



# Faith to Work Miracles



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During the last century there have been two cardinal errors made concerning much that is contained in the Gospels—errors which have prevailed extensively among professing Christians and which have wrought great havoc. Each of those errors concern that interpretation and application of the contents of the four Evangelists as to what does and does not pertain to the Lord's people today. The first of these errors was a *dispensational* one. The view was falsely taken that because our Lord's ministry was confined to Palestine, while the Temple still stood in Jerusalem, it was therefore exclusively "Jewish" in its character, and that the saints of our era must turn only to the Epistles of the Apostle to the Gentiles for their marching orders. Such an error is refuted by the opening verses of Hebrews (where the ministry of Christ is contrasted from that of the Prophets) and by the fact that the great division of time between B.C. and A.D. is dated from the *birth* of Christ, and not from His death or even His ascension.

The second error is a *practical* one. Here the pendulum has swung to the opposite extreme. In the former case an insidious and insistent attempt was made to deprive the saints of a valuable part of their legitimate heritage, taking from them needed precepts and precious promises under the pretext they were the sole property of the Jews. But in the latter case, which is now more fully to engage our attention, promises which were made *to a particular* class have been allocated universally, promises which belonged only to the Apostles and the primitive Christians have been wrongly applied to all believers in general. The result has been that false expectations were engendered, vain hopes raised, wild fanaticism encouraged—and those who have come into contact with this perversion of the Truth have seen what tragic effects followed—thousands making complete shipwreck of the faith.

No doubt it will seem to some of our friends that we are now treading on delicate ground, for to assure them that some of the promises made by Christ to His disciples, promises which numbers of our readers may have been taught are the legitimate grounds on

which to rest their faith, *do not*—in their prime sense—*belong to them* at all, must prove disquieting and disappointing. We shall, therefore, proceed cautiously and slowly, and ask them to weigh with extra diligence what follows. “And these signs shall follow them that believe: In My name shall they cast out demons, they shall speak with new tongues, they shall take up serpents; and if they drink any deadly thing, it shall not hurt them; they shall lay hands on the sick, and they shall recover” (Mark 16:17, 18). Now those are the words of the Lord Jesus, but may *we* appropriate them today and expect a literal fulfilment of the same? There are those who answer with an emphatic Yes, though we very much doubt if many regular readers of these pages would do so.

Now the verses just quoted respect the miracles which attended the preaching of the Gospel in the early days of this Christian dispensation, and it is to be duly noted that those miracles resulted from the exercise of *faith*. This we think will be so evident to our readers as to occasion no difficulty. But there are other passages in the Gospels dealing with the same subject—similar promises from the lips of the Saviour which may not appear so simple—and it is to them that we now turn. “And all things, whatsoever ye shall ask in prayer, believing, ye shall receive” (Matt. 21:22). This same promise, slightly varied, is found again in, “Therefore I say unto you, what things soever ye desire, when ye pray, believe that ye receive them, and ye shall have them” (Mark 11:24). How often has this promise been appropriated by Christians and earnestly pleaded before God, only to meet with no response. Such have attributed this lack of response to the failure of their *faith*, (or been told that is the cause), instead of perceiving they were resting their faith on an unwarrantable foundation.

“And all things, whatsoever ye shall ask in prayer, believing, ye shall receive” (Matt. 21:22). Our first concern should be to ascertain *to whom* those words were first addressed, and the circumstance which occasioned them—considerations that are usually of first importance as aids to a true application of a verse, for if the context is ignored mistakes are sure to follow. The verses immediately preceding record our Lord’s cursing of the fig tree and the effect this had upon those attending Him. Verse 20 says, “When the

disciples saw it, they marvelled, saying, How soon is the fig tree withered away.” Mark tells us, “And Peter (the spokesman of the Apostles) calling to remembrance saith unto Him, Master, behold, the fig tree which Thou cursedst is withered away” (11:21). Then it was that Christ replied, “Verily I say unto you, If ye have faith, and doubt not ye shall not only do this which is done to the fig tree, but also if ye shall say unto this mountain, Be thou removed and be thou cast into the sea, it shall be done. And all things, whatsoever ye shall ask in prayer, believing, ye shall receive” (Matt. 21:21-22).

