

Sermon preached at Faith Presbyterian Church, Springfield, Virginia,
on Sunday, March 6, 1988, by the Rev. W. Graham Smith, D.D.

MATTHEW 17:20

“I tell you the truth, if you have faith as small as a mustard seed, you will say to this mountain, ‘Move from here to there,’ and it will move. Nothing will be impossible for you.”

ARE YOU IN THE MOUNTAIN-MOVING BUSINESS?

In 1973 a church in Netcong, New Jersey, faced a seemingly insurmountable problem. They had just built a new sanctuary on their recently acquired eight-acre property, half of which was a high hill and woods. They were told that they would not be granted permanent occupancy until they had sufficient parking in the rear. Their problem was that the hill, 40 feet high, rose abruptly at the back of the church, leaving insufficient space for the legally required parking lot. The estimated cost of removing this obstacle was prohibitive for the young church. One Sunday morning the pastor reminded the congregation of Christ’s promise in Matthew 17:20, “If you have faith as small as a mustard seed, you will say to this mountain, ‘Move from here to there,’ and it will move. Nothing will be impossible for you.” Then he added, “If you believe that, come on Wednesday evening to pray with me that God will move this mountain from the back of our church.”

Next morning the phone rang. It was the telephone company. They were planning to erect a new building and needed fill for a large swampy area. They had learned that the hill back of the church had the correct proportions of sand, clay, and rock for the required fill. Within a month the phone company hauled away 40,000 square yards of fill, for which they paid the church \$5,400, not only removing the hill, but leveling the ground for the required parking lot! What an illustration of God’s Word in Isaiah 65:24, “Before they call, I will answer”!

In 1 Corinthians 12:9 Paul lists “faith” as one of the gifts of the Holy Spirit. Now obviously the “faith” mentioned here is more than saving faith. No one can become a Christian believer without exercising genuine faith in Jesus Christ as Savior. “For by grace you have been saved through faith,” says St. Paul in Ephesians 2:8. To continue the Christian life also requires faith. Again, Paul says in 2 Corinthians 5:7, “For we walk by faith, not by sight.” However, not all believers possess the faith to remove mountains. The inclusion of “mountain-moving faith” in the list of gifts bestowed by the Holy Spirit distinguishes it from saving faith (1 Corinthians 13:2).

It is interesting to notice that in 1 Corinthians 12:9 the gift of “faith” is mentioned immediately before two other gifts—the gift of “healing” and the gift of “working miracles.” This would imply that this special faith is over against the common faith that all believers have, in that it describes a particular exercise of faith which results in what we would call miraculous demonstrations of God’s grace and power.

In our Old Testament lesson this morning (1 Kings 18:20-39) we read of Elijah on Mount Carmel manifesting a remarkable faith that the Lord would vindicate Himself and demonstrate His awesome power, in contrast to the weakness of the false god Baal. The mention of “faith” in the list of the gifts bestowed by the Holy Spirit at least reminds us that one of the results of the outpouring of God’s grace upon a congregation will be an expression of faith to perform mighty exploits for God’s glory, just as Elijah did at Carmel.

We might therefore define the gift of “faith” as the Spirit-given ability to see something that God wants done, and to sustain unwavering confidence that God will empower us to devise and execute effective plans to get the job done, regardless of seemingly insurmountable obstacles.

Stephen, the first Christian martyr, was “full of faith and of the Holy Spirit” (Acts 6:5) and was enabled to “perform miracles and remarkable signs among the people” (Acts 6:8). Saul of Tarsus, later to become the Apostle Paul, was present at the martyrdom of Stephen. Indeed, he looked after the coats of those who actually stoned Stephen to death (Acts 7:58). And I have often wondered if Stephen, facing his murderers, picked out that young man Saul and by the gift of faith claimed him for salvation, praying with his dying breath, “Lord, there is a young man who could be a dauntless young champion for Christ! O God, save him and equip him to take the Gospel to the whole world!” If, in fact, Stephen prayed that prayer in faith, how magnificently was it answered!

Though all logic seems stacked against some course of action, this “faith” nevertheless sees the will of God accomplished despite all-natural resistance.

You remember the “Song of the Panama Canal Builders”—

Got any rivers you think are uncrossable?
Got any mountains you can’t tunnel through?
We specialize in things thought impossible.
We get things done that no others can do!

The Christian, possessing the gift of faith, exclaims,

Got any rivers you think are uncrossable?
Got any mountains you can’t tunnel through?
God specializes in things thought impossible.
He does the things that no others can do!

The gift of faith “laughs at impossibilities and cries, ‘It shall be done!’”

