

Prayer: It's not Magic
John Gilmer
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Scripture Lesson

Matthew 17: 14-20

I was attending a conference at the Air Force Academy in Colorado Springs. Because of parking limitations, the banquet parking was at the football stadium. I parked my rental car at the stadium to catch the shuttle bus to where the banquet was to be held. Trying to think about too many things at the same time, I managed to lock the keys inside the car, with the motor running. Great! What now? Another man attending the conference helped calm me down a bit. He said he would take the shuttle and contact the security people. Sure enough, not long after he left a car pulled up, and he and a security guard got out. The security guy soon had the door open and all was well, though I was still a bit frazzled. My new friend and I sat together at the banquet. He was a Christian, and we touched on some religious topics, nothing big. But then he said, "You can always tell someone who has a good prayer life." There he was, relaxed, big smile, and you could just about see the halo hovering over his head. And there I was, still embarrassed over my earlier stupidity, and still a bit edgy. What did that say about me? I reflected that, well, yes, prayer was something I was neither regular about nor well practiced at in any sense. So, it's a surprise to me that I ended up with a topic about prayer. I started off thinking I'd talk about Josiah, and somehow I ended up here, with one of the more difficult passages in the Bible. I'd like to reread those last two verses.

Matthew 17, 19: Then the disciples came to Jesus privately and said, "Why could we not cast it [that is, the demon] out?"

20: He said to them, "Because of your little faith. For truly I tell you, if you have faith the size of a mustard seed, you will say to this mountain, 'Move from here to there,' and it will move; and nothing will be impossible for you."

This familiar passage has always troubled me. Perhaps it has troubled you too. I recall as a child, not really believing it would happen, praying for a mountain to move. It didn't. I must not have had enough faith. If I really, really believed, if I had enough faith, it would have just picked itself up, asked "how far?" and eased down the road a bit at my direction. Right? Isn't that what we hear when we read this scripture? We end up feeling that somehow we are not religious enough, because our lack of faith has been proved.

Or perhaps we find some other rationalization. Something seems not quite right about this story, or perhaps our understanding of it. After all, we don't recall any of the giants of the faith moving mountains around routinely. Martin Luther? I heard as a child that his biggest event was the Diet of Worms. Hardly mountainous scale. In fact, we don't have any record of even Jesus himself moving mountains around. Storms, yes. Walking on water, yes. Numerous other miracles, yes. But no Galilee Canal. Or other big feats of large scale engineering. Yes, Jesus may be using hyperbole or exaggeration, like imagining that with God a rich man can go through the eye of a needle, but it still is troubling.

I think this is because we sometimes get confused between faith, or perhaps religion, and magic. This isn't surprising, because in antiquity, at the dawn of history, pagan religion was in effect a form of magic. Magic is what you call it where the magician, by skill or his own power, or by harnessing other extraordinary power, causes reality to be bent to his will. When we hear the word "magic" we normally think of a clever artist of perception, who uses tricks to accomplish feats that seem miraculous, but for which we are confident that there is an explanation that is consistent with our scientific understanding of the universe. We don't take magic seriously these days.

In antiquity, it was different. Pagan religion believed that the world was filled with a multitude of gods, generally disinterested in human welfare, and responsible for different aspects of nature or regions of territory. This is the religion that the Children of Israel encountered when they entered the Land of Canaan. The locals told the Israelites that if you want rain, pray to Baal. For fertility, Astarte, and so on. Ancient priests were the ones who knew how to do this, and do it correctly, so that the god, Baal, Astarte or one of the others, would be forced to do its duty and provide rain, or whatever else was desired. You see, these pagan priests were in fact magicians. Their magic was designed to manipulate the appropriate god to do their will. Or make it appear so.

An interesting example appears in our scriptures from fairly late in the monarchy of Israel. Jezebel is the daughter of the King of Tyre, a Canaanite, who brought her gods with her to Israel when she married King Ahab. The Lord is displeased, and causes a famine, with no rainfall for three years. The prophet Elijah is chosen to convey God's message of judgement to the King. This is consistent with the Hebrew understanding of God, and later the Jewish religion, and Christianity. It is God who has the power. He does what he wills. Elijah is just the messenger. But Ahab and Jezebel both consider Elijah the cause, and seek to kill him, as if doing so would cause his magic, which they assume is the cause of the famine, to be dispelled.

