

Final Prayer

I trust You, Lord Jesus; guard my faith so that I do not compromise my soul.
I hope in You, Lord Jesus; protect my feelings so that I do not wander from the path.
I love You, Lord Jesus; heal my heart so that I do not lose my strength.
Complete Your work in me, Lord Jesus, for Your eternal Glory. AMEN

Prayer

In all I do this day, I praise Your Name, O Lord.
When life is unrewarding, I will praise You by being faithful;
When life is difficult or hard, I will praise You by my persistence;
When life is wearisome, I will praise you through a cheerful smile;
I will do all these things and more, because Your Spirit is with me:
Thank You Lord: AMEN

Other Prayer Suggestions

Weekly Theme: Rural Life

Pray for farmers who are seeking to find ways of meeting the changing demands of people for food, and also to maintain the standards imposed upon them by governments.

On-going prayers

- *Pray for little children who are abused by their parents*
- *Give thanks to God for the many good things He has given you*
- *Pray for DR Congo at this time of civil war and unrest*

Meditation

Jesus, what do You see in Your disciples today?

Do You see those who live as if they have been saved
from a world which is still a troubled place
and from evil which lingers until You come?

Do You see those who are energised by the Gospel
and whose lives have been utterly changed
through the amazing grace and love of God?

Do You see those who are motivated to do Your work,
totally confident in the power of the Spirit
to transform the world through all they do?

Do you see those who are utterly obedient in all things,
willing to do anything You may ask of them
whatever the cost, for the sake of Your Gospel?

Jesus, challenge us to the core, so we may ever live for You.

Bible Study - Matthew 21:18-22

¹⁸ When he returned to the city in the morning, he was hungry. ¹⁹ Seeing a fig tree by the side of the road, he went to it and found nothing on it but leaves. Then he said to it, 'May no fruit ever come from you again!' And the fig tree withered immediately. ²⁰ When the disciples saw it, they were amazed, and said, 'How did the fig tree wither so quickly?' ²¹ Jesus answered them, 'Amen, I say to you; if you have faith and do not doubt, not only will you do what has been done to the fig tree, but you can say to this mountain, "Be lifted up and

thrown into the sea," it will be done. ²² However much you ask for in faithful prayer, you will receive.'

Review

When Jesus had arrived in Jerusalem He went straight to the Temple where, after creating a havoc in the Gentile courtyard (21:1-11), He did the work of the Messiah by claiming authority in the Temple and healing the blind and the crippled (21:14) and receiving praise (21:15). All this caught the attention of the chief priests who ran the Temple, and the conversations between them and Jesus was terse (21:16). After the whole remarkable incident, Matthew records that Jesus went back to Bethany for the night (21:17), to stay presumably with Mary, Martha and Lazarus with whom we know that Jesus had contact (see John 11). In the morning, Jesus set out for the Temple, and in today's passage we read about Him setting out early, not having eaten breakfast, but followed by His disciples! The brief episode described in our text took place as Jesus and the disciples walked from Bethany towards Jerusalem, on their way to further confrontation with the authorities. His entry the day before had been an occasion of joy and celebration, but now the gravity of situation was beginning to sink in.

The cursing of the Fig Tree Jesus went to Jerusalem for the festival of Passover in the late spring, when fig trees sprouted their much prized luxuriant leaves, valued for the shade they gave in the heat of the summer. During the spring, the fig also produces out immature fruits capable of being eaten but not at their best, and these early fruits usually matured over the summer to produce ripe figs later in the year. It was therefore quite natural to find Jesus looking for some early figs to take the edge off his hunger that particular morning. However, Jesus responded unexpectedly to a lack of fruit; He cursed the tree, commanding that no fruit should ever come from it again (21:19). The tree withered immediately; but what this means and why Jesus did it remains a source of fascination to us.