Whenever I think of the gift of “faith” I invariably reflect upon the life and ministry of George Muller of Bristol, England. His famous biography by Dr. A. T. Pierson is a book that has greatly influenced my own Christian life. George Muller was a German, born in Prussia in 1805. He emigrated to England in 1829 and settled as a pastor in Bristol, where, in 1836, he founded

his famous orphanage. The work was carried on entirely by faith, and during the next 62 years (for Mr. Muller lived to be 92), he cared for more than 10,000 orphans, and received the equivalent of more than five million dollars to maintain the work. He began with only two shillings in his pocket. He never made known the needs of the orphanage. He maintained that the Lord knew what was needed, and that He would provide. Over the years Mr. Muller received enough to build five large homes capable of housing 2,000 orphans, and to feed and clothe the children day by day, all by faith and prayer. Never did they go without a meal. Often the pantry was bare when the children sat down to eat but help always arrived in the nick of time.

One morning there was not a scrap of food or a drop of milk to feed the hundreds of hungry orphans seated expectantly at the breakfast table. Mr. Muller prayed, "Father, we thank Thee for the food Thou art going to give us." Within a minute or two there was a knock at the door. It was a baker who said, "I was awakened at 2 a.m. and felt I should bake some bread for you." A few minutes later came another knock. It was a milkman who said, "My milk wagon just broke down in front of your place. I must get rid of these cans of milk before I can take the wagon for repairs. Can you use this milk?" Mr. Muller testified that times without number they were without food for another meal, and without funds, but not once did God ever fail to provide the needed food.

No appeals whatsoever were made. Never was any existing need revealed to any outsider, lest it be construed as a request for aid. Though he never asked for money, he did ask for more orphans! And the beautiful thing was that so many of those orphaned children grew up to be strong Christians who knew what faith in God is all about and how He can supply our every need in the most amazing ways.

However, let me extend a word of caution. This gift of "faith" should not be identified with two things:

1. It should not be identified with a kind of brash presumption, which, for example, might lead an evangelist to exclaim, "Now, ladies and gentlemen, you bring all your unsaved friends to the service tomorrow night, because I just know that every single unbeliever who attends tomorrow night will be converted!" Well, of course, he has no right to say any such thing. He is guilty of unadulterated presumption.

2. Again, the gift of faith is not to be identified with the kind of subjective hunch that someone, at a healing service, is most assuredly going to be healed. No one has the right to say that anyone is certainly going to be healed physically. Only God knows that. And the tragedy is that if the sufferer is not healed it is blamed upon the unbelief of those who prayed for the healing, or even more cruelly, on the lack of faith of the person for whom healing is requested, "Faith," of the kind we are speaking about, does not mean that we can "twist the Lord's arm."

The Christian who possesses this gift of mountain-moving faith will always limit his asking to only those things God wants accomplished. His desire will correspond with God's desire. Such faith and prayer must be completely devoid of self-centeredness.

George Muller always first satisfied himself that he was doing what God wanted him to do

before he embarked on a project. Then, resting on the promises of the Word of God, he came boldly to the throne of grace in prayer, pleading his case, and even giving reasons why he felt God should answer! No delay discouraged him. Once he was persuaded that a thing was right, he went on praying for it until the answer came. He said, "I never give up! Tens of thousands of times have my prayers been answered!" He was a stickler for detail, and he kept a complete record of his prayer life. Do you know that it covered 3,000 pages, contained nearly a million words, and recorded more than 50,000 specific answers to his prayers?

I have said that he kept on praying till the answer was given. As a young man in his thirties, he became greatly burdened for three young friends of his who did not know Christ. And he prayed for those men until his death 60 years later; and he died without seeing any of the three led to the Savior. But the sequel—within three months of Mr. Muller's passing, all three of those men, now old, had been converted!

The gift of faith prompts prayer like that of Jesus when He raised Lazarus from the dead. Jesus actually thanked the Father in advance, as though the answer was an accomplished fact! Listen to what our Lord prayed, "Father, I thank You that You have heard Me. I know that You always hear Me, but I have said this for the benefit of the people standing here, that they may believe that You sent Me" (John 11:41-42).

Have you ever thanked God in advance, in the certainty that your prayer would be answered?

A transatlantic sea captain, after 22 hours on the bridge of his ship, in a dense fog off the banks of Newfoundland, turned around when he felt a tap on his shoulder. It was George Muller, then in his seventies. "Captain, I have come to tell you that I must be in Quebec on Saturday afternoon." This was Wednesday. When the captain said it was impossible, Muller replied, "If your ship can't take me, God will find some other way. I've never broken a speaking engagement in 57 years."

"I'd like to help," responded the captain, "but what can I do?"

"Let's go below and pray," Muller suggested.

"But, Mr. Muller, don't you know how dense the fog is?"

"My eye," said Muller, "is not on the fog but on God Who controls the fog and every circumstance of my life."

