

# Meeting With Christ

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Practical and Exegetical Studies on the Words of Jesus Christ

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Based on sermons of Pasteur Eric Chang

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## YOU WILL SAY TO THIS MOUNTAIN

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### Matthew 17:14-21

This lesson constitutes the second part of a study on Matthew 17:14-21, a passage describing Jesus healing a boy with an unclean spirit.

#### **This mountain**

The last time, much of our attention was focused on v. 17 where Jesus said, *O faithless and perverse generation, how long shall I be with you?*

Today, we will explore the meaning of v. 20. In this declaration, Jesus promised a share in His power to anyone who has faith. *If you have faith as a mustard seed, He said, you will say to this mountain, 'Move from here to there,' and it will move; and nothing will be impossible for you.* Even if your faith is no greater than a grain of mustard seed, it has unlimited potential and through God's power can make everything possible. This point is driven home with the hyperbolic analogy of moving mountains. When Jesus speaks about moving mountains, of course He does not literally mean moving mountains. He is speaking figuratively of great power.

But notice carefully the sentence. *You will say to **this** mountain.* Jesus does not seem to be just talking about a faith to move mountains. He seems to be pointing to a particular mountain. This mountain. Later in this lesson, we will take a closer look at this observation to see if we can learn something from it.

#### **Removers of mountains**

In understanding the Bible, we often have to go back to the historical context to ask ourselves this question: What did the people understand when they heard Jesus speaking about moving mountains? Was this an expression known to the hearers? Was there a saying in those days which used this kind of terminology? Well, in this particular case, we find in the Jewish literature, in the Talmud, a similar expression. It is not exactly the same, but it is quite similar.

The Jews used to call their greatest teachers by the expression 'removers of mountains.' They would say for example that there was not in their days such a 'rooter up of mountains' as this teacher. He was so skilled that he could root up mountains. The expression was used to highlight the fact that the teacher had a profound insight into weighty or mountainous problems. Nobody could deal with those difficult problems. But this man could handle them. He was able to move these mountains as though they were small things.

We all had this kind of experience. One day, you wrestle with a particular issue, and it feels like you are facing a big mountain because you don't know how to handle it. You just can't move it out of your way. Every time you think about it, you find that you can't cope with it. And then, you meet a very wise person. He understands your problem. He is able to help you. As he guides you, the problem you thought was so difficult suddenly becomes manageable. The obstacle, the mountain, has been removed.

Rabbi Rabbah bar Nachmani was a person like that. He was called 'a rooter up of mountains' in the Talmud 'because he was exceedingly acute in subtle disputations.' He had piercing judgment. The problems that people found insurmountable, this great rabbi could see right through it.

So this expression was applied to people who had deep spiritual insight. The connection of this to the Lord's teaching is quite plain. As you gradually realize in your walk with God, there is a close connection between spiritual insight and spiritual power. The person who lacks spiritual power is very often a person who lacks spiritual insight. The carnal man can hardly understand spiritual things. And he does not have spiritual power either. It is the spiritual man who has insight and perception in the things of God. It is also the spiritual man who is equipped with power.

This is one thing. The other thing is that spiritual insight is closely connected with faith, with the purity of our belief. And faith is a relationship expressed in a total commitment of ourselves to God. It is that relationship to God which determines the extent of our perception in spiritual things. A pure faith is linked with a good spiritual perception.

## **Moving mountains in the OT**

Now, the image of moving mountains also links up with OT passages. We have for example Zechariah 4:7-9.

*Zechariah 4:7. 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!"*

*8 Moreover the word of the Lord came to me, saying:*

*9 The hands of Zerubbabel have laid the foundation of this temple; his hands shall also finish it. Then you will know that the Lord of hosts has sent Me to you.*

Who are you, O great mountain, before God's servant Zerubbabel? You are nothing.

Who is Zerubbabel? When the Persian king Cyrus allowed the Jews to return to their own land, he appointed Zerubbabel governor of the colony. Shortly after his arrival to Jerusalem, Zerubbabel proceeded to lay the foundation of the new temple that he wanted to build. Soon, however, opposition arose. The adversaries of the Jews made an apparently friendly offer of assistance but Zerubbabel rebuffed them. Then they wrote to the king of Persia to say that the rebuilding of the temple constituted a threat to his empire. The king accepted the accusation and stopped the work (Ezra 4).

