

# OpenTheo

## Matthew 21:20 - 21:22



### Gospel of Matthew - Steve Gregg

Steve Gregg discusses Matthew 21:20-22 where Jesus cursed a fig tree that did not bear fruit and said that with enough faith, one can move mountains. This passage has been interpreted by Christians to mean that faith can overcome any challenge. However, Gregg suggests that the mountain being cast into the sea can be interpreted as a metaphor for the judgment of Jerusalem in 70 AD. He believes that Jesus referred to this teaching multiple times and that it is important to understand the context of the passage.

### Transcript

In Matthew chapter 21, we have read of Jesus coming into Jerusalem and being hungry and seeing a fig tree there covered with leaves and hoping to find fruit upon it. He looks and finds no fruit. Whereupon he says, no one will ever eat fruit from you again.

Now the next day when the disciples and Jesus were passing by, they noticed that the tree had withered up and was dead. Matthew tells us the tree immediately withered when Jesus said that, but apparently it wasn't discovered to be withered up until the next day. But we read in verse 20, 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. Now the disciples were shocked to see how quickly that tree had died. It had been a living tree with fresh leaves upon it, a lot of foliage, looked very healthy the day before.

And when they came back by the next day, it had no new leaves, the leaves had either withered or fallen off, the tree was dried up, it was visibly dead. And they remembered that Jesus had commented on it, they said, look how suddenly this has happened, look how quickly, how soon the fig tree has withered away. Now Jesus basically uses this as an opportunity to make a lesson about faith.

And we are very familiar, I hope most of us are familiar with this idea of faith moving a mountain. He says also if you shall say to this mountain, be removed and be cast into the sea, it will be done. This idea of mountain moving faith is an image that I think is very well known, at least among Christians, and yet probably somewhat missing the point of what Jesus was saying.

It should not be thought that Jesus really intended for his disciples to move physical mountains in this way. If he did, they never are known to have done so in biblical times. And therefore we have probably a statement that has more symbolic than literal meaning.

Now it may of course be literally true that if one had enough faith they could move a mountain. But faith, remember the Bible says in Romans chapter 10 and verse 17, Paul says faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the word of God. And that means you can't really exercise biblical faith unless God's word has been given as a word of promise and you put your faith in that.

You see you can presume all kinds of things. You can say I'm trusting God to give me a million dollars. But unless God has told you that he's going to give you a million dollars, you're not trusting him, you're just trusting in your own imagination.

To trust a person means that you believe in their character and you believe in the veracity of what they say. And if God has said something, faith means you believe what he said. But if he hasn't said anything on a given subject, then your belief in it is not what the Bible calls faith.

Therefore, faith that would move a mountain could not really exist unless God made a promise to you that he was going to move a certain mountain. If God said to you, sir or madam, I'm going to move that mountain and I want you to command it to go for me. Well then, in that case, your faith would no doubt be able to accomplish that.

We've seen in the Old Testament and the New, and even in Christian history, tremendous miracles worked by faith. And to believe a mountain could be thrown into the sea is not an impossibility with God. Nothing is impossible with God.

Now, having said all that, I want to say that I don't think Jesus here was talking about literally moving mountains at all. And we don't ever find any situation in the book of Acts where the apostles moved mountains or even where they would have any reason to do so. In fact, it's hard for me to imagine any reason why a mountain would ever need to be moved and it seems unlikely that Jesus envisaged people really doing that literal act.

For this reason, many Christians have suggested that mountains here, or a mountain, represents merely difficulty in general. That sometimes difficulties seem insurmountable. They seem enormous.

They seem immovable. They seem to be an obstruction to our progress, just like a mountain would be to a traveler. For that reason, Christians have usually dealt with this passage as if Jesus is simply saying, if you have trials, if you have problems, if you have challenges, no challenge is too great, but faith can overcome it.

Just like a mountain. If your troubles seem as large as a mountain, well, if you have enough faith, you can move that mountain into the sea and it will obey you. Well, this is how this passage has usually been preached by Christians, it seems to me.