It must be borne in mind that at an earlier date Christ had appointed 12 of His disciples to preach the Gospel and to perform miracles in confirmation of their commission. “And when He had called unto Him His twelve disciples, He gave them power against unclean spirits to cast them out and to heal all manner of sickness” (Matt. 10:1)—those miraculous powers were primarily what Paul referred to when he spoke of, “The *signs* of an Apostle were *wrought* among you” (2 Cor. 12:12). Luke tells us that, “after these things the Lord appointed other seventy also, and sent them two and two before His face into every city and place whither He Himself would come” (10:1), bidding them “heal the sick” (v. 9). The same duly returned and declared, “even the demons are subject unto us through Thy name” (v. 17). Thus, it is quite clear that the promise of Matthew 21:22 was made to those who were in possession of *miraculous powers* and was designed for their personal encouragement.

Before proceeding further, let it be pointed out that what we are advancing in this article is no novelty of our own devising, but rather a line of interpretation (alas, unknown to many in this superficial age) given out by many eminent servants of God in the past. For example, in his notes on Matthew 21:21, 22, Thomas Scott wrote, “When Jesus observed the surprise of the disciples He again showed them the energy of faith, with a special reference to the power of *working miracles* in His name. Whenever a proper occasion offered of performing a miracle in support of their doctrine, and they went about it relying on His power and not doubting His concurrence, they would not only be enabled to perform as wonderful works as that of withering the barren fig tree,

but even the Mount of Olives, which they were then passing, might, at their word be removed and cast into the sea! That is, nothing that they undertook would be impossible for them.” So also Matthew Henry said on Mark 11:22, 23, “This is to be applied first to that faith of *miracles* which the Apostles and first preachers of the Gospel were endowed with, who did wonders in things natural.”

Let us next inquire as to *the extent* of this promise: “All things whatsoever ye shall ask in prayer, believing, ye shall receive.” Though this language be indefinite and unqualified, yet we are not warranted in drawing the conclusion that it is to be taken without any limitation. From the immediate context it is quite clear that this promise had sole respect unto the working of miracles. Christ’s object was to assure His Apostles that if they prayed in faith for any supernatural gift or power in particular, that that gift or power would be granted to them. But we have no ground for believing that if those Apostles prayed for *something different*, no matter how firm their expectation, that they would receive the same. They were not justified in extending the terms of the promise any further than was warranted by the obvious design of their Master on that special occasion.

Though the Twelve had been endowed with supernatural powers yet had they prayed for the bestowment on themselves of any temporal or spiritual blessing, there was nothing whatever in this particular promise which guaranteed an answer to any such request. Like we, the Apostles and the primitive Christians were subject to poverty, disease, and all the common trials and afflictions of this present life. We have no reason to doubt that they—for they were men subject to like infirmities as we are—prayed for their removal or mitigation, yet we know from other Scriptures that their prayers respecting these things were not always granted. This at once shows us the promise of Matthew 21:22 was not a universal one, for in that case they might have sought any temporal favours with the same faith and assurance of being heard as when they prayed that miracles should be wrought by their hands.

But let us now take note of the *proviso* which our Lord laid down: “All things whatsoever ye shall ask in prayer, *believing*, ye shall receive.” The same stipulation is found again in the parallel

passage: “What things soever ye desire when ye pray, believe that ye receive them, and ye shall have them” (Mark 11:24). This promise made by Christ with respect to the working of miracles was thus conditioned upon the exercise of a certain kind of faith. If those unto whom it was made really acted out the requisite faith, then their faith absolutely secured the fulfilment of the promise. On the other hand, if they failed to put forth the faith specified, then their request was not granted. Like most of the promises in Scripture, this also was a *conditional* one.

Matthew 17 furnishes us with an illustration of the Apostles being unable to perform a desired miracle because of their failure to meet the proviso attached to the promise we are here considering. There we read of a certain man coming to Christ on behalf of his sorely-vexed son, begging the Saviour to have mercy on him, and saying, “I brought him to Thy disciples and they could not cure him” (v. 16). After the Lord had healed the demon possessed youth, His disciples asked why *they* had been unable to perform this miracle. His answer is instructive, for it definitely confirms what we have said above: “And Jesus said unto them, because of your *unbelief*: for verily I say unto you, If ye have faith as a grain of mustard seed, ye shall say unto this mountain, Remove hence to yonder place, and it shall remove; and nothing shall be impossible unto you” (v. 20).

