

## “Have Faith In God”

### The Thirty-Fourth in a Series on the Gospel of Mark

*Texts: Mark 11:20-33; Hosea 9:1-17*

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As the annual Passover celebration drew near, Jesus and his disciples entered Jerusalem in a grand messianic processional. Our Lord’s messianic mission had finally come to its dramatic climax. After entering his royal city that first Palm Sunday, Jesus immediately went to the temple, only to find the outer courtyard filled with merchants, desecrating that place which God intended to serve as a house of prayer for the Gentiles. Having cast out the merchants, Jesus and his disciples left Jerusalem for the night and returned to the village of Bethany, about two miles away. But the die had already been cast. The people believe that Jesus is the promised Messiah. They had hailed him as David’s royal son. They were now hanging on his every word. What is more, Jesus has disrupted the lucrative business of selling doves and pigeons to the pilgrims who make the trek to Jerusalem to sacrifice in the temple. Having put the Sanhedrin on notice when he entered the city, and having decried the desecration of the outer-court, we read in Mark 10:18 that the Sanhedrin began searching for a way to have Jesus killed. Jesus had become a huge threat to the authority of the Sanhedrin, and was now seen as an enemy of that nation, Israel, which he came to save. The outcome of this conflict between Jesus and the Sanhedrin will determine the very course of Israel’s future.

We return to our series on the Gospel of Mark, and we are in that section of Mark’s gospel (chapters 11-16) which deals with the final week of Jesus’ messianic mission, the so-called “Passion Week.” In chapter 10, Mark recounted the circumstances under which Jesus and his disciples left Capernaum and headed south to Jerusalem to complete that mission given him by the Father to save his people from their sins. As Jesus made this fateful journey, the people began to sense that Jesus’ mission was leading him to an inevitable conflict with the Sanhedrin—the religious leadership of Israel. But this conflict will take place only because the members of the Sanhedrin stubbornly oppose the purposes of God, and because, lacking faith, they will not receive Jesus as Israel’s Messiah. It is crystal clear from Mark’s account that Jesus has taken this journey not only to fulfill that which is predicted of him in the Old Testament, but because it is also the Father’s will that he do so. Jesus must fulfill all righteousness. He must give up his life as a ransom for many. And to do all of this, Jesus must go to Jerusalem, where he will suffer and die upon the cross to satisfy the demands of divine justice thereby saving his people from the wrath to come.

As we saw time, when Jesus entered Jerusalem that first Palm Sunday, he did so to the messianic chants of the crowds who sang “Hosanna” and “blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord.” This was the greatest day in Jerusalem’s history. Jesus fulfilled a number of messianic prophecies thereby bringing about the dawn of the messianic age. This accomplished everything the prophets had promised. Since the Passover was near, Jesus and his disciples were not the only ones headed to Jerusalem. In fact, many thousands would have been on the roads, packing the various inns along the way. As Jesus and his disciples made their way the eighteen miles and 2600 foot climb in elevation from Jericho to Jerusalem, the excitement among the people grew, as it became increasingly obvious that Jesus was actually going to enter the city. The people rightly sensed that if Jesus entered Jerusalem, hailed as Israel’s Messiah, there would be an inevitable and final showdown between Jesus and the Sanhedrin. The Sanhedrin was not about to acknowledge Jesus as Israel’s Messiah, since he was a threat to their own power and prestige. Either they would put an end to this, or Jesus would be crowned king. Little did those watching know that both things would come to pass.

Recall too that once Jesus and his disciples left Capernaum, three times Jesus had predicted that he would be delivered over to the chief priests and scribes, that he would be sentenced to death, that he would be turned over to the Romans, that he would be mocked, spit upon, and beaten, that he would be executed and then that he would be raised from the dead three days later. That which he had predicted would soon become a reality. But no one could yet understand how the tension Jesus created would turn to joy, and then to despair, and then again to joy. No one could possibly anticipate what was coming.

Several important things happened in Mark 11:1-19, which set the stage for our text in the latter half of Mark 11 (vv. 20-33). Not only had Jesus entered the city in a grand messianic procession, Jesus had gone to the temple immediately after entering the city. This was in fulfillment of the messianic prophecy in Malachi 3:1. “*See, I will send my messenger, who will prepare the way before me [i.e., John the Baptist]. Then suddenly the Lord you are seeking will come to his temple; the messenger of the covenant, whom you desire, will come,*’ says the LORD Almighty.” The long-anticipated messenger (and mediator) of the covenant, Jesus, has come to his temple. Malachi’s prophecy has been fulfilled.

