

Matthew 21:18-22

The Purpose of Trials

We are still using the study guide from last week, Matthew 21:12-22, but we are taking the last half of this section, verses 18-22 of Matthew chapter 21.

We started out in the first 11 verses of the chapter, studying the procession into Jerusalem; as pilgrims were traveling to Jerusalem for the weeklong Passover activities. There were already a few million people in the city, throngs more coming in, as well as Jesus as He's traveling with them. But as He got to the opening at the Mount of Olives to descend down into the city Jesus sent two disciples to get donkeys from Bethphage - a village on the Mount of Olives - to get these donkeys according to Zechariah 9:9 that when Messiah comes he would ride into Jerusalem on a donkey. So He had them go get the donkeys and Jesus was placed upon this donkey, along with its mother, and He rode into Jerusalem. And as He comes in through the main gates the crowds were chanting Psalm 118:26. As He rides in, they were saying, "Hosanna to the Son of David." *Hosanna* means *save now*. *Son of David* is the title for *Messiah*. "Save now, Messiah" they were chanting to Him, placing palm branches down in front of Him, and laying their clothes out in the road for Him to ride on.

As He arrives inside the city on the same day, that Sunday, Jesus goes to the Temple - recorded for us in verses 12 through 17 - where He finds people buying and selling in the courtyard area of the temple. Alfred Edersheim, a Christian Jewish historian, says that it was approximately 20 acres, this courtyard area, which is pretty large; but He finds people buying and selling, so He throws the people out. That is the literal language, *He tossed them out*, those who were buying and selling, and He overturned the money changers tables, dumped all the money out on the pavement.

This is the second time He did this. Three years earlier at the beginning of his ministry he did the same thing in the same Temple; only He took the ropes that the animals were tied up to and made whips out of them and drove the people out. If you ever think of Jesus being a Peter Pan type guy who's always loving and always caring, well, that's love in action. Tough love. He threw them out, overturned the tables, and He said to them - as He quoted Isaiah 56:7 - "My house will be called a house of prayer." And then He quoted again from Jeremiah chapter 7:11, "But you yourselves made it a den of thieves."

As the pilgrims were coming to Jerusalem to celebrate the Passover, they had to purchase animals. First, they had to exchange their money into Temple money because everybody had to pay a half shekel Temple tax. But it cost you an extra 10% over and above what the Temple tax was worth you paying, and also you had to buy an animal. So these pilgrims came in and didn't have any animals, so they had to purchase a lamb and again they would charge them up to 10 times what the animal was worth, just to purchase an animal to fulfil God's requirement for the Passover. No wonder Jesus was angry. No wonder He says, "This is My house, it is a house of prayer, but you have made it a den of robbers. You're ripping off the people and that's not what my Temple is here for."

As I mentioned last week, you have to wonder what Jesus would do in our day with the various fundraisers and the various ways in which leadership tries to earn money off of people to support the program.

If God guides, God provides. I had to learn that the hard way. I spent a lot of time last week explaining to you that I started out justifying charging people through the Internet for cassette tapes when they were out, for CDs, for courses. Justifying it, saying, "This is for the Lord's work," so I went ahead and charged people. Didn't make a whole lot of profit but made enough profit to keep it going - at least that was my justification. But as time went on God began to deal with me over and over again. Matthew 10:8 is a verse that God has used repeatedly with me where He told the disciples, "Freely you have received, freely give." Literally in the Greek it is, "You've received it as a gift, give it as a gift." So over the years, and it has been many, many years - I've been a ministry for over fifty years but that's not a long time to put in for senior work, but rather a long time for God to deal with somebody to say, "You need to learn how to trust the Lord. You take what I give you and you go and you minister to others and if they're getting ministered to don't worry, I'll lay upon their hearts to support it." And if you don't get support, then it's not the Lord. Just stop. Where God guides, God provides. He is the one that is in charge. So we started doing everything free of charge. Even here, we don't take an offering, we put a donation box out there - free to give or free not to give. We just keep going and freely give as best we can and let the Lord minister through people in response. But to rip people off and to charge people money, especially if it is justified by saying, "It is for the Lord." That is not a justification, if anything, that angers the Lord. No wonder He says, "You yourselves have made it a den of thieves."

