

You Can Cast Mountains Into The Sea if You Believe

It is Tuesday morning, 29 March A.D. 33. Jesus and His 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 is fascinating 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. Now it is Tuesday morning. Jesus and the disciples have just seen the fig tree that Jesus had cursed the previous day. They noticed that it was withered. Mark 11:20-21 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

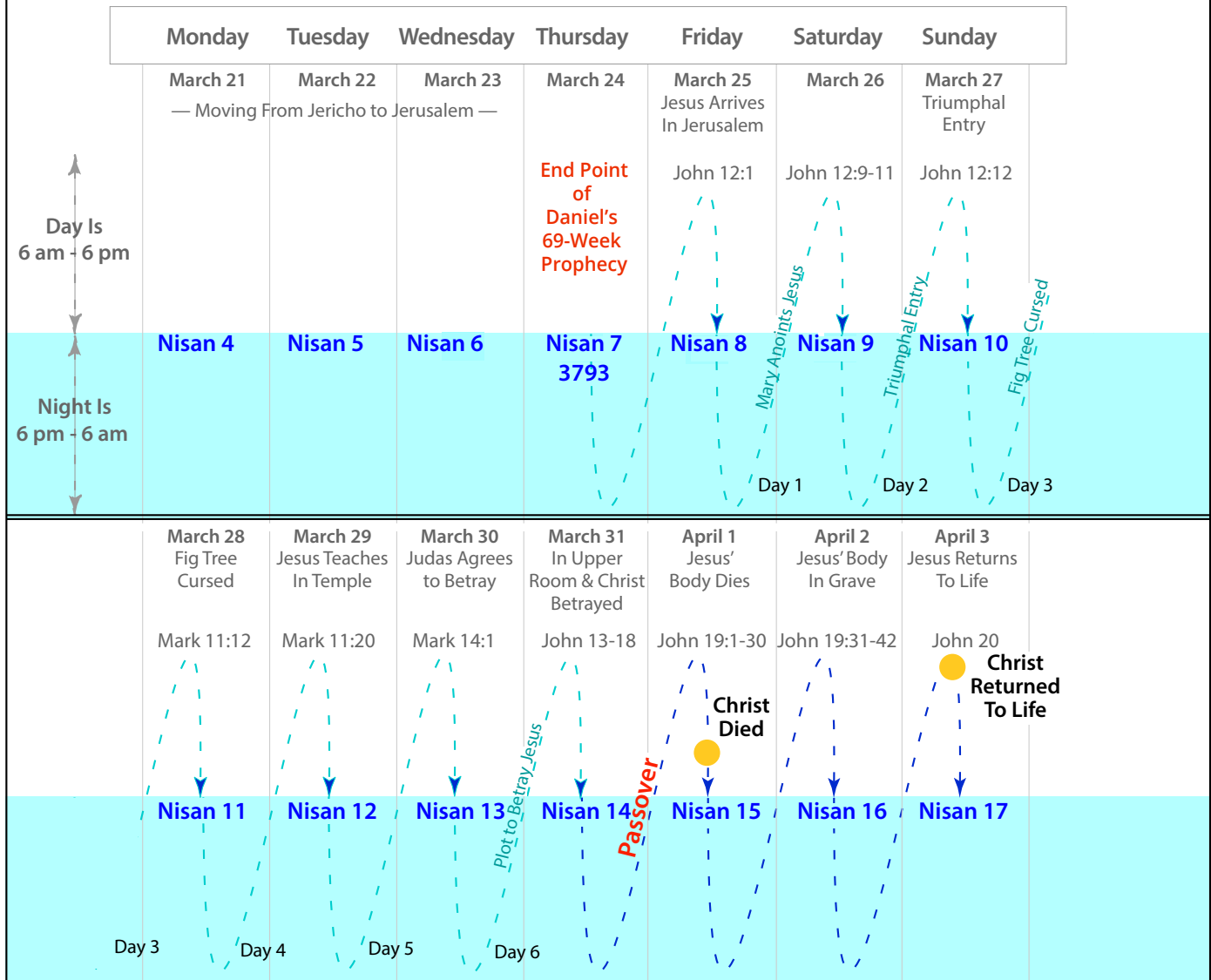
purpose? It cannot produce anything else such as apples, oranges, or cherries, for example. It had absorbed nutrients and water from the soil and then did not provide any fruit. In addition, it had depleted resources that another tree could have used to produce something of value.

