

# OpenTheo

## Q&A#72 Moving Mountains

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Today's question: "What is your interpretation of Jesus' sayings about the prayers of believers "moving mountains"?"

Within my discussion I reference N.T. Wright's interpretation from 'Jesus and the Victory of God' (<https://amzn.to/2pVvtH7>).

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## Transcript

Welcome back. Today's question is, what is your interpretation of Jesus' sayings about the prayers of believers moving mountains? This is a very interesting one. There are a few such sayings or related sayings.

The first comes after the Transfiguration, when Jesus comes down from the Mount of Transfiguration and finds that his disciples have failed to cast out the demon from the child. Then the disciples came to Jesus privately and said, Why could we not cast him out? So Jesus said to them, Because of your unbelief. For assuredly, I say to you, if you have faith as a mustard seed, you will say to this mountain, Move from here to there, and it will move, and nothing will be impossible for you.

However, this kind does not go out except by prayer and fasting. We have another account in the book of Matthew, again, in verse 21 of chapter 21. I'll begin reading at 20.

After the withering of the fig tree. Now when the disciples saw it, they marveled, saying, How did the fig tree wither away so soon? So Jesus answered and said to them, Assuredly, I say to you, if you have faith and do not doubt, you will not only do what was done to the fig tree, but also if you say to this mountain, Be removed and be cast into the sea, it will be done. And all things, whatever you ask in prayer, believing, you will receive.

There's another similar account in Luke 17, verse five and six. And the apostle said to the Lord, Increase our faith. So the Lord said, If you have faith as a mustard seed, you can say to this mulberry tree, Be pulled up by the roots and be planted in the sea, and it would obey you.

So there are a number of interesting features of these. We have the first one refers to the time after the transfiguration. The failure of the disciples to cast out the demon from the child.

And it involves a reference to a mustard seed like faith and asking this, calling for this mountain to be moved from here to there. The next one is after seeing the withering of the fig tree as Jesus is moving to and from Jerusalem, from the Mount of Olives to the Temple Mount, from the Mount of Olives to the Temple Mount. And that's moving from there between those two locations is symbolically significant within Matthew's gospel.

But Jesus curses the fig tree, which withers, and then he uses that as a sign. And the disciples ask in that context, and he says, if you have faith, you'd be able to say not only to the fig tree, but also to this mountain, be removed and be cast into the sea. So it's not just moving from here to there.

It's being cast into the sea. And there's not the reference to mustard seed in that particular account. In Luke's account, you have a reference to the fig tree being pulled up and cast into the sea, the fig sycamore mulberry tree.

And then that is associated with Jesus moving towards Jerusalem. So there seem to be three different accounts with overlapping features. And it's interesting to try and work out how these go together.

I think that the first one is, it helps us to understand what's taking place. That the moving of mountains is referring primarily to something that is an immense task, something that's the paradigmatic, impossible task. I mean, how do you move a mountain? And yet Christ is saying to his disciples that if you have faith, like a mustard seed, you will be able to perform even this task, this task that seems absolutely impossible.

And the task that frames that account is the casting out of the demons, the casting out that occurs by prayer and fasting. And so this faith is not just a power that you have that

you can do whatever you want with. It's not just an autonomous faith that believers have, that faith is some sort of supercharge that allows you to do whatever you want.

No, faith is related towards God, to perform the work of God, that nothing would stand in your way, that even if a mountain were in your way, if you had faith as a mustard seed, you would be able to move that mountain. If that were what was standing in the way of what God had for you to perform, you could move a mountain. And I think this is significant when we get to 1 Corinthians 13, where we see, I think, again, that it is a more paradigmatic notion of something impossibly difficult task.

And though I have the gift of prophecy and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and though I have all faith so that I could remove mountains, but have not love, I am nothing. So Paul is referencing, again, the same imagery, that imagery of moving the mountain. And to move mountains to do something, again, is to spare no effort, to allow nothing to stand in your way, to provide an obstacle.