After He drove everybody out, the blind and the lame came to Jesus in the temple area and He healed them. That is what it is all about. Physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual healing comes when you go to the house of God and be with God's people. That's what God wants to do. He wants to meet people where they are at and bring healing.

And the children were shouting inside the temple, "Hosanna to the Son of David," and the religious leaders began to complain to Jesus, "Did you hear what they called you? Hosanna, save now, Son of David. They called you the Son of David!" and they began to complain. Then Jesus quotes from Psalm 8:2, "Did you never read that, 'Out of the mouth of infants and nursing babies You have established praise?'" God establishes His truth through those who are childlike, not childish but those who come to Him like a child, innocent, totally dependent upon the Lord, just like a child upon their parents. Before the child can form opinions, before the child can get educated religiously, they were shouting praises to Jesus. And Jesus said, "Religious leaders are not establishing the things of God, children are." They are the innocent ones. They are the ones who will be open to the truth. The adults develop problems as we get older. But Jesus said, "Become like a child," that the kingdom of heaven is like a child, so come as a child.

So that was the end of Sunday, Procession into Jerusalem and The Purification of the Temple. We are told and will be told later on that Jesus went to Bethphage (or Bethany) at the end of His days. In the Passover week He spent the evenings in Bethany at the house of Mary and Martha and Lazarus, but during the daytime He went into Jerusalem where the pilgrims were gathering together to celebrate the Passover.

Verse 18 we begin The Punishment of the Fig Tree.

Verses 18 and 19 The Curse of the Fig Tree.

And early in the morning...

This would be Monday morning after the procession into Jerusalem, after the purification of the temple.

Early in the morning while returning into the city, He became hungry. And when He saw one fig tree by the road, He went up to it, and found nothing in it except leaves only. And He says to it, "Let there no longer become fruit from you forever." And the fig tree was dried up immediately.

What is this all about? He comes back in, He is hungry, He sees a fig tree alongside of the road. This time of the year there should be figs on the fig tree, but He found only leaves. There are certain teachings that are coming out of this text.

- 1) First of all, the fig tree. The fig tree in the Old Testament was used as an illustration for the nation Israel. In the book of Hosea, the book of Joel, and Micah - especially Micah 7:1 - using the fig tree as an example of barren Israel.
- 2) You have to understand the process of the fig tree to understand the application of this illustration. The fig tree bears figs first and leaves last so the leaves and the figs are on at the same time. When Jesus comes up to the fig tree there's only leaves, no fruit. There should have been fruit. He found nothing on it.
- 3) The leaves to the Jewish scholar represent religion. They say beginning back in Genesis 3:7 it says when Adam and Eve sinned and they heard the Lord walking through the garden and they went to hide themselves because they had sinned. "The eyes of them both were opened, and they knew that they were naked; and they sewed fig leaves together and made themselves aprons." Genesis 3:7. So they covered themselves up. Ever since Genesis 3:7 the fig leaves represent religion and religion represents a cover-up. Not forgiveness of sins, not holiness, but a cover-up. There is no fruit. The tree does not produce fruit. Only God's Spirit produces fruit, but the tree produced leaves which represented religion.

So he says in Verse 19, **And He says to it, "Let there no longer become fruit from you forever."** He cursed it. **And the fig tree was dried up immediately.** Mark tells us in his gospel that it was withered or dried up from the roots immediately. From the roots on up, it was withered under the command of Jesus. Showing that the nation Israel did not bear fruit. They bore leaves, they produced religion, but did not bear the fruit of God. So He cursed the fig tree. So He cursed Israel because they rejected their Messiah and He says, "So it will be from you forever."

In Verses 20 to 22, The Condition Concerning Prayer. We had The Curse of the Fig Tree; now we have The Condition Concerning Prayer.