But when Jesus returned to the temple the next day (Monday), he saw that the outer court—the so-called “Court of the Gentiles”—had been taken over by merchants who were selling their wares to the pilgrims visiting the city. Not only was this selling of doves and pigeons condoned by the Sanhedrin, if not officially sanctioned, in allowing this activity to occur in the outer court of the temple, that part of the temple which God intended to be a place where Gentiles could freely approach Israel’s God, had been turned from a house of prayer into a den of thieves. In righteous anger, Jesus not only drove out the merchants (John says he used a whip—John 2:15), we also read that he would not allow people to carry their merchandise through the temple courtyard. The Lord has come to his temple and was horrified to see its current condition. He will seek to return the outer-court to its proper purpose.

The other closely related event in the background of our passage is the cursing of the fig tree as recorded in Mark 10:12-14. “*The next day as they were leaving Bethany, Jesus was hungry. Seeing in the distance a fig tree in leaf, he went to find out if it had any fruit. When he reached it, he found nothing but leaves, because it was not the season for figs. Then he said to the tree, ‘May no one ever eat fruit from you again.’ And his disciples heard him say it.*” This is a difficult passage because it describes Jesus performing a destructive miracle. On its face, Mark’s account seems to indicate that Jesus was hungry and that he cursed the fig tree because it had no fruit. But it is important to understand that this passage is a kind of “living parable,” in which Jesus acts out the main point. Jesus curses the fig tree for theological reasons—i.e., to make a specific point about the covenant curses, soon to come upon Israel.

Throughout the Old Testament, the fig tree is used as a metaphor for the nation of Israel. A fruitful tree is a sign of blessing, a withered or barren tree is a sign of curse. In this case, Mark reports that the fig tree was fully leaved out, but that it had no fruit. The point is that there is the appearance of health and vitality (the leaves), but the reality is that there is nothing of substance on the tree (no fruit). The same is true of the nation of Israel. The nation possesses a temple which is the wonder of the entire Middle East, but there is no true righteousness to be found within its courts. Therefore, when Jesus curses the fig tree, he is describing Israel’s current spiritual condition. There is the appearance of life, but there is no spiritual fruit. Jesus is also foretelling what is about to happen to Jerusalem and its temple—they will come under God’s judgment and the city and its temple soon will be decimated by the Romans. When his disciples later ask him about this, Jesus will describe in great detail the future course of this age in Mark 13 (the so-called Olivet Discourse).

With all of this in mind, then, we turn to our text in Mark 11:20-33.

On Tuesday morning of the “Passion Week,” Mark recounts in verses 20-21 an interesting exchange between Jesus and Peter. *“In the morning, as they went along, they saw the fig tree withered from the roots. Peter remembered and said to Jesus, ‘Rabbi, look! The fig tree you cursed has withered!’”* This is the sequel to what happened the previous day when Jesus cursed the fig tree. Just one day later the tree is now withered, dead from the roots up. The image of a dead (or dying) fig tree as representative of God’s judgment upon Israel can be found in both Ezekiel and Hosea. According to Ezekiel 17:8, *“Say to them, ‘This is what the Sovereign LORD says: Will it thrive? Will it not be uprooted and stripped of its fruit so that it withers? All its new growth will wither. It will not take a strong arm or many people to pull it up by the roots.’”* As we saw in verse 16 of Hosea 9, our Old Testament lesson, *“Ephraim is blighted, their root is withered, they yield no fruit. Even if they bear children, I will slay their cherished offspring.”* Peter was likely familiar with these prophetic images and he remembered Jesus’ words from the previous day that no one will eat from this tree again. Peter recounted to Mark how the next day he saw the tree now dead, and realized that Jesus has been speaking of the impending judgement soon to come upon Israel.<sup>1</sup> This must have left quite an impression upon Peter.

Jesus’ response to Peter’ observation (recorded in verse 22) is very significant and is widely debated among the commentators. *“‘Have faith in God,’ Jesus answered.”* Jesus calls Peter not to miss the bigger picture here, namely that faith will enable the disciples to keep difficult things like the judgment soon to come upon Israel in its proper perspective. It may have been that Jesus is giving Peter giving a word of encouragement<sup>2</sup> (“trust God to work all this out”), not that he’s giving Peter an exhortation: “Peter, seeing what you saw, you need to have faith in God so you can do what I just did.”<sup>3</sup> But how we understand Jesus here, in large measure, depends upon how we understand what follows.