How would Zerubbabel continue to build God's house when this great mountain, the kingdom of Persia and all the other opposing people, stood in the way? And so, the prophet Zechariah said, 'Who are you, O great mountain, before Zerubbabel? God's servant will bring you down.' *You shall become a plain.* And that is exactly what happened. The mountain was moved away, and the temple continued to be built.

Isaiah is another prophet who used the picture of moving mountains. Isaiah 40:3-5.

*Isaiah 40:3. The voice of one crying in the wilderness: "Prepare the way of the Lord; make straight in the desert a highway for our God.*

*4 Every valley shall be exalted and every mountain and hill brought low; the crooked places shall be made straight and the rough places smooth;*

*5 The glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together; for the mouth of the Lord has spoken."*

The mountains will be moved away. The valleys will be lifted up, presumably by filling the mountains into the valleys.

Why? Because a highway must be built for God.

A highway from where to where? From Babylon to Jerusalem.

Why? Because God's people are returning to Jerusalem.

Here Isaiah is prophesying the return of Israel to Jerusalem. You remember that the Jews were sent into exile because of their disobedience. Now God allows them to return back to Jerusalem. But there are many mountains, many obstacles, that stand in the way. So God says, 'Prepare a highway in the wilderness. Bring the mountains down. Level them into the valleys.' Let nothing stand in the way of God's salvation. The whole world will then see the glory of God.

## **Two spiritual mountains**

It is interesting to see that the apostle Peter addressed his first letter to the 'exiles' in various places. *Peter, an apostle of Jesus Christ, to the exiles of the dispersion in Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia* (1Peter 1:1). The exiles are the Christian Jews scattered throughout the nations, dispersed from their homeland, Israel. But they are also the converted Gentiles. We, Christians, are here on earth as exiles, dispersed throughout the world and living away from our heavenly homeland (yet hoping some day to reach it). We have been delivered from captivity in the world, from Babylon, and we are returning back to the heavenly Jerusalem to meet with God. We are going back to Zion (Hebrews 12:22). That is salvation. Salvation is a process in which one is delivered out of the world and brought back to God. And through this process, God's glory is revealed to the world.

But now, think about the path that the exiles had to take when they traveled from Babylon to Jerusalem. If you look at a map, you will see that as they approached the Holy Land, they had to face a big mountain, Mount Hermon. This majestic mountain has three high peaks and is snow covered most of the year. And that is blocking the way of the exiles coming from Babylon. You see the point of what Isaiah was saying. 'Make a highway for God and His people. Bring down the mountains so that the way is clear and smooth for the returning exiles.'

Notice that not only God's people are returning along this highway of salvation but God Himself is also returning. Isaiah 40:9-10 talks about the return of God to Jerusalem.

*Isaiah 40:9. O Zion, you who bring good tidings, get up into the high mountain; O Jerusalem, you who bring good tidings, lift up your voice with strength, lift it up, be not afraid; say to the cities of Judah, "Behold your God!"*

*10 Behold, the Lord God shall come with a strong hand, and His arm shall rule for Him; behold, His reward is with Him, and His work before Him.*

*Behold your God.* Look, the Lord is coming. Prepare a highway because God is coming. And this is exactly what we, as Christians, are looking for. We are moving to Zion and God is coming with

us. Therefore we need to prepare a highway. But there are mountains that stand in the way. And they have to be brought down. What are these mountains?

Let's go back to Matthew 17:20. Jesus said to His disciples, *You will say to **this** mountain, 'Move from here to there,' and it will move.* If Jesus had a specific mountain in mind, most likely He pointed to a mountain that was nearby. He just came down from the mountain where the transfiguration occurred. This mountain is described in Matthew 17:1 as a 'high mountain.' The only very high mountain in the area is Mount Hermon. So when Jesus said, 'This mountain,' we have every reason to believe that He was referring to Mount Hermon.