And when the disciples saw this (Jesus drying up the fig tree) **they marveled, saying,**
(this is the question) **"How was immediately the fig tree dried up?"**
How did it happen? They didn't ask why. They asked how. How did this happen so quickly just instantly it was dried up?

So Jesus said in Verse 21,

And when Jesus answered He said to them, "Truly I say to you, if you should have faith and should not doubt, not only will you do the miracle of the fig tree, but even if you should say to this mountain, 'Be removed and be thrown into the sea,' it will happen."

It will be to you, if you should have faith and should not doubt. A lot of theology packed in here and we'll take as much of it as we can.

First of all, the mountain. We have to understand what He means by using the mountain as an illustration of His teaching before you can understand the teaching. He says at the end of verse 21, "If you should say to *this mountain*," so, *this mountain* meaning *the Mount of Olives*. "If you should say to this mountain, 'Be removed and thrown into the sea,' it would happen if you have faith, and do not doubt." To the Jew the mountain theologically and philosophically represented problems, unpassable problems that hindered people from moving on with their lives. So when people had circumstances or situations in their life that was like a mountain - they couldn't go around, they couldn't go over it, they couldn't go through it, their life has just stopped. And a Jewish counselor was considered somebody who possessed special abilities from God if he could counsel people and remove the mountain. He was considered to have a special ability from God if he was good at removing mountains or obstacles that would keep a person from moving on with their life. So when he says *mountain* you know that is making reference to the philosophy of the day, actually from out of a proverb that a mountain represented problems, situations, circumstances that was hindering your life from moving on.

I have never seen anybody go out and physically move a mountain. I've heard people quote this all the time. "Oh, Jesus said, 'If you had faith and didn't doubt you can move a mountain,' so anything is possible if you just have enough faith. Your problem is you just don't have any faith." Well, I've never seen anybody move a mountain by faith because that is not what Jesus is talking about. He is not talking about a physical mountain. He is talking about the mountain, the unpassable mountain that hinders people from moving on with their lives.

So He says, going back up into verse 21, "If you should have faith and should not doubt, not only will you do this like this fig tree but you'll say to this mountain, 'Be removed and thrown into the sea.'" What does He mean, "If you should have faith and should not doubt?" You see that is two there, you can't just have one. If you should have faith and should not doubt. So, what does He mean by *doubt* and *faith*?

First of all, I'm going to take the word *doubt*. It is **διακρίνω** (diakrinō) in Greek and it literally means *to tear something apart and inspect it*. To pull something into two parts and inspect it, that's called *doubt*. That's when you analyze something. Or in our case we would be more identified with taking a certain situation and tearing it apart: the good and the bad, the pros and cons. If I have a problem, "What am I to do about this problem? If I do this, this will happen. If I do this, this will happen." It is called *doubt* when you pull something apart and

analyze it and try to make a decision based on the pros and cons. We do it all the time. We try to find the Lord's will and the Lord's will is based on what more benefits will be if I do it one way versus the other. No, that's a lack of faith because faith is literally trusting the Lord with everything, no matter how it's going to turn out. Usually we are afraid of how things are going to turn out if we obey the Lord. And the Lord all He asks is trust, "You trust Me. Hand it over to Me and trust Me with it and I'll take care of it; but you have got to trust Me. Even if it works out to be a disaster, you have to trust Me, that I'm working it out according to My will for My purposes." To judge between two things, pull it apart, analyze it, try to make a decision based on what's best from the circumstances; that is called *doubt*. That is our English word *doubt*.

A good example of this is from James 1:2-8 and I'm going to read that. If you have a Bible and you want to follow along with me, it is James 1:2-8.

The first part of James 1:2-4 is The Explanation of the Process of Faith. He says, **My brothers, count it all joy when you fall into diverse or various temptations.** Trials in your life. So, if you're in a trial in your life - or various trials in your life - you are supposed to rejoice because of what the trial is for. Verse 3 says, "Knowing this," so you are to rejoice because of what you know about it.

