

## **Title: Power to Move Mountains-Faith 3**

**By: Lesly F. Massey, Ph.D.**

**Text: Matt 17:14-20**

In reading the Gospels, there is very much that is astounding, revealing the divinity of Jesus in ways that move us and mystify us— stories of his teachings and wonders, his manner and treatment of people, his forgiving nature and gentleness with children. But certain teachings are challenging in the extreme. Like you, I have wrestled with some of his hard sayings. We are uncertain how to interpret them and how to apply them in daily life. Like the Sadducees, not all of us believe in angels or demons, so stories like this one leave us with more questions than answers. What does he mean when he says “pick up my cross and follow him?” What does it mean to “pluck out an offending eye?” To “become a eunuch for kingdom sake?” To “turn our backs on family?” To “sell all and give to poor?” None of that literally, we’re sure, but still compelling. And we come away with a valuable lesson if we can just see it.

I am forced to conclude that Jesus often spoke in metaphor and hyperbole (as in his parables), not intending a literal interpretation but exaggerating reality for effect. Nonetheless, his purpose is to encourage a life-altering application. So must be the case with regard to moving mountains. Jesus did not really suggest that Mount Hermon could be lifted and cast into the Mediterranean by one man with just a milligram of faith. But rather that strong faith is the most significant human virtue in surviving hardship, overcoming obstacles, reaching goals, accomplishing noble objectives.

The geography of Palestine is rather bland compared to certain other places in the world. About 50 miles wide by a 150 miles north to south. Today cities and farms are bigger and modern. In Jesus day there were many scattered olive groves and vineyards, some ancient, and a few places fertile enough to grow fields of barley. But much of it was dry and desolate, rocky and difficult to traverse. There were five distinct regions. The coastal plains (called the shephelah) which included the lowlands and hills; the higher range of mountains, the Jordan rift valley (lowest land on earth, -1300 ft), and the Trans-Jordan Plateau. In traveling by foot (or eveny donkey, horse, or chariot) the mountains were almost always visible, although not very high compared to the Himalayas, Alps or the Rockies. Mt Carmel on the coast near Joppa is a ridge 24 miles long and 1800 feet above coast. Zion is the 2500 foot mountain of Jerusalem. Also Hebron, Olivet, Gerizim, and Horeb (Sinai) in the Negeb region to south. Hermon to far north is the tallest, 9000 feet and often snowcapped. But to ancient travelers those mountains were enormous obstacles. Caravans followed the easiest route. Those who lived in Judean towns could not get anywhere without dealing with rocky paths and with both a steep climb and descent. Tending sheep or goats was a drudgery because the herdsman had to climb into rocky crags. Surely they often thought how they wished they could just hurl this mountain into the sea. Like you, “my life would be so much better if I didn’t have to contend with this. I envy people living down there in the fertile plain. It looks so green and appealing from up here.”

And we should not forget that in Jesus’ day, Jews struggled with their on-going legacy of oppression. They had rebuilt Jerusalem after the Babylonian exile, only to be defeated and dominated by the Greeks (Seleucid Dynasty), then a dynasty of their own called the Hasmoneans, and then the Romans. They felt continually oppressed and continually downtrodden.

None of us can deny that much of life is spent dealing with obstacles. Hindrances to accomplishment. Just when we reach the top of one mountain, we see another one across a valley, so now the destination seems farther away and harder to reach than it appeared before. And we constantly look to those who climb Mt Everest or scale El Capitan to teach us how to be people with more courage, tenacity, drive, and faith.

Actor Michael J. Fox (who became famous for his role as Alex Keaton in sitcom *Family Ties*, and his movie series *Back to the Future*), more recently published a book entitled *Always Looking Up, the Adventures of an Incurable Optimist*. At the height of his career he began to have tremors and was diagnosed with Parkinson’s Disease. Today he is still acting, and is an activist for various causes. In one interview he said *The problem with most people is the difference between what they expect in life and what they settle for. Some accept things they could change if they tried, but don’t have the will. Others expect and want things to*

*be different in unchangeable “non-choices”, and in refusal to accept that, they wallow in bitterness and misery, and simply sink, or wither away.*

Today, I encourage everyone to nourish the fighter, the climber, the determined optimist in you. Believe that you can move mountains, or if not climb over them or tunnel through them. Believe that you can endure circumstances you cannot change and find a way to rise above them. But do not just give up. Acquiescence is only the right choice when facing “Non-choices,” and even then how you deal with those circumstances is a choice.

A dear friend of mine Virginia Dixon passed away recently. She loved a story called *How Nell Got Out of the Well*. It was about a farm horse that fell into a cistern. The farmer could not get her out, and feared that trying would kill her. So he decided Nell was a goner and only thing to do was bury her right there. While it broke his heart to do so, he began shoveling dirt into the cistern. But Nell was not so ready to depart this world. She kept stomping dirt as the farmer shoveled it in, until it filled up the cistern and she climbed out. With renewed life and hope Nell sauntered back to the pasture. That’s the spirit of a mountain mover.

Welsh poet Dylan Thomas (1914–1953) wrote many powerful lines. Perhaps the most quoted are those line we know from the movie *Independence Day* when the US President says: “We will not go quietly into the night, we will not go down without a fight.” Thomas wrote that for his dying father. But those lines speak to us all.

We often say all things are possible for God, but God’s people need to learn to be people of possibilities, instead of a nation of downtrodden, persecuted, and defeated. People who are no longer defeated at very sight of mountain, but people who can move mountains out of the way. People who believe that no matter what is going on socially or politically around us, we still have the ability to serve God’s interests and find happiness and fulfillment. I pray for that spirit in each one of you.