

# Prayer: An Act of Faith

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PART 4

## *Matthew 21:18-22*

“In prayer it is better to have a heart without words than words without heart.”  
– John Bunyan

A little girl, dressed in her Sunday best, was hurrying off to Sunday School as fast as she could go. Not wanting to be late, she prayed for help beyond herself. “Dear Lord, please don’t let me be late! Dear Lord, please don’t let me be late!” All of a sudden she tripped and fell, getting her clothes dirty. She jumped up, brushed herself off and continued praying, “Dear Lord, please don’t let me be late...But don’t shove me either!”

Any time you pray, it is an act of faith. To even bow in prayer is recognition of a relationship with a God who cannot be seen, and recognizing that resources outside yourself are needed. It is true that many bow before the Lord with only their heads rather than their hearts. Too often prayer has been a custom or a traditional response to ceremony with little emotional attachment to or need of the Father as well as a means to get us out of something.

What I have learned in studying the prayer life of Jesus is that His prayers were not in response to tradition or ceremony but to the spontaneity of His life. He prayed at His baptism, during His temptation and wilderness journey, and before He selected His twelve disciples. He prayed before He raised His friend Lazarus from the grave, and He prayed at His transfiguration. His miracles no doubt were results of faithful prayer, and His prayers from the Cross demonstrate that praying for the Will of the Father is important from start to finish. Jesus teaches us that prayer is an act of absolute trust.

*<sup>18</sup> Early in the morning, as he was on his way back to the city, he was hungry. <sup>19</sup> Seeing a fig tree by the road, he went up to it but found nothing on it except leaves. Then he said to it, “May you never bear fruit again!” Immediately the tree withered.*

*<sup>20</sup> When the disciples saw this, they were amazed. “How did the fig tree wither so quickly?” they asked. <sup>21</sup> Jesus replied, “I tell you the truth, if you have faith and do not doubt, not only can you do what was done to the fig tree, but also you can say to this mountain, ‘Go, throw yourself into the sea,’ and it will be done. <sup>22</sup> If you believe, you will receive whatever you ask for in prayer” (Matthew 21:18-22).*

### *Context of the Teaching*

There are some difficulties with this passage. It portrays Jesus in a terse and vindictive tone. No other place in the New Testament does Jesus use His powers for Himself or in any way that would appear retaliatory. The narrative is blatantly out of character for Christ. Further, many scholars have argued that it was not the season for figs. Mark even makes a notation of that fact. These facts then raise the question, “Why would He ‘zap’ the fig tree if it were not time for the tree to bear?” Matthew and Mark include this incident, but Luke includes a parable of Jesus about a useless fig tree (Luke 13:6-9). This may be one of the times when what Jesus said was turned into something Jesus did. The only way to resolve the issue is to see the Savior capturing a moment to give His disciples a

memorable lesson in a dramatic symbolic act. It was a common practice of teachers and even some of the prophets to do something drastic to secure learning when simple words might not do the trick.

In order to understand this passage in Matthew, we must put the verses in their context, and deal with some problems in the text. Jesus had experienced a “triumphant” entry into Jerusalem and had confronted the greedy money-changers in the Temple. As He overturned their tables, scattering their money, He proclaimed that the place of worship would be a place of prayer for all people (Matthew 21:12-13). The religious leaders were indignant over His disrupting their Temple operations, and to add salt to their wounds, the children were using Messianic titles as they called out to Jesus.

He left the Temple and the city later in the evening and made His way to the little village of Bethany, about a mile or so east, just across the Mount of Olives. In the morning He decided to go back into Jerusalem with His disciples. On the way He stops at a fig tree. However, he finds no fruit, only the rich foliage. He immediately curses the tree and it withers before the disciples’ eyes. Of course, they were astonished, asking, “How did this happen?”

### *The Lesson of Integrity*

The tree was “boasting” of fruitfulness, but the boasting was false. He cursed the tree not because it did not have fruit but because it made a show that it did. Similarly, the religious order and system of the day boasted of religious integrity and fruitfulness, yet it was really only a self-serving show. Everything happening within the Temple was sanctioned by the religious order. It was permissible and necessary for people to purchase the animal or bird they were to offer as a sacrifice. Further, with so many foreigners in town for the Passover there was a need for currency exchange. However, Jesus was indignant about this arrangement. The problem in all of it was the deception of false hopes. The worship of God and the subsequent relationship with God was being raped by the greedy and the flowery. It was a religion that had gone to leaf but had no fruit. The lesson for the disciples was indeed personal and unmistakable; anyone who makes a show of being fruitful while being spiritually barren will be cursed.