In verses 23-24, Jesus goes on to say, *“‘I tell you the truth, if anyone says to this mountain, ‘Go, throw yourself into the sea,’ and does not doubt in his heart but believes that what he says will happen, it will be done for him. Therefore I tell you, whatever you ask for in prayer, believe that you have received it, and it will be yours.’”* Here’s the issue. When Jesus says to Peter “have faith in God,” is he saying in what follows that *if* we have faith in God, that he will hear us and do for us what otherwise seems impossible? Or is Jesus saying, “true faith in God will enable you to say to the mountain, go throw yourself into the sea, and it will be done.” In the former, God responds to the fact that faith trusts in God’s power to fulfill his purposes. In the latter, faith successfully invokes God’s miraculous power and thereby enables the believer to do those things which Jesus has done. I am convinced that the former is the better interpretation—that this is a word of encouragement from Jesus to Peter, and not a command for Christians to speak authoritatively in prayer, expecting things to be done because we have faith and we have commanded something to come to pass.

There are a number of reasons why I think this is best understood as a word of encouragement. For one thing, Peter has seen the fig tree withered from the roots up and is beginning to understand that God’s

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<sup>1</sup> Lane, The Gospel According to Mark, 409.

<sup>2</sup> See the discussion in; Lane, The Gospel According to Mark, 409-410.

<sup>3</sup> This is basically the interpretation set forth in; France, The Gospel of Mark, 447-448.

judgment is soon to come upon Israel. There are difficult days ahead (i.e., Jesus' betrayal and death) and Peter needs to have faith that God will fulfill his purposes, even when things look so bad that nothing good could possibly come of it. Another reason to interpret the passage in this way is that Jesus seems to be speaking prophetically here. On a clear day, you could stand on the Mount of Olives and see all the way down to the Dead Sea some twenty-five miles below to the east. That may be the basis for the reference here to a mountain being cast into the sea. Furthermore, in Zechariah 14:4 Zechariah speaks of the Mount of Olives splitting in two.<sup>4</sup> Jesus may be speaking metaphorically here of this prophecy coming to pass, using the familiar scene of the Dead Sea, visible from the Mount of Olives. There is no question that Jesus is reminding Peter that God responds to all those who have faith.<sup>5</sup> But the faith in God that Jesus is speaking of is a faith specifically grounded in God's word and its promises to believers, not in the whims of sinful men and women.

Keeping this in mind, prevents us from reading this passage as Word-Faith people do—Jesus is giving us the formula to name what we want and then claim it in prayer. “If you truly believe, and then say . . . it will be done.” But as we all know, reading the passage in this way opens the door to all kinds of foolish and sinful presumption. Rather, Jesus is saying that God responds to faith, and that faith in God is likewise the basis for our own confidence that God will deal with all the unforeseen contingencies which may arise in life and that with God, nothing is impossible.<sup>6</sup>

In verse 25, Jesus goes on to say, *And when you stand praying, if you hold anything against anyone, forgive him, so that your Father in heaven may forgive you your sins.* Not only must God's people believe that God can do all things—he can take mountains and throw them into the sea if he wishes—but the same faith which acknowledges that, must also grasp that we must forgive others, because we have been forgiven by God from the guilt of our own sins. If God is our Father, then we must be willing to see ourselves as part of a believing community in which we pray along with others whose many sins against God have been forgiven. To put it another way, having been reconciled to God through faith in Jesus Christ, that same act of faith should direct us to forgive others who may have sinned against us. If Jesus' response is tied to the fig tree incident, then it is not unreasonable to assume that Jesus adds these words, because he does not want believers praying to God and calling down curses (like Jesus did with the fig tree) upon others within the body of Christ, who they think, may have wronged them. No, the faith which seeks forgiveness, also grants forgiveness to others.

**H**aving passed by the fig tree. And having heard Jesus speak of the necessity of faith so as to understand the purposes of God, Jesus went back into the city. It was not long before Jesus clashed with members of the Sanhedrin over his actions in the temple the previous day.

In verses 27-28 Mark describes this clash as follows. *“They arrived again in Jerusalem, and while Jesus was walking in the temple courts, the chief priests, the teachers of the law and the elders came to him. ‘By what authority are you doing these things?’ they asked. ‘And who gave you authority to do this?’”* It is vital to notice that when Jesus returns to Jerusalem the next day, virtually the entire religious establishment of Israel turns out to oppose him. Here, Mark mentions the chief priests (who conducted

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<sup>4</sup> Lane, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 410.

<sup>5</sup> Cranfield, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 361.