And Christ, I think, with this saying is talking about that sort of thing. It's a bit more interesting when you think about the fact that Christ, on every single time he uses this, he refers to something particular. He refers to this mountain.

And this mountain, in the first occasion, is the Mount of Transfiguration. This mountain, on the second occasion, is presumably the Temple Mount. And the location that that is to be moved to, the first, the Mount of Transfiguration, referenced from here to there, and the second one is to be cast into the sea.

Now, I think there's some possibility that that is a reference to the casting of the Temple Mount and Jerusalem into the Gentile sea, that Jerusalem will be trampled underfoot by the Gentiles, that there will be a destruction of the Temple, all these sorts of things. There may be an allusion to it there. And so Christ's saying may have a more specific reference than to just faith as such and its power to perform God's work.

Rather, this mountain, the obstacle, is going to be removed and cast into the sea. And that play between the mountains at the end of Matthew, I think, may give some weight to that. Now, I wouldn't put too much weight upon that reading.

It's a possible reading. And it's one suggested by N.T. Wright and others. The fact that we find similar references elsewhere, maybe casts some doubt upon how much weight we should put upon it.

That refers to the Mount of Transfiguration as well. The Mount of Transfiguration being moved from here to there. Again, I don't know what to make of that.

The fact of the fig tree, the fig tree is significant. The fig tree is symbolic. It represents Israel.

And so the withered fig tree or the fig tree, the sycamore fig mulberry tree, that's pulled up by its roots and cast into the sea. Again, that's symbolism. It's a charged image.

And so what, like we might talk about a rose as the symbol of England or leeks as symbols of Wales or the thistle that you might pluck up this thistle and remove it far from the rose, for instance, might be seen as a breach between Scotland and England. Now, these are symbolic ways of talking about realities that are more concrete and historical and national. And so maybe the fig mulberry tree represents Israel at this point.

And Israel is being cast into the Gentile sea. Maybe the mountain is the Temple Mount. I don't know.

I think there's a high possibility since that particular withered fig tree is associated with Israel and is associated with Christ's judgment upon the temple and his statements about the temple and its destiny. So within the end of Matthew, I think there's some weight to that reading. When we take into account 1 Corinthians 13, verse 2, I think it shows that there's a more general reference.

We shouldn't just see it as a specific reference to the Temple Mount. It's a more general reference to a difficult thing that can be undertaken if you have sufficient faith. That also may refer back to Zechariah 4. In Zechariah 4, we read, So he answered and said to me, this is the word of the Lord to Zerubbabel, not by might nor by power, but by my spirit, says the Lord of hosts.

Who are you, O great mountain? Before Zerubbabel you shall become a plain, and he shall bring forth the capstone with shouts of grace, grace to it. And so there is a reference there to the building of the temple and Christ is undertaking a temple building mission. And so the mountain that stands in his way is the Temple Mount.

The themes of temple building and other things like that are associated with the Temple, with the Mount of Transfiguration as well. Immediately before it, I will build my church and the gates of hell will not prevail against it. On the Mount, the building of tabernacles, that reference.

And so the four corners, Christ is the first corner and then the chief cornerstone and then the three corners of Peter, James and John. Maybe that's another reference. Maybe that's another thing that's taking place here.

I think if that were, it's fairly faint and I wouldn't put much weight upon it. More generally, I think then this is a reference to just the difficult obstacle that stands in the way of performing God's purpose. And the obstacle may be the specific temple and Temple Mount.

It may be that which stands in the way of the temple building, as in the case of

Zachariah's prophecy concerning Zerubbabel. Or it may be just whatever it is that stands in the way, that difficult task, that impossible task that must be performed if you're going to perform God's calling for you. And if you have faith like a mustard seed, that task will not be impossible.

And here I think there is a more general call for every single Christian that we should strive for that sort of faith, not just faith that is rooted in this specific historical circumstance, but faith that takes that as the paradigm for all faith. And there I think that Paul's reference really shows that this is a more general thing. If you have any further questions, please leave them on my Curious Cat account.

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