

## I Tell You the Truth . . . Faith Can Move Mountains

It's December 24<sup>th</sup> and the parking lot is jammed full, bumper-to-bumper. Increasingly frustrated because there isn't a single, vacant parking stall, a driver keeps circling . . . and circling . . . and circling. Just when he thinks he found the perfect spot, only four stalls from the front door, he slams his fist on the steering wheel when he sees a motorcycle occupying what he thought was the only open spot. Desperate for a parking spot he angrily utters a prayer, "Lord, if you give me a parking spot, I'll donate an extra \$1000 to church." Boom! (*Snap fingers.*) Just like that, he sees the white reverse lights flick on to his right. He slams on the brakes to reserve the coveted spot. Rejoicing as he watches the space open up inching into the stall, he sighs, "Forget it, God, I just found a space."

You may have heard a story like that before. Our first reaction may be to **laugh**. But it's really no laughing matter. John's situation, as silly as it sounds, sheds insight on how prayer is often **viewed** and **used**. Unfortunately, it's also how prayer is often used in our lives. Prayer can be a **last resort** when all else fails. We fail to tap into prayer's power or trust its effectiveness. Or when something does happen in our lives, we chalk it up to **coincidence** instead of God's answer to our prayer. As shallow or underutilized as prayer may become for our lives, how important it is for us to hear these words of our Savior, spoken a few short days before he died: *"I tell you the truth, if you have faith and do not doubt . . . you can say to this mountain, 'Go, throw yourself into the sea,' and it will be done. If you believe, you will receive whatever you ask for in prayer."*

Wow, what a promise! If you believe, you will receive! If you don't doubt, it will be done! Really? How could Jesus make such an outlandish statement? Let's consider the **context** in which he said it. It was the early part of Holy Week. After spending the night in rural Bethany, Jesus and his disciples were heading west into the city of Jerusalem for another day full of activity. But along the path, they came across a **fig tree** in full bloom. Typically, if a fig tree has leaves, it also has fruit, as its fruit and foliage appear simultaneously. But when Jesus went to pick breakfast from its branches that morning, no fruit was to be found. It was empty. It was a hypocrite—nice on the outside, worthless on the inside. So Jesus said, *"May you never bear fruit again!"* Boom! Immediately, the tree withered.

If you were Peter or Philip and you saw this fig tree wither simply because Jesus said so, what would be your reaction? Maybe you would have thought of the time **in the boat** when Jesus stilled the storm with a simple, "Silence!" Or maybe the time **on the shores** where we picked up leftovers from a little boy's lunch that fed thousands. And now this! These newly blackened fig leaves testify that this man has great powers. He takes a backseat to no one, not even nature. His power is wondrous. His power is amazing.

As you're staring at the fig tree with eyes wide open and contemplating what you just witnessed, you hear Jesus say, "You think that's amazing. Look at those mountains. As tall as they are, as solid and strong as they are, if you have faith, if you don't doubt, they can fall into that sea 4,000 feet below and behind you." If you're Philip or Peter, do you believe him? Absolutely. You don't doubt him for a second. Why? Because you've seen what he can do. You've seen his power at work.

That's the key when it comes to unlocking the beauty and comfort of Jesus' *"I tell you the truth"* statement before us today. All too often we hear those words, if *you* have faith and if *you* believe, and we emphasize the "you." But what makes Jesus' statement the truth? It's knowing the power of the One who **makes the promise**. Jesus, the One who can wither a tree with his tongue, promises, *"I tell you the truth . . . faith can move mountains."* His **promise** and his **power** make prayer **effective**. His **promise** and his **power** make your faith **powerful**. In other words, moving mountains does not depend on the one who has the faith, but **the One in whom** you have faith.

How important that is to remember, especially in the season of Lent. During this time of year in which our hymn tunes have turned to minor keys and our "Alleluias" are temporarily missing, we are led to contemplate the seriousness of our sin. Words like *repentance* and *confession* dominate our services and devotionals. While a season of confession is valuable for magnifying the love of our Lord, there's also a danger. As we see our hands swinging the hammer to pound the nails, as we hear our voices in the midst of the mocking crowds, we can easily despair, "What kind of a believer am I? What kind of a faith do I have?" Satan would want nothing less than to have us rest the validity of our faith on **our own** actions and words. Satan would want nothing less than to have us base the power of our faith on how we've seen our prayers answered in the past. "I prayed that Grandpa would get well, but he didn't. . . ." "My faith must not be that good. I prayed that our marriage would survive, but the divorce papers were signed. . . . I must have doubted God." "I believed I could get the job, but I didn't receive the offer."

With our faith shaken, we start to wonder, "Do I *really* believe?" Or, "Do I believe *enough* in Jesus?" Or worse, we question, "Is Jesus worth believing in? Can we trust him when he says, *'I tell you the truth . . . faith can move mountains?'*" I've never seen a mountain fall into the sea. Have you?

But Jesus' point on this Lenten path is not whether or not he's made the mountains fall into the sea. **His point is that he can**. He's that powerful. And the disciples, through prayer, could tap into that power. What a loving thing to teach his disciples in this final week. In a few days, the disciples would see Jesus arrested, beaten, and crucified at the hands of ungodly men. Undoubtedly, their faith would be shaken. Yet they could go back to this tree, they could replay this conversation, and they could be reminded of Jesus' power. They could be reminded that he didn't die out of weakness or because he was outsmarted by his betrayer, but that he

died of his own accord. As a result, they could have faith, mountain-moving faith. Would they always remember that? No. If they did, Peter wouldn't have cowered under the questioning of a servant girl. They wouldn't have huddle in a locked room afraid for their lives. But no matter how they felt or how they acted, Jesus' statement remained, *"I tell you the truth, you tell this mountain to fall into the sea, and it will be done!"*

The same goes for us. In this season of Jesus' suffering, never mistake it for weakness. Through the eyes of Scripture, we've seen Jesus do more than collapse a mountain into a sea or wither a tree. We have seen the Savior **tempted** by the devil himself, yet he remained without sin. That's power. We'll soon see a Savior pick up a **severed ear** and put it back in its proper place. That's power. We'll see a Savior-God take mere **bread and wine** and in, with, and under it, give his disciples his body and his blood to eat and to drink. That's power. We'll see a Savior-God **crush Satan's head** as he cries from the cross, *"It is finished!"* That's power. We'll see our Savior declared with power to be the Son of God by the **resurrection** from the dead. That's power. We'll see our Savior-God place his **disciple's finger** into his pierced hands and say, *"Stop doubting and believe."* We'll see our Savior-God **ascend** into heaven and take his position of power at the right hand of God. That's power. And today, he invites us to tap into that power through **prayer**. Not as a last resort or a desperate plea, but as a primary blessing he's reserved for you and me.

Oh, I'm not saying we won't forget that. At times, we'll cower under questioning and we'll hide behind our fears. But you know what? Our fears don't change the facts. No matter how weak-kneed you feel, the fact remains, *"I tell you the truth . . . your faith can move mountains,"* because your faith depends on the One who has tree-withering, death-defying, sin-erasing, Satan-squelching power. Like the disciples, may that lead us to be amazed. May that lead us to pray. Amen.

