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**“Matthew 21:21 tells of how the disciples were impressed by Christ’s withering of the fig tree. Christ said that if they had sufficient faith they also could have withered the fig tree or even remove mountains. The fig tree was literal did Jesus also mean that they could literally have removed a mountain. What is faith fit to remove mountains? Was it confined to N.T. times as a special gift – if not could men literally remove mountains today?”**

QUESTIONS like this one have intrigued christians, and others, throughout the ages. Did Jesus expect us to take literally all that he said, or did he sometimes speak in symbolic language in order to illustrate some profound truth? Did he, in fact, intend that all christians for all time should be capable of doing the things which he said to specific people at certain times during his earthly ministry? I have always understood that the ‘golden rule’ of interpretation is to give words their ordinary grammatical meaning whenever possible and then see how they relate to the context, and then be consistent in our interpretations and refrain from making the scriptures say what we want them to say in order to fit our particular beliefs and theories. So let us try to analyse what was said, to whom, and why it was said. But before we do that, let us first think about capability.

#### **Divine Power**

That Jesus had special powers no one can deny. These powers were supernatural and miraculous and enabled him to do the things which he did. Nicodemus put his finger on it when he said, “Rabbi, we know that thou art a teacher come from God: for no man can do these miracles that thou doest, except God be with him” (John 3:2). John the Baptist made it perfectly clear what Jesus had received from the Father, “For he whom God hath sent speaketh the words of God: for God giveth not the Spirit by measure unto him. The Father loveth the Son, and hath given all things into his hand” (John 3:34,35). Jesus himself testified to the power which he had received from the Father; concerning his own life he said, “No man taketh it from me,

but I lay it down of myself. I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it again. This commandment have I received of my Father" (John 10:18).

Regarding divide, miraculous powers, the only people who have problems are the ones that do not accept the existence of God. Once we accept the fact that an all-powerful God exists then we should have no problems at all with miracles. Therefore, it was only natural (in the nature of God, that is) that Jesus should be able to dry up the fig tree, heal the sick, raise the dead, see into mens hearts and minds; we would expect that of him. The question we have to ask ourselves is, "Does man have the same power that Jesus Had?" I think we must answer that with an unqualified no. What certain men did have was power which was delegated to them in order to carry out some aspect of the will of God. Consequently, Luke records that Jesus appointed seventy disciples and sent them out before him two by two. The scripture says that they returned with great joy saying that even devils had been subject to them. Jesus then said to them, "Behold, I give unto you power to tread on scorpions and serpents, and over all the power of the enemy: and nothing shall by any means hurt you" (see Luke 10:1-17; also v.19). Also, before Jesus ascended, he spoke to his disciples and said, "But ye shall receive power, after that the Holy Spirit is come upon you" (Acts 1:8). We know how this power was demonstrated on the Day of Pentecost, and subsequently by Peter and Paul particularly, although Paul wasn't present at Pentecost.

I think, then, we can say this. It was possible for Jesus to do anything; natural, supernatural, miraculous. Others could only do such things as were specified to them under the power delegated to them. So let's return to the withering of the fig tree.

#### What was the problem?

I would recommend that we should read Matt. 21:18-22; Mark 11:12-26; and Luke 17:1-10, in order to see the basic teaching that Jesus was trying to drive home to his disciples. The problem as Jesus saw it was one of faith – complete faith in God. The withering of the fig tree was a salutary lesson to the disciples of what happened when he looked for fruit and found none. We only need to recall the teaching of Jesus concerning the vine, as recorded in John's gospel; "I am the vine, ye are the branches. He that abideth in me, and I in him, the same bringeth forth much fruit: for without me ye can do nothing. If a man abide not in me, he is cast forth as a branch and withered". (John 15:6,7). Jesus confirms to whom he is speaking a little later on, "Ye have not chosen me, but I have chosen you, and ordained you, that you should go and bring forth fruit, and that your fruit should remain: that whatsoever ye shall ask of the Father in my name, he may give it you" (v.16). This indicates that he was speaking to his disciples

It must also be remembered that Jesus spoke to them about his departure and made statements to them which, on the face of it, seem to be impossible. John records, "Verily, verily, I say unto you, He that believeth on me, the works that I do shall he do also; and greater works than these shall he do; because I go unto my Father" (John 14:12-14). Now we know that power to work miracles was delegated to the disciples (Apostles), but what were the greater works that Jesus spoke of? I am convinced in my own mind that these are connected with the spiritual life, and find their expression in the gospel and the advent of the Holy Spirit into the life of the believer. The greater works would be possible "because I go unto my Father"; in other words, after the facts of the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus. What Jesus was looking for was a complete and absolute faith in himself and in God. He knew that all the other works which he wrought were only supplementary to his main purpose in coming to earth, i.e., to demonstrate God's power in the gospel.

#### The power of the Gospel

Many times we underestimate the power of the gospel. Paul never did, and consequently he could write to the saints in Rome, "For I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ: for it is the power of God unto salvation to every one that believeth. To the Jew first, and also to the Greek" (Rom. 1:16). The gospel is the 'dynamite' of God. We all know the power of dynamite, and what its impact has been in the world, but the power of the gospel is greater even than this. People would marvel if a man had the power to move a mountain, but what greater miracle is

there than the salvation of souls through the gospel? Have you ever considered what happens when a person is obedient to God through Christ? His sins are forgiven and he is made clean; he becomes a new creature in Christ Jesus; he becomes a joint heir with Christ of the heavenly glory; he becomes a son of deity; the gracious presence of God dwells within him in the form of the Holy Spirit; the glory of God is manifest in him.

What good would be accomplished if Christians could move masses of rock and earth into different places? Would not this power tend to glorify self? How much greater to see the beauty of a transformed life in Christ, to the glory of God through the gospel. Do we Christians fully realise the power which has been delegated to us through the gospel. In his second letter to Corinth, Paul wrote, "For God, who commanded the light to shine out of darkness, hath shined in our hearts, to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ. But we have this treasure in earthen vessels, that the excellency of the power may be of God, and not of us" (2 Cor. 4:6,7). Jesus knew all about the 'mountain' of sin in the world. He knew that it would require a particular type of faith and courage to remove it; that is why he stressed the quality of faith to his disciples, and consequently to us also. To save souls from hell this, says Jesus, is a greater work than withering a fig tree. After all, the Christ did not come to demonstrate his power to wither fig trees, or turn stones into bread; his declared intention was "to seek and to save the lost".

### In Conclusion

How, then, shall we summarise? That Jesus could work miracles is very much in evidence in the Bible. That divine power to operate in the field of natural things was granted to certain people for specific reasons connected with the spread of the gospel in early days is also well attested to in the N. T. But I am persuaded that similar power is not delegated to people today, in spite of what some religious groups might say. No, God wants us to have complete and implicit faith in a dynamic Christ and gospel. With such a faith, we have to wrestle with all the expressions of sin in the world; jealousy, hatred, greed, sexual and moral depravity, injustice, man's inhumanity against his fellow men; all of those considerable mountains which mar the sweet plains of righteousness. What did the early Christians do; level a few undulations in the ground? No, they turned the world upside down. How did they do it; by working large scale miracles? No, they realised that they were vessels of honour, fit to take the 'dynamite' of the gospel to the world. That same power, the power to turn our World upside down, is still with us today; the power inherent in the gospel. We worship the same God; we serve the same Christ; the gospel has still its ancient power. Jesus says to us, "Have you the faith to tackle the mountain of sin?" Or are we like Simon - and some latter day Simons - who want to have the visible manifestation of miracle-working? Lord, increase our faith so that your will may always be our desire.