of mountains or having great faith? Jesus gives us two very important principles. First He said we must not doubt God.

*... and does not doubt in his heart, but believes that what he says is going to happen, it will be granted him.
Mark 11:23b (NASB)*

The Greek word for "doubt" in this verse is *diakrino*. It is composed of two Greek words that mean "through" and "judgment." If we combine the meanings together the sense is of a person who is struggling between two opposing judgments, thoughts, or conclusions about what will happen. Doubt is little faith. Next we must ask, "Does this mean that we must be convinced God will grant our prayer request and that it will happen?" For Jesus said he must believe "that what he says is going to happen."

Consider the historical event of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego being thrown into the fiery furnace. The early Christians left frescoes or mural paintings of these three men on the walls of Rome's catacombs. These early believers looked up to these men as examples of great faith. Why? Daniel 3:16-18 tells us that Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego were warned to bow down and worship King Nebuchadnezzar or they would be thrown into the fiery furnace. But Daniel 3 states that these three men were not convinced that God would rescue them from the fiery furnace, but if God desired to do so, He could rescue them.

The choice to rescue them or to not rescue them was God's decision. Verses 17-18 says,

If it be so, our God whom we serve is able to deliver us from the furnace of blazing fire; and He will deliver us out of your hand, O king. But even if He does not, let it be known to you, O king, that we are not going to serve your gods or worship the golden image that you have set up." Daniel 3:17-18 (NASB)

There are two key statements they made that we must remember: "is able to deliver" and "if not, be it known to you, O king, that we will not serve your gods." These men of great faith were not convinced that God would rescue them, but they believed He could if He wanted to.

So, what did Jesus mean by, "Whoever says to this mountain, 'Be taken up and cast into the sea,' and does not doubt in his heart, but believes that what he says is going to happen, it will be granted him."? What is the meaning of Jesus' statement?

Before we discover the answer to the question, we should ask if God would actually allow a believer to cast a mountain into the sea? Another question is would God choose to let you redesign the planet that He created? Would He let you create new mountains and destroy existing mountains? Would He let you redesign the seas, the oceans, the universe, or allow you to destroy the moon? Would He allow you to change your face or allow you to live five hundred years? When we stop to think about the implication of Jesus' statement, it becomes obvious that Jesus did not mean that if we had enough faith, we could do whatever we desired.

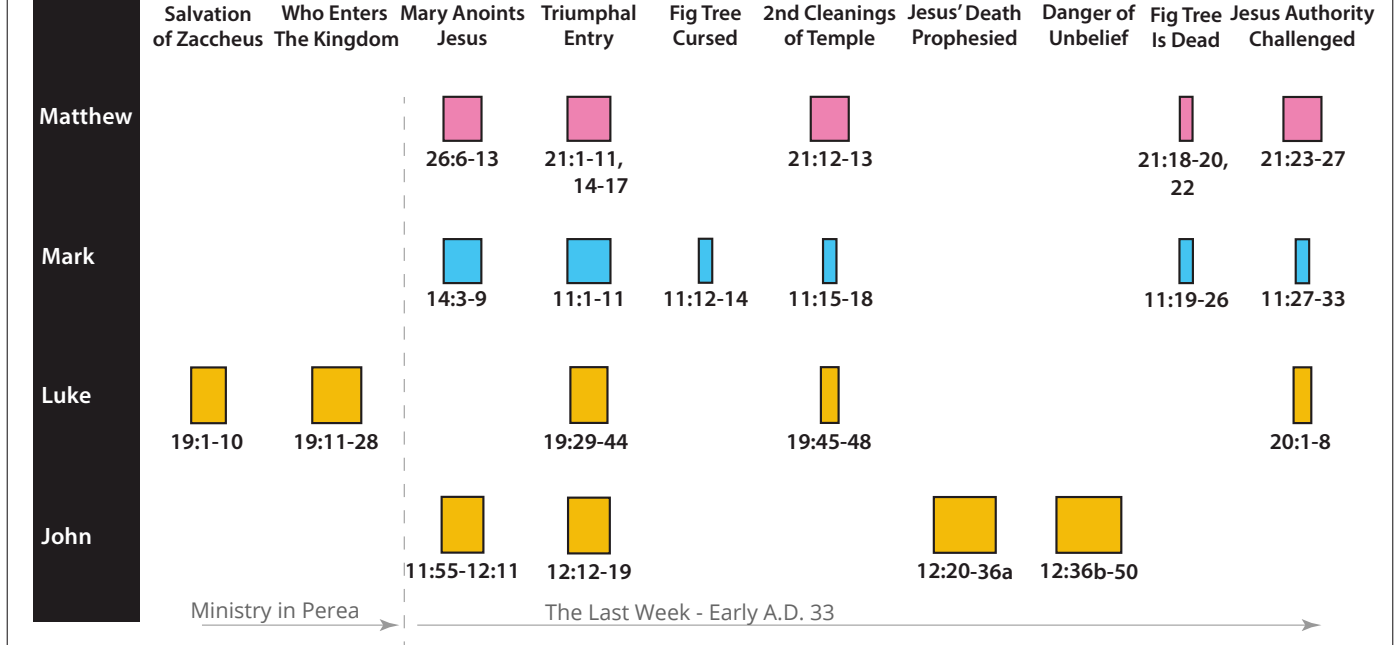
John 14:13-14 records a statement that Jesus made in the Upper Room on the night He was betrayed. It has a similar thought to Mark 11:23. That is, we have whatever we ask. Jesus said to the disciples in the Upper Room,