<sup>6</sup> Lane, *The Gospel According to Jesus*, 410.

the worship in the temple), the teachers of the law (the religious lawyers and theologians) and then the elders (the older wise men). In the next chapter, Mark (12:13) adds the Pharisees (the theological conservatives, who believed in angels and the resurrection), the Herodians (those who sought to make a political peace with Rome—as opposed to the zealots, who were seeking to bring about a Jewish revolution), and then the Sadducees (the theological liberals who denied the resurrection and accepted only the Torah, and not the prophets, as Scripture).<sup>7</sup> Every known religious group and faction is mentioned. These men did not agree upon anything and they hated and mistrusted each other, but they are united in their opposition to Jesus.

By mentioning all these groups, Mark is making it as plain as he can that Jesus was opposed by the entire Jewish religious establishment, and not just a few isolated groups. Furthermore, this opposition is in Jerusalem, not in the backwater country of the Galilee. The point is that the shepherds of Israel, reject their own Messiah *en masse*. This not only proves how blind that these men had become to the truth, but this exchange sets the stage for the Parable of the Tenants which follows in Mark 12, in which Jesus clearly speaks a word of judgment upon all of these men who have already rejected John and are even now rejecting him. We should also notice that this conflict takes place within the confines of the temple, which Jesus is seeking to purify and which, despite its magnificent splendor, pales in comparison to Jesus himself, who is the true temple. Therefore, we miss a great deal of what is transpiring, if we fail to see that great tragedy which is even now taking place. Israel is on the verge of rejecting her own Messiah, thereby placing the nation under the full fury of the covenant curses.

As one commentator points out, all of this should serve to make clear to Mark's reader/hearer that Jesus will now take on the entire religious establishment of Israel as the story races to its dramatic climax. But Jesus not only holds his own with all of his opponents, he ultimately silences them and leaves them without any excuse whatsoever for what is about to happen. All of the various messianic claims set forth in Mark 11 continue to play out before eyes of everyone who is watching. Indeed, Jesus links himself to the prior ministry of John who is the messianic forerunner, and then makes the case that his own ministry is that revelation of someone far greater than John, the very Son of David—i.e., Israel's Messiah.<sup>8</sup> All the while this conflict is playing out, the crowds watch and listen. At first, they support Jesus because they are amazed by his teaching. The religious leaders are jealous because the people are listening to Jesus' every word. But as the events of the week unfold, the masses begin to desert Jesus because he is so unlike what they expected. Jesus makes no plans to raise an army. He speaks of the destruction of the temple, not a victory over Rome. He speaks of laying down his own life, not slaying their Roman oppressors. And so as the days go by, not only is Jesus rejected by the religious leaders, he will soon be rejected by all Israel. Only a small believing remnant will remain. And this fulfills what is written about Jesus throughout the Old Testament Scripture.

And so a group of chief priests, teachers of the law, and some of the elders (most likely all of them are members of the Sanhedrin) see Jesus in the temple area and approach to ask “by whose authority are disrupting the goings-on in the temple courtyard?” They are not only alarmed that Jesus has taken it upon himself to cast the merchants out of the temple, they are also troubled by the fact the people are following Jesus and listening to his every word. In the minds of the Sanhedrin, it was one thing for Jesus to be off in far-away Galilee causing trouble, but he's now in the court of the Jerusalem temple stirring

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<sup>7</sup> See the discussion in; France, The Gospel of Mark, 451-452.

<sup>8</sup> France, The Gospel of Mark, 451.

up trouble. This cannot be allowed to continue. The nature of the questions these men ask, tell us a great deal about what was troubling them. When they ask by what authority Jesus was doing this, they are trying to see if Jesus was claiming to be a prophet, i.e., that he had the authority to do this because he was claiming divine right. That would open Jesus to a charge of false teaching or even blasphemy. The second question, “by who’s authority are you doing this?” was probably designed to expose to the people that Jesus was performing some official act in the temple, without any proper authority in doing so.<sup>9</sup> In other words, Jesus was performing some illegal activity.

Jesus, as he often does, answers the question with a question of his own. Thus we read in verses 29-30, “*Jesus replied, ‘I will ask you one question. Answer me, and I will tell you by what authority I am doing these things. John’s baptism—was it from heaven, or from men? Tell me!’*” Jesus will not answer them unless and until they are able to answer him. How did these men understand the ministry of John the Baptist? That will determine how he will answer these representatives from the Sanhedrin. Jesus is thereby openly identifying with John, who as the last of the Old Testament prophets had come to warn Israel one final time, before the Messiah came. Because when the Messiah came, it would already be too late for Israel. For if John’s purpose was to warn Israel to repent, Jesus’ purpose was to dispense both covenant blessings and covenant curses. Furthermore, when John came preaching in the wilderness, it was this event which first exposed the unrighteousness of the Jewish religious leadership and caused the people to begin to question the authority of the Sanhedrin. In asking this question then, Jesus is drawing a line in the sand. The members of the Sanhedrin either cross the line and identify with him and John, or else they are rejecting the messianic forerunner and the Messiah himself.