Down on his knees, Muller prayed the simplest prayer the captain had ever heard. In his opinion, it befitted a child of nine. "O Lord, if Thou wilt, remove this fog in five minutes Thou dost know the engagement made for me in Quebec for Saturday." Putting his hand on the captain's shoulder, Muller restrained him from praying. "First, you don't believe God will do it; and second, I believe He has done it! Open the door, Captain, and you'll find the fog gone." And so it was. Mr. Muller kept his Saturday engagement in Quebec.

A person in our generation who I believe has this gift of faith is Robert Schuller, pastor of the Crystal Cathedral in Anaheim, California. Years ago, Schuller had a vision of a great church, larger than Notre Dame Cathedral in Paris, which would glorify God and serve the community and the world.

Schuller and Muller are similar in many ways, but quite different in others. As I have told you, Muller was opposed to making direct appeals for support, believing that God would provide. Schuller takes the opposite approach. He tells of how he engaged a rich man in conversation, challenging him with the vision of the crystal cathedral. He looked him in the eye and said, "I need your help. I would like you to give me a million dollars toward the cathedral." The man looked right back at him and with a smile said, "Schuller, if you're crazy enough to ask me for a million dollars, I'm crazy enough to give it to you!" Within a few days the million-dollar gift was in the bank. Now George Muller would have turned over in his grave. But God, I believe, is pleased with them both.

Now I firmly believe that there are some of you here this morning who possess this gift of mountain-moving faith and you may not even know it! Some of us need to launch out into the deep, and trust God for the seemingly impossible.

To maintain this kind of faith you must live very close to Christ in unconditional obedience and commitment. As you read Muller's biography you are struck by his deep sense of personal unworthiness, and his earnest desire to confess and turn away from any sin the moment he realized he had committed it, seeking the full cleansing which is available through the blood of Jesus.

Get into the Word of God more and more. Discover how great God is, and how He yearns that we trust Him to do great things. The person who possesses this gift of faith has the ability to envision what God wants to accomplish in his life, his family, his church, his business, and out in the world of the un-evangelized millions. Like William Carey such a person will "attempt great things for God and expect great things from God." Everyone else may sit back and say, "Let's use common sense. What you dream is impossible." But if you have the gift of faith you will not be perturbed.

Even if you feel you don't have this gift of faith, remember—we are all commanded to have faith. Several times our Lord rebuked His disciples because of their little faith. I'm convinced that every one of us should seek opportunities to develop our faith.

Haven't we a right to believe that God will be greatly glorified in our new congregation? He made no mistake in placing us here in the Franconia corridor, near Kingstowne Village where 5,600 new housing units are being built. It will be a town the size of Vienna. I drove around the whole area a few days ago and claimed it for the Lord, and especially for the Evangelical Presbyterian Church! Will you share my vision of fields white unto harvest? I believe that within three to four years we can have a congregation of 800 to 1,000 members. What glory that would bring to God and joy to the heart of our Savior. It can happen if you and I are prepared to pay the price.

God wants us to stop splashing around in the shallow waters of conventional piety. He wants us to launch out into the deep, drop our nets, and expect them to be filled with fish. He wants us, through the exercise of faith, to prove how great and how good He is.

Let me close with one of my favorite stories. Dallas Theological Seminary, one of the largest and finest seminaries in the country, was founded in 1924, but in a short time it almost folded. Indeed, it faced bankruptcy. All the creditors were going to foreclose at 12 noon on a particular day. That morning the founders of the seminary met in the office of the President, Dr. Lewis Sperry Chafer, to pray that God would provide. Dr. Harry Ironside, a member of the group, who later became pastor of the Moody Church in Chicago, rose to pray, and in his characteristically refreshing way, he exclaimed, "Lord, we know that the cattle on a thousand hills are Thine. Please sell some of them and send us the money!"

While they were praying, a tall Texan came into the business office and said, "I've just sold two carloads of cattle in Fort Worth. I've been trying to make a business deal go through, and it won't work, and I feel God is compelling me to give this money to the seminary. I don't know if you need it or not, but here's the check." A secretary took the check, and knowing how critical the situation was, went to Dr. Chafer's door and timidly knocked. When the door was opened, she handed him the check, and when he looked at it, he saw that it was for the exact amount of the debt! And when he saw the signature on the check, he recognized the name of the cattleman from Fort Worth. Turning to Dr. Ironside, he said quietly, "Harry, God sold the cattle!"

Oh Breath of God, come sweeping through us,
Revive Thy Church with life and power;
Oh Breath of Life, come, cleanse, renew us,
And fit Thy Church to meet this hour.

Revive us, Lord! Is zeal abating
While harvest fields are vast and white?
Revive us, Lord, the world is waiting;
Equip Thy Church to spread the light!

AMEN.