The second time that the Lord Jesus spoke about moving a mountain is in Matthew 21:21. He said, ... *if you say to **this** mountain, 'Be removed and be cast into the sea,' it will be done ...* Again, it is a specific mountain. But this time, it is a different mountain. If you read Matthew 21:1, you will see that it is the Mount of Olives.

So two mountains stood in the path of the exiles who were traveling from Babylon to Jerusalem. The first one is the majestic Mount Hermon. The second one, much smaller, is the Mount of Olives. They blocked the pathway to Jerusalem. And they had to be removed, 'made low,' in order to prepare a way for God.

I believe that these two mountains have a spiritual significance. What does Mount Hermon represent? A lot of Matthew 17 has to do with the power of the evil one. It deals with the question of demon possession and how to cast out a demon. The kingdom of Satan is the great mountain that stands between God and man's salvation. All the powers of evil are there to block the way of salvation.

What about the Mount of Olives? In Matthew 21, the focus is on the issue of unbelief, particularly the unbelief of Israel and its religious leaders. You can see that in the parable of the barren fig tree, in the parable of the two sons and in the parable of the wine-growers. So the second mountain is the mountain of unbelief.

These are the two spiritual mountains, the mountain of evil and the mountain of unbelief. They are the main obstacles between God and man's salvation. They must be brought down. And who is going to do it? The people of God are being called to prepare the highway of salvation for mankind. How are we going to do it? By faith, by a pure and undivided faith, which is able to draw on the unlimited power of God.

### **A faith that can move mountains**

Why do I emphasize a 'pure and undivided' faith? Because that is the kind of faith that can move mountains. I would like to discuss this point more fully. Let's turn to the parallel passage in Mark, Mark 9:22-24. Here the father of the demon possessed boy said to Jesus in v. 22.

*Mark 9:22. "It has often cast him into the fire and into the water, to destroy him; but if you are able to do anything, have pity on us and help us."*

*23 Jesus said to him, "If you are able! -- All things can be done for the one who believes."*

*24 Immediately the father of the child cried out, "**I believe; help my unbelief!**"*

'It seems that you come to Me without any real confidence,' Jesus answered. 'You say, 'If I am able to do anything.' Well, the question is not whether I can do anything. The question is whether you can believe.' Jesus put the ball squarely into the father's court.

And notice his curious reply in v. 24. *'I believe; help my unbelief.'* I believe. But at the same time, I don't believe. 'I do believe,' the father said; but he recognized that his faith was far from perfect. It was mixed with unbelief.

It is possible to see that in very desperate situations. A person has tried everything but nothing helped him. As a last resort, he turns to God. In his desperation, he is prepared to come to God even in unbelief.

But we don't need to look at other people. We can just look at ourselves. Every believer, I am sure, at one time or another has found himself in this man's case because our faith is imperfect. It is often weak and defective in its exercise. Personally, I find that it is somewhat easy to believe when I can get something out of the situation. Unbelief tends to set in when certain demands are required of me. And I also find that my unbelief often expresses itself in selfishness, in hanging on to the securities of this life rather than trusting God with a singleness of heart.

The disciples asked Jesus, 'Why couldn't we cast out the demon?' The Lord unhesitatingly answered, *'Because of your unbelief'* (Matthew 17:20). 'Because you lack the purity of faith. It is still mixed with unbelief. Hence, when you tried to confront the enemy, you found yourself powerless. You couldn't cast it out.' This is not to say that the disciples were entirely without power. They did have some power, but not its fullness. They did have some faith, but they still had much to learn to keep it pure.

Let us come to God in prayer and in fasting (v. 21), asking Him to help us overcome our unbelief. For we know that a pure faith is so able to bring God's power into operation that no mountain will stand in our way to bring our fellow men to salvation.

One final point about faith. There is an aspect of this passage which emphasizes what a small amount of pure faith can do – the possibilities are limitless. If we have faith as a mustard seed, we can perform the most difficult undertaking. However we are not told that if we have faith as big as a mountain we can move mountains. Some Christians have a mechanistic approach to the works of the kingdom. They think that if you believe much, God will do much. And the reason God is not doing much for you and through you is because you do not believe enough. Well, this is not quite true. With faith, all things are possible, yes, but only within the sovereign will of God. The will of God always constitutes the final determinant.