The struggle between Canaanite, pagan religion and the true recognition of a single almighty God was never completely resolved during the monarchy. They came closest was the time of Josiah, a descendant of Jezebel, who came to the monarchy of Judah as a child. Josiah was a great king. He is not often remembered, though. How many people have you known named Josiah? How about David? A few more, yes? David is certainly remembered as a great king of Israel, but he did have a few problems. He is remembered rightly for his love of God, but not particularly for his righteousness. Josiah, on the other hand, was perhaps the most righteous king in the history of either Israel or Judah.

Josiah followed his grandfather Manasseh, who was very accommodating to the Assyrians, the superpower of the time, and to the Assyrian religion. It was during the time of Manasseh that the Arc of the Covenant seems to have disappeared, and no wonder! The Assyrian gods were worshiped in the temple! Manasseh's son, when he became king, followed the same policies and was assassinated after two years. Josiah did his best to put things right again. We read in 2 Kings, Chapter 22:

3. In the eighteenth year of King Josiah, the king sent Shaphan, son of Azaliah, son of Meshullam, the secretary, to the house of the Lord, saying,

4. "Go up to the high priest Hilkiah, and have him count the entire sum of the money that has been brought into the house of the Lord, which the keepers of the threshold have collected from the people.
5. Let it be given over into the hand of the workers who have the oversight of the house of the Lord; let them give it over to the workers who are at the house of the Lord, repairing the house,
6. that is, to the carpenters, to the builders, to the masons; and let them use it to buy timber and quarried stone to repair the house.
7. but no accounting shall be asked from them for the money that is delivered into their hand, for they deal honestly."

As the temple is being repaired, a discovery is made: "the book of the law of the Lord." Scholars believe this book is most of what we have in our Bibles as the book of Deuteronomy. Continuing with verse 10:

10. Shaphan the secretary informed the king, "The priest Hilkiah has given me a book." Shaphan then read it aloud to the king.
11. When the king heard the words of the book of the law, he tore his clothes.
12. Then the king commanded the priest, Hilkiah, Ahikam son of Shaphan, Achbor son of Micaiah, Shaphan the secretary, and the king's servant Asaiah, saying,
13. "Go, inquire of the Lord for me, for the people, and for all Judah, concerning the words of this book that has been found; for great is the wrath of the Lord that is kindled against us, because our ancestors did not obey the words of this book, to do according to all that is written concerning us."

Whether the book was Deuteronomy or other writings we now have in the Torah, the first five books of our Bible, the message is consistent. We find the Ten Commandments in both Deuteronomy and Exodus. From Deuteronomy we read the words for the First Commandment, the words that King Josiah hears, beginning with Deuteronomy 5, Verse 6:

6. I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery;
7. you shall have no other gods before me,
8. You shall not make for yourself an idol, whether in the form of anything that is in heaven above, or that is on the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth.
9. You shall not bow down to them or worship them; for I the Lord your God am a jealous God, punishing children for the iniquity of parents, to the third and fourth generation of those who reject me,
10. but showing steadfast love to the thousandth generation of those who love me and keep my commandments.

Did you hear those last two verses? We often sort of skip over that; it jars our modern senses. "I the Lord your God am a jealous God, punishing children for the iniquity of parents, to the third and fourth generation of those who reject me."

This idea, that disobedience brings punishment and obedience brings blessing, runs throughout Deuteronomy and the Law. The theme is elaborated in Chapter 6:

1. Now this is the commandment - the statutes and the ordinances - that the Lord your God charged me to teach you to observe in the land that you are about to cross into and occupy,
2. So that you and your children and your children's children, may fear the Lord your God all the days of your life, and keep all his decrees and his commandments that I am commanding you, so that your days may be long.
3. Hear therefore, O Israel, and observe them diligently, so that it may go well with you, and so that you may multiply greatly in a land flowing with milk and honey, as the Lord, the God of your ancestors, has promised you.

Continuing later with verse 14:

14. Do not follow other gods, any of the gods of the people who are all around you,
15. Because the Lord your God, who is present with you, is a jealous God. The anger of the Lord your God will be kindled against you and he would destroy you from the face of the earth.