And there's even some popular gospel songs and so forth that speak along these lines of problems being like mountains, but faith moving these mountains. I suspect that Jesus had a different message in mind here because Jesus, I think, is essentially saying something that relates to his having cursed the fig tree. Let me work on this a little bit with you and see if you can follow what I have in mind here.

I said earlier, last time, that the fig tree, in my estimation, was a symbol of Israel itself. Israel was ordained by God to bring forth spiritual fruit. But for the most part, Israel's history had been characterized by a failure on Israel's part to produce this fruit.

Therefore, the prophets did predict that time would come when God would raise up fruit through someone else. And in Matthew chapter 22, we will find when we get to that passage, we're not quite there yet, but in Matthew chapter 22, Jesus said that the kingdom of God is taken from you and is given to a nation that will bring forth the fruit of it. I'm sorry, that's not 22, that's later in the same chapter, 21.

That's why I was looking for it in vain. It actually is near the end of Matthew 21 that we find this. Now, Jesus said this just a little while after he cursed the fig tree.

And he's saying that Israel will have the kingdom of God and the opportunity to bear its fruit taken from her. And that opportunity to bear the fruit of the kingdom will be given to someone else. This statement in Matthew 21, 43 could well be his explanation of the meaning of the cursing of the fig tree earlier in the same chapter.

But there's more to it than that. What about this moving of the mountain? Now, you have to realize that the nation of Israel in Jesus' time had become very corrupt. They had become a harlot rather than a wife of God.

They weren't worshipping idols outright in the way that some of their ancestors had done, but they were nonetheless worshipping religion itself rather than God. The Pharisees in particular were this way. And whatever it was that they valued, they didn't value Jesus highly enough.

And they rejected Jesus. And this is the most idolatrous act Israel ever did in her long history was to choose her national sovereignty over the Messiah himself and over God himself. Now, this is a great offense to God.

And so, of course, God had to judge Israel and declare her unworthy to produce fruit for his kingdom anymore. This judgment came upon Israel when the Romans, 40 years after the time of Christ, came down upon Israel. Actually, in 66 AD, the Jews rebelled against Rome and the Romans sent their armies in and there was a bloody and gruesome war that was fought for about three and a half years.

And it ended in the year 70 AD when the Romans tore down the walls of Jerusalem, took the Jews into captivity and leveled Jerusalem to the ground. And that was the end of the Jewish state and the Jewish religion and the temple was gone. Now, that was the judgment of God upon Israel for having rejected Christ.

Now, that judgment that came in 70 AD upon the Jews was predicted many times by both John the Baptist and Jesus. And I believe that the cursing of the fig tree is one of those ways in which Jesus predicted that this judgment was going to come upon the Jews shortly. Remember that when Jesus said to the fig tree, you'll never bear fruit again, it immediately withered up and died.

And the disciples said, look how soon this has happened. This soonness, this immediacy, I believe, illustrated that Israel, though it had been tolerated by God in its state of apostasy for many centuries, was soon going to be withered, was soon going to be destroyed, was soon going to be removed from its place as God's fruit bearer. And that soonness was within that generation when the Romans, of course, did destroy Jerusalem and the temple and drove the Jews out of their land.

Now, that event was more significant than many Christians realize. The Jews, in the days of the book of Acts, were living on borrowed time. They had crucified Jesus, but he had risen again and had established his church.

He had not yet sent the judgment on Jerusalem that came in 70 AD, and between the time of Jesus and the time of the destruction of Jerusalem was the time of the book of Acts. And during that time, the church was persecuted, largely by the Jews, by the Sanhedrin. There was a bit of persecution here and there from other sources, but it wasn't generally the case that the Gentiles persecuted the church, but the Jews did.

Stephen was stoned by the Sanhedrin. James, the first apostle to be martyred, was killed at the behest of the Jews by Herod. And Saul of Tarsus was a Jew who was licensed by the Sanhedrin to go out and throw Christians into prison and so forth.