We must next inquire wherein did this faith to work miracles differ from any other kind of faith? The answer is: It rested on an entirely different foundation. In the first place, it could only be exercised by those who had been specially endowed by supernatural power to work miracles, which pertained alone to Christ’s servants at the beginning of this Christian era. And in the second place, such faith had to rely implicitly upon the specific promises which Christ had made unto such, namely, that upon their counting on His assistance to enable them thereto, He would infallibly make good His word respecting the same. The same thing may be seen, as pointed out in an earlier paragraph, in the promises recorded in Mark 16:17, 18. Such were quite distinct from that faith which secures eternal life, resting upon quite another sort of promise.

In proof of what has last been said we refer to Acts 3. There we read of the beggar who had been lame from his birth asking alms of

the Apostles as they were about to enter the Temple. To him Peter said, “Silver and gold have I none, but such as I have give I thee: in the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth rise up and walk” (v. 6, and cf. “in My name” in Mark 16:17). Later, in explaining to the wondering bystanders what had happened, Peter, after charging them with delivering up the Lord Jesus to Pilate, declared that God glorified His Son adding, “and His name, through faith in His name, hath made this man strong” (Acts 3:16). Peter, then, had definitely acted faith upon such promises as had been given to the Apostles in Matthew 21:21, 22, and Mark 16:17, 18, etc.

Saving faith consists of the heart’s appropriation of the Gospel: it is laying hold of Christ Himself as He is offered therein to poor sinners: it is trusting in the mercy of God in the Redeemer. But the faith to perform miracles could only be effectually exercised by those to whom special promises for the working of such had been given. Christ had endowed the Apostles with supernatural powers and had given assurance that He would assist them in the bringing of wondrous signs to pass for the glory of His name and the extension of His kingdom. And *that* promise of His was to be the ground of their faith. Thus, their faith had as definite and sure ground to rest upon as ours today in connection with eternal life. Nevertheless the former was vastly inferior to the latter. Judas had the one, but not the other. Hence Paul declares that it was possible in those days to have faith so as to “remove mountains” and yet be destitute of a holy love (1 Cor. 13:2).

After all that has been pointed out above it should be obvious that Christians at this day are quite unwarranted in applying such a promise to themselves in any case they feel inclined, and that ministers of the Gospel are seriously misleading their hearers when they say to them, “All things whatsoever ye shall ask in prayer, believing, ye shall receive them.” We are fully aware that some godly but misguided preachers *have* so misapplied this text, and that some devout believers have taken this promise for themselves. Yet this is no proof that either of them were right in so doing. We have personally attended more than one “Faith-healing service” where such a promise was “claimed” by the one in charge and have witnessed the pathetic disappointment of the sick hobbling away on

their crutches at the close. How many sober-minded people were led into open infidelity by such a fiasco only the Day will reveal. Perhaps some of our readers are beginning to better grasp our meaning when we say, from time to time, Many who fail to understand the *sense* of a verse are frequently misled by the *sound* of it.

“And all things, whatsoever ye shall ask in prayer, believing, ye shall receive” (Matt. 21:22). We have already seen that this promise was made to those who had been endowed with supernatural powers, and that it was given for the purpose of encouraging them to exercise faith that Christ would continue to assist in their *working of miracles*, for the glory of His name and the good of His cause. We have also shown that the Apostles themselves had no warrant whatever to apply this particular promise to ordinary blessings of either a temporal or spiritual nature. It should, therefore, be quite apparent that Christians today have no right to appropriate this promise unto themselves and expect a literal fulfilment of the same. To make this still clearer, let the following considerations be carefully weighed.

Even the primitive Christians themselves were not all endowed with supernatural gifts. Proof of this is found in that statement of the Apostles, “Are all Apostles? are all Prophets? are all teachers? are all workers of miracles? Have all gifts of healing? do all speak with tongues? Do all interpret?” (1 Cor. 12:29-30). This is the more striking in that those extraordinary gifts abounded more copiously at Corinth than in any of the apostolic churches; yet these questions, with their strong emphasis, clearly denotes that there was *not* an equality of endowment. Paul’s obvious design here was to suppress on the one hand all discontent and envy, and on the other all pride and arrogance, for he had expressly reminded them that the Spirit apportioned His gifts “to every man severally as *He* will” (v. 11).