Knowing this that the trying of your faith works patience. Now in the New Testament there are two words in the King James Text that are translated two different kinds of patience. One is the word *patience*, it is **ὑπομένω** (hypomenō), which means *to remain under circumstances, patience*. *Long-suffering* is another word used in the King James text, that means *to have patience with people*. **μακροθυμία** (makrothumia) means *be patient with people*, **ὑπομενω** (hypomenō) means *to remain under your circumstances, be patient*. This word is **ὑπομένω** (hypomenō), *remain under your circumstances*.

That the testing (or trying) of your faith works endurance. That is why we go through hardship; because by remaining under our circumstances and trusting the Lord we build endurance. Because our main desire in trials is to get rid of the trials or get out from underneath it, and God says, "No, I've brought it into your life so that you learn to remain under it trusting Me." His response is, "I don't need to get rid of it." The Lord is in charge, so He brings those circumstances.

Verse 4 says, **But let patience (or endurance) have its perfect work** (that's *complete work*). Don't quit, don't get out from underneath) **that you may be perfect and entire, wanting** (or literally, *lacking*) **nothing**. See, our problem is that we have no endurance. We are constantly seeking the Lord to get rid of our circumstances, rid of the hard times. When the Lord is saying, "Okay you quit, you get out from underneath it now, I've got another one waiting for you because we are trying to produce endurance here." We are trying to produce a trust in the Lord.

Verses 5 to 8, The Explanation of the Prayer of Faith. He says, **If any of you lack wisdom, let him ask of God, that gives to all men liberally (or freely) and upbraids not (or does not rebuke), and it shall be given him.** So he is saying, "God freely gives. You want wisdom? God will give you wisdom." But here it is right out in the middle of the chapter in

verse 5 - you've probably heard this verse quoted all the time., "If you lack wisdom, ask from God and He'll give you wisdom." So, if you need wisdom on how to deal with your situation ask God, He'll give you freely. He won't rebuke you for it, He freely gives.

But the term wisdom is put in verse 5 because it's a continuation of verses 2 and 4. You gain wisdom by endurance. You endure things experiencing the Lord Himself and by that you gain wisdom. Wisdom of the Lord. Wisdom of who He is. Wisdom of His faithfulness. So, if you lack wisdom, if you want to know Him, if you want to know peace in your circumstances, and know the Jesus that can take care of it, then ask Him. He will bring trials into your life that are going to produce endurance for you to gain wisdom.

If anyone lacks wisdom, let him ask of God, who gives to all freely and does not rebuke, and it will be given to him. But let him ask in faith. In other words, do you want wisdom? Do you want God to take care of your situations? Then you are going to have to ask in faith. You are going to have to trust Him. You are going to have to believe in Him. But you see where doubt comes in? "Lord, I'm praying about my situation. I really trust You; I really want to trust You." And then when you get through praying, in your mind you're going, "Now wait a minute, should I do this, or should I do this? Well, if I do this, this will happen. If I do this, this will happen." Do you see? You start pulling things apart, analyzing things from the human, and trying to make a spiritual decision based on human logic and reason.

But let him ask in faith nothing wavering. King James says, *nothing wavering*. I like that. It is the same word *doubt* over in Matthew 21:21. *Wavering* is the word *doubt*. Here it is translated *wavering* because he uses a ship for an example. **For he that wavers is like a wave of the sea driven by the wind and tossed.** You are like that wave or that ship that is out in the middle of the ocean, no anchor point. The winds and the waves are pushing you all around the place. That's *wavering*. That is the person who doubts. That is the person who goes through the religious procedures of prayer but in their mind and in their heart they are doubting. Humanly trying to work it out. Humanly trying to get rid of the problem rather than turn it over to the Lord and experience Him in it, for as long as the Lord wants to go - that is *faith*.

For let not that man think that he shall receive anything from the Lord. The wavering person will not receive anything from the Lord. You can pray. You can scream. You can shout. You can cry. You can laugh. You can do whatever you want to do. You are not going to receive anything from the Lord if you're wavering like that ship being tossed around out in the sea and you are not trusting the Lord. It's *faith*. Trusting Him and not doubting.