When Paul himself became a Christian, he was pursued by Jewish opponents who tried to get him killed and came very close to doing so. The great persecutor of the church in the early days of the church, in the book of Acts, was the Jews. And therefore, the judgment of the Jews was to come, and it was to basically end up being a relief to the church that had suffered such persecution at their hands.

First, the Jews had crucified Christ, and then they persecuted Christ's ambassadors, and then came the judgment on Jerusalem. And that was something for the Christians actually to look forward to. I'm not saying that we should revel in the downfall of wicked people in the sense of their agony or their suffering, but in the sense that their career as evil people has come to an end, there is something to be rejoiced in there, that the career of evil is curtailed when God brings judgment upon it.

Now, the disciples were to anticipate this destruction of Jerusalem, which was emblemized by the withering of the fig tree. And Jesus made a comment about it. He said, if you have faith, you can not only see this fig tree wither, but you can also say to this mountain, be removed and be cast into the sea, and it will be done.

Now, I'm going to suggest something to you that many, of course, would not necessarily agree with. It has to do with my interpretation of the book of Revelation. And there are many interpretations of the book of Revelation, but I myself believe that some of the early chapters in Revelation are predicting the fall of Jerusalem in 70 AD.

And one of those chapters, chapter 8, has this image. In chapter 8 of Revelation, verses 8 and 9, it says, Then the second angel sounded, and something like a great mountain burning with fire was thrown into the sea, and the third of the sea became blood. Now, what is this? A mountain burning with fire thrown into the sea.

Where do we have the imagery of a mountain thrown into the sea? Elsewhere. We have it in the mouth of Jesus. Jesus said, if you have faith, you can say to this mountain, be cast into the sea, and it will be cast into the sea.

The only thing that's added here is that the mountain is on fire when it's thrown into the sea. What does this represent? Well, when it comes to Revelation, there's so many different interpretations that we couldn't even survey them all at this time. But I'd like to suggest to you my understanding is that this represents the nation of Israel being scattered among the Gentiles.

Because Mount Zion, Jerusalem, was a great mountain that emblemized the whole Jewish commonwealth, the whole Jewish kingdom. The sea, in biblical prophecy, more often than not, represents the Gentile nations. Now, for this mountain to be cast into the sea would be a picture of the people of Jerusalem, the people of Judah, being dispersed in the Gentile world, which happened in 70 A.D. And this happened with Jerusalem being burned down.

We see this mountain burning with fire and thrown into the sea. It's a symbolic image. But it agrees with what Jesus said in this case.

And the only reason that I incline toward seeing it this way is because Jesus said it on the same occasion he was talking about the fig tree withering. And I do believe that there's

very good grounds to believe that the withering of the fig tree speaks of the rejection of Israel and their judgment that came upon them because of their rejection of Christ. And so in the context, Jesus says to his disciples, there are two things that faith can accomplish on your part.

The withering of the fig tree and also you can say to this mountain, be cast in the sea and it'll happen. Now, he said you will say to this mountain, which mountain was he talking about? Well, he was he was ascending the hill to Jerusalem. He was basically saying you can say to Mount Zion, be cast in the sea and it will.

And using the symbolic language of prophecy, it would mean that the people of Jerusalem would be cast out and dispersed into the sea of the Gentile world. Now, the only thing that some would find objectionable about this interpretation is that Jesus seems to put it the responsibility of the disciples to make this happen, because he says, if you have faith, you will say to this mountain, be cast into the sea. And it seems some would say that certainly the disciples would not have anything to do with this judgment of Jerusalem.

And and and yet that is not entirely true, because the prayers of God's people are what bring about God's hand moving in many significant ways, including his judgment on the nations or on those who persecute them. If you will look at Luke chapter 18, there's a very interesting story there that Jesus told Luke 18, one through eight. Jesus spoke a parable to them that men ought always to pray and not lose heart, saying there was a certain city, a judge.

Who did not fear God or regard man now, there was a widow in that city and she came to him saying, avenge me of my adversary. And he would not for a while. But afterward, he said within himself, though I do not fear God nor regard man yet because this widow troubles me, I will avenge her lest by her continual coming.