Showiness is a well learned trait of the human race, especially in our culture. Only when the situations and environment lay waste the false identities of dress, words, attitude, and achievement is the real person known. Only when the pressure comes for us, do we and others really get in touch with who we really are.

Jesus Christ wanted His followers to be genuine people, transparent people. He abhors showiness, falsehood, and faked piety; and practically so, for the success of His message depended upon the genuine hearts of those who would be carrying it to the nations. They had to be clearly His without any pretense or show. The Son of God is in no way impressed with or congratulatory to anyone or anything which would pretend to be something that they are not. In the pretense will come the experience of withering away.

Further, the fig tree was useless. It was not doing what it was created to do. The cursing of the tree was a prophetic symbol against Israel. The nation that became known as the People of God through God’s covenant with Abraham was raised up for a definite purpose: to produce the Messiah. The gospels testify that those out of whom should come the Christ rejected Him, even to the point of seeking to kill Him. The purpose for which God called them was not recognized. They were not fulfilling what they were called to do. Disaster would then, according to Jesus, be inevitable. Anyone who fails to be useful invites trouble.

## *The Lesson of Faith*

How prayer is attached to this incident may appear to be somewhat confusing. Adding the “miracle” of casting a mountain into the sea by the command of praying faith, astounds us even further. This statement of Jesus must not be taken literally, for no one can remove a mountain to the sea with words, no matter how spiritually felt and intended.

Some scholars have suggested that since the Dead Sea can be seen from the Mount of Olives, that Jesus was implying that the disciples should be praying for the coming eschatological reign. They arrive at this interpretation by using Zechariah 14:4 which speaks of the “splitting of the Mount of Olives” on the Day of the Lord.<sup>1</sup> I think this is a bit of a stretch given the fact that “casting a mountain in the sea” was a common phrase used of effective teachers who could remove difficulties from the minds of their students. These types of teachers were called mountain movers.<sup>2</sup>

Jesus apparently uses the phrase to emphasize that prayers offered in faith produce great results. He added this imagery to the cursing of the fig tree to illustrate there are divine resources available which can save from the peril of hypocritical piety and spiritual barrenness. These resources are obtained through the prayer of faith.

*But, what is the prayer of faith?*

Believing faith in the New Testament is tied to genuine trust in God. This type of faith always leans against and rests upon the will of God. A person who prays as an act of faith is one who prays trusting in two things.

First, he trusts *the ways of God*. He believes that God’s character as revealed in the Scriptures is one of lovingkindness and purposeful action to preserve His people in that realm of lovingkindness (Psalm 86:15; 89:1; 117). He is a God who delivers people, making them to become His people, upholding them with His hand (Psalm 100:3; Isaiah 41:13; Matthew 1:21). He broods over His people and orders their steps so they will not stumble (Psalm 18:36; 37:23). He is a God who guides, protects, and provides, all in accordance with His grace and purposes (Psalm 32:8; 73:24; John 16:13). Without question, to the person praying in faith, God works all things for good for them who lovingly trust Him and believe they are a child of His purpose and will (Romans 8:28). Since God has been faithful then, He is faithful now, and He will be faithful. All He is and does is in accordance with His divine wisdom and love. That is the guarantee for the prayer of faith. God’s ways can be trusted.

Secondly, the believer praying in faith trusts *the words of God*. The speech or voice of God was to convey guidance and promise and to reveal His will. His word always matched His ways, and vice versa. If His people who are called by His majestic name would humble themselves and pray, He will hear and restore them (2 Chronicles 7:14). His words were always filled with invitation and calling. There is forever value in the words of God, for in them is salvation defined, hope assured, sin cancelled, Satan dispelled, and Christ glorified. Obedience to the word of God is necessary for blessing, required for strength, and demanded for growth. The imperative to read and apply the words, commands, and principles of God to living is paramount in the teachings of His Son. Without abiding in the His Word there is no fruitfulness. In fact, there is nothing of eternal value and impact

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<sup>1</sup> Carson, D. A., *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary: Matthew*, F. E. Gaebelin, editor, (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House), 1984.

<sup>2</sup> Barclay, William, *Daily Study Bible Series, Mark*, (New York: Westminster Press), 1975.

that is produced from a life that refuses to abide in Christ and His Word (John 15:5).

Let me quickly say that piety and “leafiness” can creep in here. You can know a great deal about the Word of God, but if the word is not being lived out (obeyed), your spiritual life has merely “gone to leaf.” However, if one chooses to abide in Christ and abide in the Word then there is the glorious promise of answered prayer (John 15:7). Notice, as we have seen time and time again, praying is dependent and has its substance in the relationship of the one praying with God. We pray not for an answer but for the relationship. The prayer of faith is an act of trust in and obedience to God’s Word.