Verse 8 says, **And this is a double minded man who is unstable in all his ways.** *Double minded* is the Greek word *two minds*. I like what John Bunyan wrote. If you ever read his writings, he wrote about a character named Mr. Facing-Both-Ways. It would be equivalent to our two-faced person analogy. A double minded man is a person who trusts the Lord on one hand and yet worries on the other hand. Trusts the Lord on one hand but analyzes it in the human on the other and does not just give it over to the Lord. Mr Facing-Both-Ways.

A double minded man is unstable in all his ways. In other words, wavers back and forth in everything. Now, that is not to condemn the person. That is to say here's the deal.

Trials are to cause you to endure by putting your trust in the Lord. If you haven't learned to do that yet you are going to be like that ship tossed by the sea. You are going to be Mr. or Mrs. Facing-Both-Ways going in two different directions at one-time. And James says, "No, you don't understand what trials are for. Trials are to learn how to trust the Lord. Period. 100%."

A couple of weeks ago, we took the Lord's entrance into Jerusalem. We saw how they took the donkey and they put their clothes on the donkey and then they put Jesus upon the donkey. Luke tells us about that incident, that putting the clothes on the donkey represents putting the clothes on the donkey and letting go. Peter picked up on it in I Peter 5 and says, "Cast all your cares upon the Lord." Same word. The only two places in the entire New Testament where it is found: Luke 19:5 and I Peter 5:7. So, by tossing the clothes on top of the donkey and letting go and letting Jesus ride the donkey, that is what is meant by *faith*. It doesn't mean you throw the clothes on top of the donkey and then you hold it while you're walking alongside of it to make sure you don't lose your clothes. "That is my favorite coat. I'll let Jesus ride on it, but I'm making sure that I am in control. I make sure I get it back in good condition."

Well see that's what is being taught here by Jesus and James as he picks it up. The circumstances are there for you not to get rid of. The Lord does not have to get rid of anything. He's perfectly capable of being in charge and taking care of everything according to His will. It might not look like it. We might fear what He might do. We might fear He's not going to answer prayer. He always answers prayer, always. If you pray for His will to be done, you've got it, every time. Except when that human logic and reason starts to work. We start to look at things and wonder if God really heard the prayer. How is God going to answer the prayer? And we begin to take it back, we begin to worry.

Paul's attitude towards trials changed and it's recorded in II Corinthians 12:9. He prayed to the Lord three times that the Lord remove this thorn in the flesh, a health issue that he had, and he prayed three times for God to remove it. And then finally the third time the Lord says, "My grace is sufficient for you: for My strength is made perfect in weakness." Oh! So, I have to become weak in order for the Lord's power to become strong. That's how it works. Paul says, "Most gladly therefore will I rather glory in my weaknesses, in order that the power of Christ may rest upon me." I glory in all the troubles I've seen. I glory in the fact that God is putting me through situations where it's making me weak, because when I'm weak then I trust in Him and then He is strong.

Back to Matthew chapter 21.

If you should have faith and should not doubt, not only will you do the miracle of the fig tree, but even if you should say to this mountain, (that is the Mount of Olives) "Be removed and be thrown into the sea," it will happen. Verse 22, And all things...
I labored explaining to you what the mountain is and what faith and doubt mean because the next verse is what people use to show that you can make anything happen just by believing.

And all things, whatsoever you should ask in prayer, believing, you will receive.
Notice the word *believing*. It is an -ING word. It means it is a present participle. It means continuous action. Whatever you ask, if you are continually believing, continually throwing

those clothes over the donkey's back and letting go and letting God have it, and letting God take care of it continuously, then you'll receive whatever you're asking for in your trust in the Lord. See, it is dealing with mountains. It is talking about something that stops a person from following Christ because they're so inundated with problems and hardships. By your faith and trust in Christ the mountains will be removed. Those objects that keep you from walking with the Lord, that keep you from enduring, will be removed. Every one of them. Because the Lord will take us through those mountains.

Let's close in prayer.