



## **Matthew 17:19–20**

19 Then the disciples came to Jesus in private and asked, “Why couldn’t we drive it out?” 20 He replied, “Because you have so little faith. Truly I tell you, if you have faith as small as a mustard seed, you can say to this mountain, ‘Move from here to there,’ and it will move. Nothing will be impossible for you.”

### **Reflection**

(Today's reflection is given by Justin Mof-fatt)

Now that has to be one of the most memorable things a person has ever said: that faith as small as a mustard seed results somehow in a mountain being moved from here to there. This raises so many questions. What is 'faith as small as a mustard seed'?<sup>1</sup> And do I have this faith? And if so, then 'Can I move mountains?' Two verses, but they pack a punch.

It's a great promise, and it is baffling at the same time. One commentator wrote: "There are several features of this account that make it difficult to understand completely." But, let's have a go.

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1 By the way, a mustard seed is really small. Google it and see.

First: context. Have a read of Matthew 17:1–18 if you can. Or listen to the last few ‘Days with Jesus’ if you haven’t already. Jesus is transfigured up on a high mountain, reminiscent of Mount Sinai in the book of Exodus. But at the foot of the mountain, his disciples are trying to heal a demon-possessed person, and they can’t do it. They are scrambling, like Israel was at the foot of Mount Sinai in Exodus 32. So Jesus heals the boy, while rebuking the disciples. Then, from verse 19, we’re made privy to a private conversation.

19 Then the disciples asked in private, ‘Why couldn’t we drive it out?’

Jesus explains:

20 He replied, 'Because you have so little faith.'

I'm told that the word there does not so much refer to the littleness of their faith, but to its poverty. 'Little faith', like that of a mustard seed, can be effective, as Jesus goes on to say. But their faith is effectively not there at all; it's even smaller than a mustard seed.

So there is a rebuke here for us. And comfort too. The rebuke is that it is possible to have 'little faith', or 'poor faith'. It may mean that we have simply relied on ourselves; our own power, our own record, our own strength. It's subtle, but the 'we' in verse 19 is emphatic: "Why couldn't we drive it out?" *We've* done it before. You may remember that from chapter 10. *We*

should be able to do it again. *We* have the power. *We* have the ability.

Tom Wright in his reflection on this text tells the story of a young fit woman who swam the length of a long and open bay one particular day and was proud of herself. The next day she did the same swim at the same time and found herself making no headway, and in fact, being drawn out to sea. When the lifeguard rescued her, she expressed in dismay, “Why was it so easy yesterday, and so impossible today?” To which the lifeguard replied, “You’re not the first person to ask that. Some days the tides and currents run differently. It looks the same but there is a huge undertow. One day it’s working with you, another day it’s working against you.” He went on: “We get quite cross with people insist on

trying to do it without realising they're going to need our help.”

Jesus gave the disciples the power to cast out demons in Chapter 10:8. And they did. So they must have thought they could do it in their own strength. But the activity of ‘casting out evil’ is not something a human can do on their own. We need the power of God. We need the ability of God. We need the victory of God (ultimately in Jesus defeating Israel’s, and our, stubbornness on the cross).

## **Think**

It’s easy for us to fall into the trap of thinking that we can do anything in your own strength. Maybe because we’ve done it well before. Maybe even because God

gave us the power before, and now we think that because we've done it once, we can do it again on your own. But no – as Mark records in his version of this story text: 'This kind only comes out by prayer'. Not your own words, or commands, or incantations, or positive thinking or anything else.

God alone can do the impossible. Praying to him is the activity of 'faith as small as a mustard seed'. Because when you pray, God can move mountains. Thomas Wilcox said in the 17th century: 'Believing is the most wonderful thing in the world. Put anything of your own to it, and you will spoil it. It is the hardest thing in the world to take Christ alone for righteousness, that is, to acknowledge Him as "Christ". Join anything to Him of your own and you un-

Christ Him.’ That should be a rebuke to ‘competent swimmers’ in this world, if you get my meaning.

So what’s the comfort? God can do anything. The disciples’ ‘little (or poor) faith’ must have been even smaller than a mustard seed. But with faith as small as a mustard seed – in other words, not much – you can move this mountain, Jesus says, pointing back up to the mountain that he was transfigured on. By which I think is Jesus saying: ‘You didn’t trust me! *You* were trying to drive it out. But I am the one who has victory over evil. This kind only comes out with prayer; by speaking with my Father through whom all things are possible.’ Prayer is the admission that we can’t do anything in our own strength, and that God can do everything.



The 'mountain moving' thing is interesting, since you don't have any record of Jesus or God actually changing topography. Nor is it strictly true that moving a mountain is miraculous, since mountains are moved all the time with earth movers making freeways! And imagine if every mountain were moved because a million people had the 'faith to move' them, and they actually moved? It would be utter chaos. Jesus is speaking here about the power of prayer to overcome great difficulties. We know that from Isaiah 40 and Zechariah 14 among other places. God can do anything (like raise the dead or cast out and defeat evil) because we believe in him. To have faith as small as a mustard seed is to say, 'I can't do it. But you can.' As R.T France says of prayer: 'It is important to observe

here that it is not the amount of faith which brings the impossible within reach, but the power of God, which is available to even the “smallest faith”.’

## **Pray**

Pray then for faith as small as a mustard seed. Or more. Do that. But better still, believe in God. Trust Jesus.

I had a mentor who once declared to me that ‘he didn’t believe in the power of prayer’. When he said that, I assumed that he was a heretic! So I asked him why he didn’t believe in the power of prayer. And he replied, “because I believe in the power of God, who hears our weak prayers”. And answers.

What was he saying? It's not prayers that are powerful. I take it that this is what the disciples thought. They are just words. But if God is present, and if God hears, and if God acts, then he is powerful to take faith as small as a mustard seed and move mountains.

That's both a rebuke and a challenge to get you praying today and believing in Christ!