The manifest limitation of the promise we are here considering forbids that Christians today should give it a general and universal application: “And all things, whatsoever ye shall ask in prayer, believing, ye shall receive.” There are very few passages in Scripture where the expression “all things” is to be understood without qualification, and certainly this is not one of those few. The



preceding “and” clearly connects with what is said in verse 21, and therefore must signify all such things as are *there* in view, namely, the working of miracles. As we have previously pointed out, this promise did not even give the Apostles themselves carte blanche, so that if they prayed for anything whatever (provided they did so with unshaken faith) they were infallibly assured of receiving the same. How much less, then, may ordinary Christians today give such a scope to this promise!

Scripture itself records more than one instance of pious souls earnestly supplicating God for certain things, and the Holy Spirit has conveyed no suggestion that it was because they prayed unbelievably their requests were not granted. Moses (Deut. 3:23-26) is a case in point. So also David both fasted and prayed on behalf of his sick child that it might recover, yet it died (2 Sam. 12:16-19). So, too, in this New Testament era we find that the beloved Apostle besought the Lord thrice that his thorn in the flesh might be removed (2 Cor. 12:7-9), yet it was not; though he received assurance from the Lord, “My grace is sufficient for thee”—to endure the affliction. Most certainly Paul was acquainted with this promise in Matthew 21:22! Surely, then, Christians now have no right to exercise faith in it when praying for anything.

If Christians of this day determine to appropriate Matthew 21:22 unto themselves, then they must do so on the principle that believing a thing *to be true* will *make it true*. The language used by Christ on that occasion is too clear to be mistaken: “And all things, whatsoever ye shall ask in prayer, believing, ye shall receive”—to the same effect is, “What things soever ye desire, when ye pray, believe that ye receive them, and ye shall have them” (Mark 11:24). But this principle that believing a thing to be true necessarily makes it true is manifestly untenable and erroneous. Were I to pray for the salvation of one whom God had not eternally chosen in Christ, no believing on my part would effect his salvation: and to insist that God *should* save him, would be presumption and *not faith*. If I were seriously sick and believed God would heal me, no such believing would bring my healing to pass; and if such were not the Lord’s will for me, then such “believing” would be fanaticism and not faith.

Since Christians in our day have no right to appropriate this

special promise to themselves, they have no warrant to ask for any favour, whether temporal or spiritual, private or public, absolutely and unsubmitively. True prayer is not an endeavouring to bring the Divine will into subjection to ours, but a seeking to yield up our wills to God's. What the Lord has predestinated cannot be changed by any appeals of ours, for with Him there is "no variableness, neither shadow of turning" (James 1:17). God's eternal decrees were framed by perfect goodness and unerring wisdom, and therefore He has no need to forego the execution of any part of them: "But He is in one mind, and who can turn Him? and what His soul desireth, even that He doeth" (Job 23:13). It is a most grotesque and God-dishonouring idea to suppose that prayer has been appointed for the purpose of the creature's exercising his persuasive powers so as to induce the Almighty to give something He does not wish to bestow.

"This is the confidence that we have in Him: that if we ask anything *according to His will*, He heareth us" (1 John 5:14). Ah, *that* is what we need to lay hold of and act upon in this blatant and presumptuous age. We come to the Throne of Grace not as dictators, but suppliants. We approach the One seated thereon not as equals, but as beggars. We go there not to demand our rights, but to *beg* favours. We stand not on our dignity, but bow the knee in conscious unworthiness. We present not ultimatums, but make "requests." And those requests we do not make in a spirit of self-assertiveness, but in humble submissiveness. If we approach the Throne of Grace in a correct frame, we go there conscious of our ignorance and foolishness, fully assured that the Lord knows far better than we what it would be good to bestow upon us and what would be best to withhold from us.

God has infallibly purposed when and where and upon whom He will bestow His favour, and Christians have no right, and when in their right mind, no desire to ask Him *to alter* any of His determinations respecting either themselves or others. Consequently, since they have no means of knowing beforehand what He has decreed concerning the granting of any specific favour, they are not justified in asking Him for anything absolutely, but rather must they proffer each request with unreserved submission to

His good pleasure. They may greatly desire to see the salvation of some particular person, but as they know not whether he is one of God's elect, they must not ask for it unconditionally, but subject to His Divine purpose. They may have a loved one who is seriously sick, and while it is both their duty and privilege to ask for his or her recovery, yet they must not pray for the same absolutely but in subjection to the will of God.