She weary me. Then the Lord said, hear what the unjust judge said and shall not God avenge his own elect who cry out day and night to him, though he bears long with them? I tell you that he will avenge them speedily. Nevertheless, when the Son of Man comes, will he really find faith in the land or on the earth? Can be translated either way.

Now, it's interesting. Jesus tells his disciples to pray. And in the context, it is a prayer for avenging the woman says, avenge me of my adversary.

And Jesus says, God will avenge those who cry to him night and day. It sounds as if Christians actually are can legitimately cry out for God to avenge them. And certainly they can.

In Romans chapter 12, Paul said, Brethren, do not avenge yourselves, but give place to wrath. For God has said, Vengeance is mine. I will repay.

It is not wrong for us to wish for God to settle the score. When the church is being persecuted by the wicked, for us to cry out to God and ask him to avenge the blood of the martyrs, for him to bring down the wicked, to judge the systems that oppose his kingdom. That is entirely right.

In fact, in Revelation 6, verses 9 and 10, it says, when he opened the fifth seal, I saw under the altar the souls of those who had been slain for the word of God and for the testimony which they held. These are martyrs, Christian martyrs. And they cried with a loud voice saying, How long, O Lord, holy and true, until you judge and avenge our blood on those who dwell in the land? Now, here's those that were martyred for Jesus.

And they're saying, Lord, how long will it be before you avenge our blood on those who dwell in the land? And so here they are crying out day and night, as Jesus said in Luke 18, they cry out day and night for him to avenge them. And he says he will. This prayer has got to be a prayer of faith.

You have to realize, and it's hard for us to grasp sometimes, how that in the early days, when the Sanhedrin and the political power of Jerusalem was persecuting the church, that the Christians were terrorized by this. When Saul of Tarsus was commissioned by the Sanhedrin to go out and arrest Christians and bring them home and kill them and so forth, that terrorized the church. And you can bet that Christians rightly said, Lord, when will you bring down this wicked system that's persecuting your son and his people? And that is what we are, actually, we find the model of that in the teaching of Jesus and in the book of Revelation.

The souls of the martyrs in heaven are saying, how long before you avenge our blood? Or Jesus says God will avenge his own who call out to him day and night. The idea is that the persecuted Christians are asking God to settle the score with their enemies because they will not take up swords themselves. They ask for God to do what he said he would do.

Vengeance is mine. I will repay, says the Lord. They're simply asking him to do so.

Now, they have to do so in faith, just like any other prayer has to be in faith. In the context of Jesus cursing the fig tree, which was an emblem of Israel being judged, Jesus said to the disciples, if you say to this mountain, now he's standing at Mount Zion, he's talking about that mountain, Jerusalem. If you say to this mountain, be removed and cast into the sea, it will be done.

The dispersal of Israel into the Gentile lands, Jesus indicated, is in the power of the disciples to accomplish through their prayers of faith. Their faith and their prayer is that which would accomplish the downfall of their enemy's power. That did happen in 70 AD.

Then Jesus said to them in verse 22, and all things whatever you ask in prayer, believing,

you will receive. This blanket promise of answering all prayer that you have faith for is, of course, similar to many other places that Jesus said things that are not very much different than that. We need to take that, of course, as part of the whole fabric of the biblical teaching on prayer.

It's not just simply anything that you can force yourself to believe that God will do, he's got to do it for you. It's rather, as I said earlier, faith comes by hearing and hearing by the word of God. If God has promised a thing and then you have faith for it, it will be done.

There's nothing impossible, there's nothing too difficult, but that God can do it if he has promised it and if you have the faith to receive that promise from him. In this particular context, I believe it was the promise that God would vindicate his people from their enemies who were persecuting them, which was the Jews. At this very time, the Jews were plotting to kill Jesus.

In Acts, they plotted to kill Paul and the apostles. The time came where God avenged his people and did destroy that system. I believe that many times Jesus refers to it in his teaching and this is, if I'm not mistaken, one of them.

When he speaks of moving a mountain, he's not talking about literal mountains, but he's speaking again about the judgment of Israel as in the cursing of the fig tree.