For this, we need to dig back into the Old Testament, where we find that almost every mention of fig trees in the Old Testament connects with the theme of the failure of Israel to do God's will. Isaiah 34:4 talks of withered fig trees as a sign of God's Judgement. Jeremiah berates Israel for failing to keep the Lord's covenant using the example of a fig tree (Jer 8:13). The most enigmatic prophecy of all is from Micah (7:1ff) 'Woe is me! For I have become like one who ... finds no cluster to eat; there is no first-ripe fig for which I hunger. The faithful have disappeared from the land!' Finally, Habakkuk, after speaking out against the misery of God's wrath against Israel says 'though there is no first ripe fruit of the fig tree – yet I will rejoice ...' (Hab. 3:17) suggesting that after God had judged His people they would rejoice again (and see also Joel 1:12 and Hosea 2:2).

These prophecies, confirm our opinion that Jesus cursed the fig tree as a sign that He was fulfilling Old Testament prophecy about the judgment of God on a failed Israel. Already, John the Baptist had laid an 'axe to the root of the tree' (Matt 3:10), and Jesus had spoken about bearing good fruit within the Kingdom of God (7:17,18 and 13:23). Now in this brief private moment with the disciples, He would have expected them to understand something of the meaning of His words.

Faith to move mountains Whether or not the disciples realised this aspect of the meaning of the sign, they were incredulous at what they saw; 'how did the fig tree wither so quickly?' they said, and in response, Jesus spoke to them about faith. Looking back, it was indeed faith that was missing from Israel, moreover, this lack precipitated her collapse. It was important for Jesus to connect the collapse of Israel with faith, because faith would prove to be the central feature of the new people of God after the Resurrection, and was the difference between the Old and the New Covenant.

Jesus then said famously; 'if you have faith and do not doubt ... you can say to this mountain "be lifted up" and it will be done!' To some extent, it seems that Jesus has given us here an invitation to use our faith almost like a blank cheque to achieve the impossible. However, we should moderate our worldly aspirations here and reflect on what this meant to Jesus and the disciples. The picture of lifting up a mountain and throwing it into the sea (21:21) is one that Jesus had already used when talking about faith to cast out demons (17:20). In addition, the moving of mountains is also a significant feature of the Old Testament, where it occurs in Isaiah's famous prophecies about the Lord's work of redemption (41:15, 42:11 etc.) through the Servant.

In the light of this, we should be careful to remember that 'moving mountains' was integrally connected in Jesus' mind with the coming of the Kingdom; it was certainly not a matter of giving Christians permission to get whatever they want. But it is unwise to dismiss altogether the tempting appeal of what Jesus said. 'Moving mountains' is like a challenge to reach for the highest goals and desire the greatest things, and Jesus asks us through this great saying to aspire to the highest for the sake of the Kingdom; not for our benefit, of course, but for the Lord. This is not about satisfying our wills, but about being in tune with the will of God, and links closely with that other great saying of Jesus; 'ask and you shall receive ...' (Matt. 7:7-11) . The highest goals in this world are achieved when we realise our potential through prayer; through talking to God about the 'mountains' that need to be moved and in faith, doing what He says.

Questions *(for use in groups)*

1. Discuss in your group what you think Jesus meant by cursing the fig tree. Did the disciples really understand this?
2. What does the invitation to 'move mountains' by faith make you think about, and is it something you feel is right according to God's will?
3. What impossible things (mountains) have you been able to move by faith during your lifetime?

Discipleship

Personal comment:

It can be hard to read a passage of scripture and find that if we are to understand it, then we must take into account a whole world view or new set of information (from the Old Testament) of which we were unaware. It would be so much easier to be able to respond immediately to the text as we have it, and find its deeper meaning quickly and simply. However, this is not reality, for God has given Scripture to us and it is all relevant to our understanding His will. Unfortunately many people today like to think that they can get away with some kind of effective Christian living without having to do much 'study' or scriptural work 'in depth', and if they do, they want a preacher to do it for them and deliver it on Sunday. This will not work, and it is only when we come to terms with the whole Bible ourselves that we will understand the greater depths of God's work through Jesus.

Ideas for discipleship programme

- Ask the Lord to help you check out your own highest desires against His will. Spend time in fasting and prayer so that you can give time to this exercise.
- Walk around your local town or village (or city), and pray for the people there who do not know the love of their Creator. Pray to move mountains!