Christ has left us a perfect example of submission in prayer, as in everything else. Behold Him in the garden of Gethsemane—the ante-chamber of Calvary—entering upon His inconceivable sufferings. Mark His posture: He is not erect, but on His knees, and later on His face. Harken to His language: “Father, if Thou be willing, remove this cup from Me; nevertheless, not My will, but Thine be done” (Luke 22:42). It was His holy *desire* for the Father to remove that awful cup from Him, if He were graciously pleased to do so; but if not—He asked that His petition might be denied and the will of His Father done. Can we in the face of *that*, my reader, come before God and insist that any request of ours be granted irrespective of whether or not it be accordant with the Divine will? No indeed, rather must we earnestly seek grace to emulate the example left us by the Redeemer.

Sad indeed is it to witness and read of much that is going on in the religious world today. Nor is it that the lawless spirit of the age has had an evil influence upon the churches: rather did the evil *begin in the churches* and later infest society generally. The Law of God was banished from the pulpits before lawlessness became so rife in the state. Irreverence characterized the pew before infidelity stalked the streets. The Most High was insulted in public prayer before it became the common thing to take His name in vain on the stage and over the air. Instead of bowing before the Throne of Grace many conducted their public “devotions” as though they themselves occupied that Throne. Genuine and unreserved submission to the Divine will is now a thing of the past save among that insignificant remnant who have been given broken and contrite hearts.

Since Christians have no right, at this date, to exercise faith in the promise of Matthew 21:22, then clearly they have no right to exercise faith in their own peculiar *feelings*. The Apostles

themselves who possessed supernatural powers did not believe that all things whatsoever they asked in faith should be granted to them because they had peculiar feelings respecting what they asked for; but they believed that when they requested a miracle should be wrought by them, Christ would enable them thereto, because they based their faith on His promise to that end. They knew that promise was made to their *faith*, and not to their feelings. That being the case with the Apostles themselves, how much less may the ordinary Christian now claim a fulfilment of Matthew 21:22 because of some strong feeling he is the subject of!

But though Christians today have no such promise to rest upon as Matthew 21:22, some of them have a *deep feeling* that what they pray for shall be granted. That is quite wrong and reprehensible. We have no Scriptural warrant whatever to base our confidence of being heard upon any feeling, however deep and persistent, and must not expect God to answer us unless we can plead some promise of His. There are no promises made in the Word to any *feelings*. All the promises of the Gospel are made to holy exercises or affections, and to nothing in which men are entirely passive. Our hearts are deceitful above all things, and those who rely upon inward impulses and secret feelings are in great danger of running into the grossest errors and the wildest delusions. Evil spirits as well as the Holy Spirit can impress our minds.

Many have prayed for particular favours with the mistaken assurance that if they ask for them in unwavering faith those favours would certainly be granted them. This idea “led George Whitefield confidently to expect what he had no right to confidently expect. He had an amiable, promising little son, whom he ardently desired and prayed might be an eminently useful minister; and he had such strong and agreeable feelings concerning him that he confidently expected that he would be what he ardently desired and prayed that he might be. But his son died when he was about four years old and the event not only disappointed him, but cured him of his error” (N. Emmons, to whom we are indebted for several thoughts in this discussion). We may add that when C. H. Spurgeon lay dying, tens of thousands fasted and offered special

prayer for the sparing of his life; but as the sequel showed, such was not according to God's will.

In seeking to correct one error we must endeavour to guard against another. Though the promise of Matthew 21:22 belongs not unto us today, there are scores of promises in both the Old and New Testaments which Christians *may* lawfully take to themselves and plead before God. In those promises they have all the encouragement to pray in faith which they can reasonably desire. God has never said to the seed of Jacob, "seek ye Me in vain," but has assured them that if they pray aright they shall be heard, and either receive what they ask for or something more for His glory and their good. In order to pray aright, they must pray with a real desire for the things they request, and with a genuine submission to the will of God whether He shall grant or deny their petitions. When a believer presents suitable petitions unto God, in a right manner, grounded on the Divine promises, then he should not doubt either His willingness or ability to grant them, either on account of his own unworthiness or because of any difficulty in the way. "If we ask any thing according to His will, He heareth us" (1 John 5:14).