Deuteronomy, over and over, lists blessings that will come to those who love God and obey His law: long life, abundance, and more. And it follows with punishments to be dealt to those who reject the Law: destruction, slavery, hunger, and other curses. This reflects recognition that God is supreme and cannot be manipulated, but implies everything will go well for the righteous and bad for the unrighteous.

You can see why Josiah is worried. The remnant of Israel, the Kingdom of Judah, has not been faithful to the Law. His own grandfather, Manasseh, was an obvious example. Could Josiah lead his people in repentance and regain the blessings and avoid the punishments? He gave it every possible effort. Josiah's reform sought to bring his people back to God. The Passover was re-instituted. The idols and other objects associated with Baal and Astarte taken out of the temple and burned. The priesthood was reformed. Shrines to other gods were torn down throughout the land, even some going back to the time of Solomon. But ultimately, Josiah's reform, and his righteousness, could not assure long life, health, and continued occupation of the land of Canaan. We read further in II Kings:

- II Kings 23: 29. In his days, Pharaoh Neco, king of Egypt, went up to the King of Assyria to the river Euphrates. King Josiah went out to meet him [that is, in battle]; but when Pharaoh Neco met him at Megiddo, he killed him [that is, Josiah].
30. His servants carried him dead in a chariot from Megiddo, brought him to Jerusalem, and buried him in his own tomb.

With Josiah's death, the Judaite religion came crashing down. If Josiah, the most righteous ever of the Kings of Judah, dies in battle, presumably the Lord's battle, and as a young man, how can righteousness and faithfulness to the Law be understood to bring manifold blessings? Within 25 years Jerusalem is destroyed, and the temple torn down by the Babylonians. How can God be worshiped without the Temple? How can we sing the Lord's song in a strange land? The exiles in Babylon had to answer these questions. They heard and remembered the words of the prophets, prophets who told of God's abiding love, prophets that

foretold the coming of a new Israel. Prophets that went beyond the “obedience brings blessings and disobedience brings punishment.”

God was recognized as all powerful and beyond manipulation. The leaders of what was coming to be the Jewish religion finally made sure that no vestiges of the ancient paganism remained. But sometimes bad things did happen to good people. Even people as important and righteous as Josiah. How was this to be understood? Ecclesiastes takes a hard bitten look at the issue. On the other hand, Isaiah of the exile finds God's purpose even in suffering.

We struggle with the issue even today. We wonder if God is listening. We pray, and sometimes our prayers are not answered. Sometimes it seems like they are never answered, and we start to wonder if God is there. Maybe we stop expecting God to listen to or answer prayer. We see bad things happen to good people, and we see those who do evil prosper. And we wonder.

Now, I do believe God answers prayer, sometimes in extraordinary ways. My wife Cindy and I had a friend, a young woman in her twenties, who told us she was praying for a little yellow car with a stereo and a sun roof. It couldn't have been more than a couple of days later, when she told us that her prayers had been answered; she had indeed found and purchased exactly the car she has prayed for. Good grief! I would not have dared pray for God for something like that. I mean, if you are going to pray and have a prayer answered, why not world peace, or that the hungry all be fed! Or, to ask like Tevya does in the play "Fiddler on the roof", "What would be so terrible if I had a small fortune?" A yellow car with a stereo and a sun roof? What did she do right? What do I do wrong? You see, we can start to think of it like a form of magic. There are many more times I have experienced or heard of God answering prayer, in matters more serious than a little yellow car. You have probably heard such testimonies too. But, we wonder, why does God answer some prayers so directly and positively, and seemingly not others?

We as Christians depend on Jesus's words and actions to help us understand. Jesus, too, was a righteous man. Yet he never promised that righteousness would bring a long life, wealth, and plenty. When he gave instruction in how to pray, he gave us a very simple, straightforward prayer, that we all know and pray. You know the words. I read from Matthew 6:

Matthew 6 9-13 Lord's prayer.