Again, their answer, like their question, shows the depth of their own spiritual darkness. As we read in verses 31-33, “*They discussed it among themselves and said, ‘If we say, ‘From heaven,’ he will ask, ‘Then why didn’t you believe him?’ But if we say, ‘From men’...’ (They feared the people, for everyone held that John really was a prophet.). So they answered Jesus, ‘We don’t know.’*” These representatives of the Sanhedrin are calculating, shrewd, and evasive. They ask a trick question and Jesus responds by exposing their ruse before the crowds. These men are thoroughly embarrassed and unwilling to embrace the truth. They cannot acknowledge that John was sent by God, because if they do, then why did they oppose him. Why are they opposing Jesus? If they reject John, then they are rejecting Jesus. And everyone is watching. And so, they decide to say nothing because they are afraid that they are losing control. Jesus has completely stumped them. He has thoroughly embarrassed them before the people. If they won’t answer him, Mark tells us that then, “*Jesus said, ‘Neither will I tell you by what authority I am doing these things.’*” With this, Jesus is now one step closer to Caiphus’ courtyard, Pilate’s hall, and mount Calvary. But there are more steps yet to take, and we will turn our attention to this on-going conflict between Jesus and the Pharisees in the weeks to come.

**W**hat, then, should we take with us from this passage?

Throughout this entire final phase of Jesus’ messianic ministry, we start to get a sense of the depths of his humiliation. The religious leaders of Israel, who hate each other, are absolutely united in their opposition to him. They are already seeking to have Jesus killed. The crowds are fickle, and will not stay with Jesus when he fails to give them what they want. They too will turn on him and fill Pilate’s palace, calling for Jesus’ crucifixion. His own disciples still do not fully grasp the nature of his mission and what lies ahead.

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<sup>9</sup> Lane, The Gospel According to Mark, 413.

And so throughout this section of Mark it will become clearer and clearer that Jesus will be betrayed, abandoned, and handed over unto death, so that we might be saved. All Israel will reject him. And while Jesus does this to fulfill Bible prophecy and to save us from our sins, he knows what lies ahead for his disciples and how difficult all of this will be for them. When Jesus enters Jerusalem, there is great joy and the sense that everything they had hoped for would come to pass. Israel would have a king—Jesus. The people had received Jesus with joy to shouts of “Hosanna.” The religious leaders were no match for him. Everything looked like it was going to be great and that the kingdom of God would come right then and there. Israel will be great again!

But Good Friday was still ahead. The betrayal, arrest, suffering, and death of Jesus was not even on the radar for the disciples, nor anyone else. This is why Jesus’ words to Peter—“have faith in God”—are so important for us to keep in mind. God will keep his promises—no matter what. He can throw mountains into the sea if he wishes. He will do what he has promised to do in his word. That same faith which looks to him for salvation from sin, also must trust that God will answer our prayers and do the impossible, no matter how desperate the situation may look to us. Jesus was preparing Peter for Good Friday all the while Peter was still basking in the celebration of Palm Sunday.

That is why we too must believe that whatever we ask in prayer, God will grant, if it be his will. God can do the impossible. He knows that while we are basking in the light of Palm Sunday, there are Good Fridays, yet to come. And because God is all powerful and can throw mountains into the sea, Good Friday’s inevitably give way to Easter. God alone can and does turn whatever happens to us in this life into good, even as he did with the cross of Jesus Christ. Therefore, if we have faith in God, we will not only trust him and watch as he answers our prayers in the most amazing of ways, we will also forgive those who sin against us. For we know that as forgiven sinners, we are in no place to hold the sins of others against them. Faith which believes God’s promises, also releases others from the guilt of their sins, even their sins against us.

Beloved, have faith in God. Believe his wonderful promise that in Jesus Christ he will save us from our sins. Believe that he will answer our prayers and that he can do the impossible according to his will. Believe this because Jesus—who knew what was soon to happen to him—was raised from the dead, in the ultimate display of God’s ability to do the impossible. He has promised to do this and more for us his people. Have faith in God, because he can do all things. He can throw mountains into the sea. He can raise the dead. Amen.