Earlier Jesus had taught that believers who do not count the cost and are 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 7:6-8). They were to be His witnesses to the world (Zechariah 8:2-3; Romans 9:1-5). But just

Last Week of Jesus' Life



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. Now 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 in Scripture 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 statement not based on Scripture. They find the physical building to be spiritual. But in Revelation 21:22, we are told there will not be a physical temple in the eternal state, or eternal heaven. Instead God the Father and Christ will be the temple. Today we worship in spirit and truth, not dependent upon pews, offering plates, amplification systems, and glorified buildings. Yes, the temple had meaning as a place of worship, but otherwise it was meaningless. The nation

Israel represented the people and 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 Peter 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! Yet we struggle to trust Him. Earlier Jesus had already told the disciples four times that they had little faith. 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 already 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)**

"Our faith grows as we remember that miracles are actually God altering His own laws to routinely provide blessings for us."

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, not to 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 a 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.” God uses His power to reward us according to our faith.

What follows reveals that Jesus took the opportunity to teach the disciples how to have great faith. 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? This question is important to some people, but frankly, it does not affect the meaning of the passage. When He said, “this mountain,” He may have pointed to a specific mountain. If He did, He would have pointed to 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 to 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. The one He pointed to is not important. What He said next is what is important.

Now, what did Jesus mean that we could take up and cast a mountain into the sea if certain conditions are satisfied? The key is to understand that this statement is a cultural issue. The rabbis of Jesus’ day often referred to a person who had a great understanding of the Torah, had great spiritual insight, or was a great spiritual leader as a “rooter up of mountains.”¹ This helps us understand Jesus’ statement. He

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

redefined the term “rooter of mountains.” He meant that a rooter of mountains is a person who has great faith.

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 pieces of evidence of great faith. First, Jesus says the person of great faith does 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. In Matthew 14:28-31, we are told that Peter asked Jesus to enable him to walk on the water. We discover that Peter had enough faith to get out of the boat, but his faith did not last very long. Verse 30 says he saw the winds and became frightened. At that moment, he was afraid of the storm and wind. Then in desperation he called for Jesus to save him. Peter’s problem was not the wind. According to Jesus, it was little faith. Jesus did not say that Peter forgot He was there to help. Jesus said Peter was afraid and simply had doubt. That is one symptom of little faith. We have already discovered that little faith also worries and is anxious. But in this passage, Jesus clearly said that great faith is not afraid and does not doubt!

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. Those 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 chose to do so, He could rescue them.

The choice to rescue them or not to 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 did not doubt that God could rescue them, but they did not know if it was God’s will to do that. So, great faith is to be convinced that God is all-powerful and can. It does not doubt.

Another example is the Syrophenician woman, who knew that Jesus could heal her daughter and this is obvious by the fact that she repeatedly and unrelentingly begged Jesus do that. Jesus responded that she had great faith (Matthew 15:28).

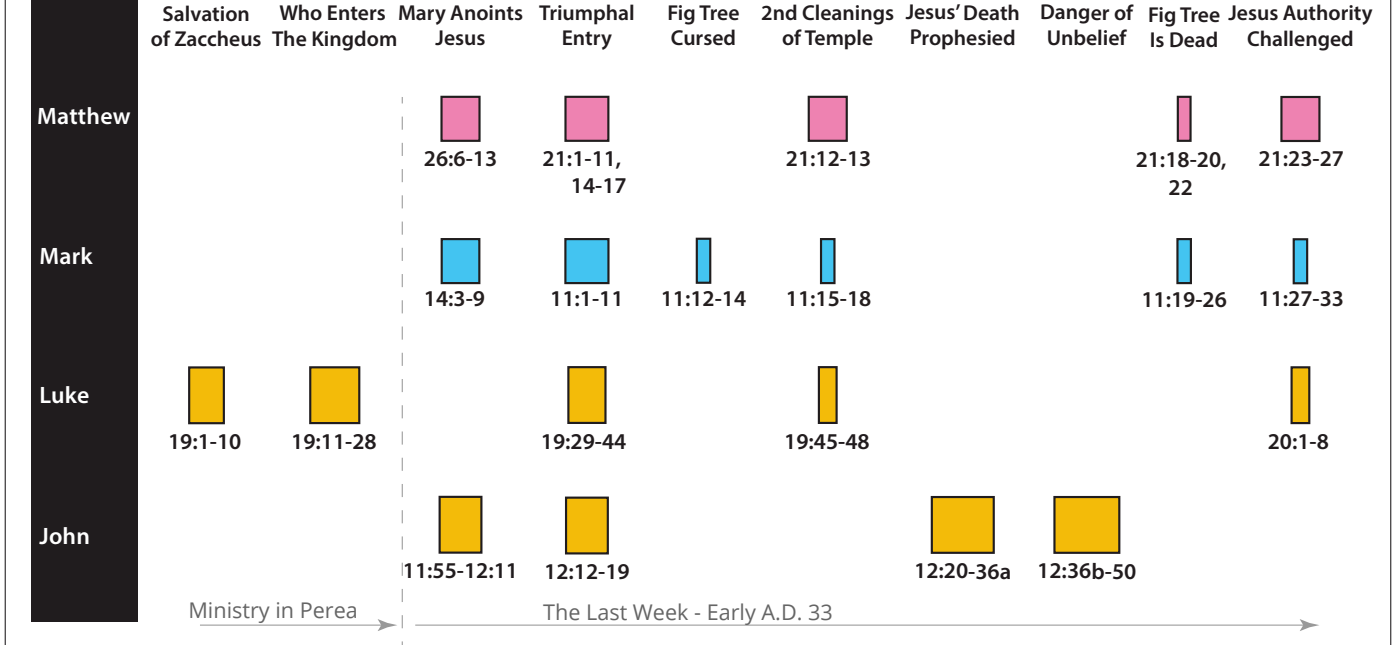
So, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, and the Syrophenician woman all had great faith. They knew God could help them, and they did not waver. They did not doubt that He could. So, what did Jesus mean by, “Whoever does not doubt in his heart, but believes that what he says is going to happen, it will be granted him.”?