6. Our Father, who art in heaven, Hallowed be thy name.
10. Thy kingdom come; thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.
11. Give us this day, our daily bread,
12. And forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us.
13. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For Thine is the Power, and the Glory, Forever. Amen. (KJV)

Notice: the prayer begins with a recognition that God is in charge. Perhaps most importantly, the prayer asks that God's will be done. It asks for material goods that are just necessities. It asks that God forgive us as we forgive, putting us right with God and our neighbor. Finally, God is asked not for more material goods, but for his assistance in

righteousness and avoiding evil. Jesus not only taught this prayer; he lived it. In the garden, his prayer is shortened to the most immediate essentials:

Mark 14, 36: He said, "Abba, Father, for you all things are possible; remove this cup from me; yet, not what I want, but what you want."

God's will is the key. Jesus prays for God's will to be done. And that will allowed Jesus, the most righteous man to ever walk the earth, to suffer and die a criminal's death. It allowed the righteous king Josiah to die in battle. It allowed God's own people to be defeated and carried off to captivity in Babylon. I'm sure you can add to the list tragedies that have befallen other, good, even righteous, people.

Why would this be within God's will? We just don't know. We do know, with the help of hindsight and the prophets, that the Kingdom of Judah had to fall, and the exile had to happen, before Hosea would be remembered, before Ezekiel could prophesy, and before the prophecies of Isaiah could be recorded. We know that Jesus's death on the cross was not without purpose as well. And, it was not the last word concerning Jesus, either. For from that terrible, awful death came the resurrection, and the promise of salvation for us, even today, for those who are faithful to God's call and purpose.

So, returning to the problem we started with, how would greater faith have allowed the disciples to move mountains? It wouldn't have, unless that movement of those mountains was within God's will. For God can move mountains. He has done so; just look around! The words are difficult to understand though. Perhaps what's behind Jesus's words is this: If we have enough faith to content ourselves to pray for God's will to be done, it will be. How could Jesus pray for a particular person to be healed and have it happen? We just don't know. But we do know from the scriptures that it happened. Wouldn't you like to be able to do that, maybe just once, to save some good person? We don't know how Jesus knew how to pray in these specific cases. He somehow knew that his prayer for healing was within God's will. Not because Jesus's mission was to bring better health care to Palestine. It wasn't. These miracles of healing were signs of God's caring, and of His special presence in Jesus and Jesus's mission.

So, now we have a different problem. How can we pray for a particular person to be healed, not knowing whether that healing is within God's will or not? Well, that really isn't a problem unless you have to be right all the time. If you are not to pray for something that may not be within God's will, then all you can pray is for God's will to be done. But even Jesus asked for more than that! He said we should pray for our daily bread. Not everyone, even the righteous, always get that. He asked that the cup be taken from him. It wasn't. But if we pray for righteousness, if we try to stay right with God, we can rely on God's grace and mercies. We don't really even have to know how to pray! God's love takes care of us even there. I like the way the apostle Paul puts it in his letter to the Romans:

Romans 8: 26 Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit interceded with sighs too deep for words.

27. And God, who searches the heart, knows what is in the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God.

So, even though I don't know how to pray, and sometimes I mistake prayer with attempts at magic, to miraculously heal someone I know is in need, or something else important, God can see my heart. God knows our love for each other, for he gives us that love. God can recognize that love when we desperately pray to save the life of another, for he gave us that life. God can understand when we bargain, when we threaten, when we resort even to pagan-like practices in our desperate love and caring for another, for his love ultimately can save us and those for whom we pray. He understands when we similarly pray for his help for ourselves, for he is with us. We don't have to accomplish magic. We just have to care, open our hearts to God, and ask that His will be done, and accept that he is in charge, not we ourselves. For His will will be done. Our prayers do matter, even when we don't know how to pray. So, that's something we can relax about. It is our heart, not our awkward words of prayer, that God searches out.

In Jesus's surrender to God's will, God opened the door to eternal life. When we accept God's authority rather than our own, when we accept God's mission for us rather than our own material enrichment, when we accept God's gift of grace rather than our own earned goodness, we join Him in that purpose, ultimately, to be with Him forever. For God calls out to us in love. In the words of Jesus, As John in the Revelation hears Jesus call to us from heaven, the New Jerusalem:

Rev 22: 17. The spirit and the bride say, "Come"

And let everyone who hears say, "Come".

And let everyone who is thirsty come.

Let anyone who wishes take the water of life as a gift.

Amen.