### *Empowered*

The prayer of faith also enables us to keep the proper perspective of God and a humble perspective of ourselves. This is the great miracle. We can pray in relationship with Christ (“ask anything in my name”) and find the obstacles before us will be no greater than the strength found in trusting the ways and words of God. In every step of this life we are steadied by this trust, and in such a way as to make the “mountain” seem to be out of view. In other words, the prayer of faith renews a focus upon a faithful God rather than a fearful obstacle, whatever it might be.

There are examples of this throughout the Scriptures. For instance, when the Children of Israel were prepared to cross the Jordan River into the Promised Land, the river was at a seasonal flood stage. Joshua charged the Levitical priests to carry the Ark of the Covenant on regardless and rallied the people to follow it because Yahweh would do something marvelous among them. If you read the account in Joshua 3 you will discover that the people did not rest on the slopes waiting for God to remove the obstacle of rushing currents before they marched forward. Their trust was placed in what God said. They needed no proof. Rather, they went as far as they could go, and once they took the crucial first step into the river, God took over and the miracle occurred. The river stopped flowing and the people crossed over. If your focus is kept upon a faithful God rather than the “mountain,” your faith will overcome it.

Consider the prayer of repentance as an example of “praying believing you have already received it” (Matthew 21:22). Sin may rise to enormous heights, and the person doomed to stay in its shadow is ever reminded of its consequences. But a prayer of faith that affirms trust in the loving way of God paved with the blood of His Son will discover the mountain has been cast away. Sin has been forgiven! When someone trusts that the Word of God is true concerning the crucifixion of Jesus Christ, they receive pardon for their sin, and they are promised fellowship with the Father because of His grace (Ephesians 2:8-9). When they believe Jesus was raised from the dead without doubting it, they have received the promise of eternal life and will receive the welcome of Christ in heaven, “Enter into the joy of the Lord” (Romans 10:9; Matthew 25:21-23). Through the prayer of repentant faith, the mountain of sin is removed and the promises of new life and heaven’s reward are guaranteed. “Everything you ask in prayer, believing, you shall receive” (Matthew 21:22). This is the economy of God. He empowers those who pray believing.

We can then conclude that praying believing is not the easy way out of things. Perhaps the real significance here is that praying believing is the way to receive power to do things yourself. The prayer of faith is a prayer that encounters the securities of God’s character and promises and at the same time opens the potential of your life under that character and those promises. In believing prayer the pray-er is active and working because he or she is empowered to do things, convinced of their purpose and calling.

## *Surrendered*

The prayer of faith is also a prayer of submission. It allows us to accept and handle things. Praying submissively is to pray without doubts and without a need to escape. The faith that trusts the ways and words of God is a faith that resists doubts. Doubt questions the validity of God's word and questions the timely activity of God's ways. Do you remember the temptation of Eve? Satan raised doubt within her by asking if God really meant what He said (Genesis 3:1). "Did God really say, 'You must not eat from any tree in the garden?'" One of the craftiest tactics of Satan is to raise doubt in your mind and foster fear in your heart.

But, doubt is not necessarily unbelief. Actually, as translated in the Scriptures, it means staggering or wavering in faith. Doubt is faith that cannot make up its mind. Praying without doubt is praying with your mind made up about the ways and words of God. You need no proof of His conduct or proof of His promises; you simply believe them.

Far too many of us have treated the prayer of faith as a tactic to avert something dreadful coming. To do so is to actually avert the power of the Spirit. The only possible exception to this is praying repentantly, asking God for forgiveness through Jesus Christ. Doing so delivers your soul from the judgment, averting the wrath of God upon sin. The quicker we learn that a part of the Christian walk is going through the tough things with the grace of God the quicker we will find the joy and satisfaction meant for us in praying believing.

The best example of a prayer of faith, which involves both trust and submission, is the prayer of Jesus in Gethsemane (Mark 14:36). Notice Christ's faith, His request and His subsequent surrender. "Abba, Father, everything is possible for you. Take this cup from me. Yet not what I will, but what you will." There is little question about His trust in the manner in which God was working and could work. He refused to sway to another alternative ("Take this cup from me."). His mind was made up and He prayed trusting God and surrendering to His will, whatever that would be.

When faith has conquered doubt, praying moves from the conflict of our will with God's to the surrendering of our wills to His. Christ's prayer was a prayer of surrendering faith, and it should be our model of believing prayer.

## *Conclusion*

Therefore, we must pray with faith and without pretense. It is important to have a clean, honest heart before the Lord and a mind that is made up about His character and calling. As an act of faith, the pray-er has decided to be so open to God that he or she is willing to be changed by the will of God, empowered to do what otherwise would have never been attempted. In fact, you cannot remain the same when you pray believing.