The second, very important evidence of great faith is that we believe when we say “is going to happen.”

The second, very important evidence of great faith is that we believe what we say “is going to happen.” To discover the meaning of this second evidence, we should ask if God would actually allow a believer to cast a mountain into the sea? Does Jesus mean that our words create reality? Did Jesus mean that God will give us one million dollars if we choose our words carefully? If so, why are television preachers asking people for money? Did Jesus mean that God would 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,

Life and Heart of Jesus

The Last Week - March A.D. 33



or allow you to destroy the moon? Would He allow you to change your face or live to the age of 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 great faith, we could do whatever we desired. There are limits to the statement "what he says is going to happen, it will be granted him" in Mark 11:23.

So, there must be conditions on His statement that whoever "believes that what he says is going to happen, it will be granted him." There are four conditions.

Asks According to the Father's Will. The first condition is great faith asks according to the Father's will. For example, John 14:13-14 records an important statement that Jesus made in the Upper Room on the night He was betrayed. It has a similar thought to Mark 11:23. 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)

Here, Jesus said that if we ask in His name, He will do it. 1 John 5:14 says almost the same thing. To ask in Jesus' name is to ask according to the Father's will.

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)

So, the first important evidence of great faith is that our requests are according to the Father's will.

Believes and Abides in His word. The second evidence of great faith is that it believes in God and saturates himself or herself with the Scriptures. That is, because we know the Scriptures and we think and act biblically.

If we return to John 15 and read verse 7, we discover a second condition that is required to have our requests granted to us. So, remember that Jesus said this in John 14:13-14, "If you ask Me anything in My name, I will do it." Then, a few minutes later in the Upper Room, He said this in John 15:7,

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)

Now, Jesus did not contradict Himself. He simply provided more information about John 14:13-14. If we want our requests to be answered, then we must abide in Christ; that is, we must be believers. Also, Scripture must abide in us! That is, we are studying the Scriptures.

Forgives Others. A third evidence of great faith is that it forgives others. That is the message of Mark 11:24-26. There Jesus gave the disciples another condition for their requests being granted.

“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)

Forgiving others pleases God! It is another sign of a righteous person. Righteous people forgive and love others. Mark 11:26 frightens people.

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

The brackets indicate that Mark 11:26 does not belong here because it is not in the best manuscripts. Yet, it is still biblical since the same message is given at the end of the Lord’s Prayer (Matthew 6:14-15). The message is that if we do not forgive others, then the Father will not forgive us. This does not refer to the forgiveness of sins in relation to eternal life. 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). So, forgiveness is essential to our prayers being answered.

Keeps His Commandments. The final condition to having great faith is that it keeps the Father’s commandments. We obey must His commands if we want

our requests to be granted, as stated in 1 John 3:22.

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)

We must keep His commandments and do anything else that would please the Lord. James 5:16-17 echoes the same principle.

... 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 5:16b-17 (NASB)

That is a righteous men or woman can accomplish much because He is pleasing to the Lord.

Conclusion. I want to conclude with three points. The evidence of great faith is that we believe our requests will be granted according to His will, and we do not doubt that God can grant our requests. The roofer of mountains is a righteous man who has great faith.

Here are the characteristics of the righteous man. He believes God is truly real. He does not doubt that God can do anything we ask. He seeks to please Him by striving to be righteous (Matthew 5:6; 6:33). He studies Scripture. He forgives others. He prays that the Father’s will to be accomplished.

Finally, when Mark 11:24 says that we can know our prayers will be answered. There are some situations we can positively know.

“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)

What are some of those situations? Here are a few. Our prayers will be answered when we ask that God be glorified, be made holy, and that His will be done here on earth. He takes vengeance upon those who persecute believers. Also,

He will save the elect and conform them into the image of Christ.

Jesus urges us to have great faith!