Whatever you ask in My name, that will I do, so that the Father may be glorified in the Son. If you ask Me anything in My name, I will do it. John 14:13-14 (NASB)

This time Jesus did not add "believes that what he says is

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going to happen, it will be granted him.” But a few minutes later, He added this to His previous comment in John 14:13-14,

If you abide in Me, and My words abide in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. John 15:7 (NASB)

The apostle John wrote this in 1 John 5:14

This is the confidence which we have before Him, that, if we ask anything according to His will, He hears us. 1 John 5:14 (NASB)

1 John 3:22 also says that when we pray, we will receive our request if we keep His commandments.

And whatsoever we ask, we receive of him, because we keep his commandments, and do those things that are pleasing in his sight. 1 John 3:22 (NASB)

So, how do understand Jesus' statements about prayer? In

order to have our prayer requests granted, multiple conditions exist. First, we must keep the Lord's commandments, and do whatever pleases the Lord. We often forget about desiring to please the Lord. That means our hearts must desire to please Him and we then keep His commandments. That means we will want to do His will and then ask Him to answer according to His will. That pleases Him. That fulfills the requirement of 1 John 5:14. Pleasing Him will also include spending time in His Word. That fulfills the condition in John 15:7. When we desire to please the Lord, we reveal that we believe Him. So, all of the conditions are rolled together. We believe God. We strive to obey Him. We desire to read His Word, the Scriptures. When we pray, we have a desire to ask according to His will. Consequently, our prayers are granted. John 14:13-14 reflects the end results of the prayer life of a righteous person. That is why a righteous person's requests are granted when they seriously pray. Those are the conditions of great faith. For great faith trusts and responds this way!

Another evidence of great faith is we are convinced we receive our requests. That is Jesus' next statement.

“Therefore I say to you, all things for which you pray and ask, believe that you have received them, and they will be granted you. Mark 11:24 (NASB)

If you ask according to the Father’s will, then you know it will occur. If you pray that the Father’s kingdom will come, you know it is going to occur. Jesus taught us in what we call the Lord’s Prayer, to pray that His kingdom would come (Matthew 6:10). Matthew 25:34 tells us that the Father has already prepared His kingdom, and Matthew 26:29 says it is coming! So, why pray for something that is going to happen? Because Jesus ask us to do that for the Father. God the Father wants that kingdom, has planned for the kingdom, and would it not be great for the Father to have His kingdom?

In verse 25, Jesus gave the disciples another condition for requests being granted.

Whenever you stand praying, forgive, if you have anything against anyone, so that your Father who is in heaven will also forgive you your transgressions. Mark 11:25 (NASB)

We must forgive others! Why must we forgive others? It is another sign of a righteous person. Righteous people forgive and love others.

Verse 26 frightens people.

[“But if you do not forgive, neither will your Father who is in heaven forgive your transgressions.”] Mark 11:26 (NASB)

But it is the same message given at the end of the Lord’s Prayer (Matthew 6:13-14). This does not refer to the forgiveness of sins in relationship to eternal life for Romans 8:1 says that believers will never be condemned. This forgiveness maintains our relationship with God. That is the message of 1 John 1:9-2:2.

So, why will the Father not forgive us? Because not forgiving others is a sin (Matthew 18:21-35; Ephesians 4:32).

Conclusion. Jesus taught us to have faith that is so

great that it could move mountains if moving the mountain was the Father’s will. Great faith does not doubt but is so confident in what God has said, that it seeks to please Him by pursuing righteousness (Matthew 5:6; 6:33), reading Scripture, forgiving others, and praying for the Father’s will to be accomplished. That is the heart of a righteous person.

Scripture connects a righteous man with great faith and answered prayer. The righteous man Enoch in Hebrews 11:5-6 had great faith. Hebrews 11:6 says that without faith it is *impossible* to please God. James 5:16-17 gives us the contrast.

... The effective prayer of a righteous man can accomplish much. Elijah was a man with a nature like ours, and he prayed earnestly that it would not rain, and it did not rain on the earth for three years and six months. James 5:16-17 (NASB)

Jesus urges us to have great faith!

