

FAITH AND PRAYER

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THE PROTESTANT FAITH

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A very interesting promise that Jesus made on more than one occasion to his disciples and so to us who believe in Him is His words "Truly, I say to you if you have faith as a grain of mustard seed you shall say unto this mountain 'remove from here to there' and it shall remove and nothing shall be impossible to you. Jesus was returning from the mountain on which he had been transfigured and as he came back to the group of disciples there was an argument going on between them and the Scribes. While He was away a sick boy had been brought to the disciples but they had failed to cure him. Now the miracles of healing associated with Jesus were signs that the Messiah was present. They were the things that the prophets had foretold that the Messiah would do, and on an earlier occasion the disciples had been sent out by Jesus on a mission to proclaim that the Kingdom of God was at hand and to heal the sick. They had returned with joy, relating how wonderfully they had been used to heal the sick and to cast out devils. But not all who heard them had accepted their message that in Jesus God's kingdom was present, and the scribes were doubtless arguing over the claims the disciples made on behalf of their Master, especially now that they had failed to perform a messianic sign. On being informed of what had happened Jesus exclaimed 'O faithless and perverse humanity'. The disciples were included, and we also in this description of mankind, for these words of Jesus describe the race of men of which we are a part, 'O faithless and perverse generation' - faithless because we lack any real concept of God's sovereignty or of His power, and perverse because although we believe in God, we do not glorify Him as God, nor are we thankful, but we go our own self-centred ways. With such an attitude, there is no possibility of experiencing the power of God in our lives or in our community.

The father of the sick boy turns to Jesus with an appeal, "If you can do anything, have pity on us". It is plain that the man's faith had been shattered by the failure of the disciples to carry out the cure that he had hoped for. It was not a propitious situation for Jesus to reveal His Messiahship through miracles which were signs of it. You may remember how when Jesus was in His home town of Nazareth he could do no miracles or mighty works there because of their deep-grained unbelief. His fellow townsfolk saw Jesus simply as the carpenter. Without faith Christ cannot make himself known to us. And so in reply to the father's appeal "if you can do anything, have pity on us" Jesus replied "What do you mean by these words 'If you can do anything'? Do you not know that everything is possible to the man who believes.?" At this the father's faith flickered up again, "I believe - but not enough. Help me" he said. In response Jesus took the lad and cured him. Here was proof positive that Jesus was the man of faith, in contrast to the faithless race of mankind. There was, then, one who believed perfectly and for whom all things were possible.

Afterwards, when they were in the house alone the disciples asked Jesus "Why were we not able to heal the boy?" and Jesus replied in a very direct way; "because of your little faith". We do not realise how small our faith is until some emergency reveals its absence. A few months earlier the disciples had been caught in a storm on the lake and Jesus had rebuked them with similar words "Oh ye of little faith, why are you afraid?" We find it so difficult to believe that God is in control of our circumstances and that we may trust Him, and should trust Him in everything. We may think we are doing this, but when a crisis overcomes us, or perhaps our health fails or our circumstances begin to dissolve, we are found to be of little faith. It was in this situation that Jesus gave this promise "If you have faith as much as a grain of mustard seed you will say to this mountain 'be removed from here to there' and it shall remove and nothing shall be impossible to you". And our Lord repeated this promise at the withering of the fig tree. He Himself demonstrated this truth, that all things were possible to the man who believes, by healing the boy. And He gave His disciples, shown up to be among those of little faith and as belonging to the faithless and perverse generation (and we deceive ourselves if we think we are not included in this category) the encouragement that they might share in this power. For the promise is for us if we believe, that nothing will be impossible for us. "If you have faith as a grain of mustard seed, you will say to this mountain 'move from here to there' and it shall move and nothing shall be impossible to you."

However, we must not seek faith simply in order to remove mountains, for this shows that we have not really understood what is implied in the promise. It shows that we are still wishing to manipulate God for our own ends, good though we may judge these to be, and this is the attitude of the faithless and perverse humanity of which we are by nature members. In actual fact, faith does not remove mountains. It never has removed any. Faith means knowing and approving the will of God, knowing his will through fellowship with Him and approving it with all the intensity of our nature. Thus, our prayers will be within the will of God, and so faith will never lead us to pray for the removal of the mountains of our own choice. For example Jesus could have prayed for 12 legion of angels to remove him from the hands of the Jews, but he didn't. He could have prayed to be protected from dashing himself to pieces on jumping from the pinnacle of the Temple. But he didn't. Faith means knowing and approving the will of God, and praying within that will.

The sublime example of the faith of Jesus was His prayer to be saved from death. For half the night He prayed in Gethsemane and we may be sure that while He hung for half a day on the cross He was in prayer to His father, because we read in Hebrews chapter 5 verse 7 "that in the days of His flesh He offered up prayers and supplications with strong crying and tears to Him that was able to save Him out of death; and He was heard". From one point of view He was not saved out of death, in so far as He had to undergo the physical death of the cross though he had prayed that were it the will of God He might not need to drink that cup. Yet He was saved from death in the fullest meaning, for He was raised the third day. And so the writer says that "He offered up prayers and supplications with strong crying and tears to Him that was able to save Him from death and He was heard". It is interesting to note from this passage that it was through Jesus' faith and prayer that He was raised from the dead and therefore as the writer goes on to say, "He became the ground of our eternal salvation". We are saved through the faith of Jesus Christ which He exercised in the days of His flesh. He endured the cross and is now raised to God's right hand and has become the exemplar of faith for all of us (Hebrews 12:2).

But how do we obtain faith? How do we change from being faithless and of little faith to having the faith of Jesus Christ? Jesus told His disciples when they questioned Him about the healing of the boy not only that they had failed because of their lack of faith but he added "this sort is only cured through prayer and fasting". Prayer is the means for growth in faith. Although the word fasting is not in every manuscript, it makes little difference whether it is in or out. For in this context it simply means self discipline in prayer, emphasising that our prayers must be real, and that when we pray to God we must discipline ourselves, our time and our way of living in order that we might pray with reality.

Prayer is coming into God's presence and having fellowship with Him. Consequently, prayer to God cannot take second place in our lives and still remain real and true. That is why we must pray with self discipline, setting aside anything which hinders prayer. For since God is true, our fellowship with Him must have top priority or we cannot have it in any real way at all.

Prayer means observing a God-centred view of the world and accepting God's scale of values, that is, accepting Christ's way of life. If we pray in this way then our faith will grow so that at the time of crisis we will be living as men and women of faith and the promise will be true of us that all things are possible to the one who believes; for we will know the mind of God and our prayers and actions will be directed in the line of the will of God so that nothing will be impossible for us.

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