

OCTOBER 7, 2013

# Faith of a Mustard Seed

GAYLE SOMERS



## Gospel (Read Lk 17:5-10)

What prompted the apostles to ask Jesus to increase their faith in [Sunday's reading](#)? In the verses preceding ours, Jesus had been talking about forgiveness: “Take heed to yourselves, if your brother sins, rebuke him, and if he repents, forgive him; and if he sins against you seven times in the day, and turns to you seven times, and says, ‘I repent,’ you must forgive him” (see Lk 17:3-4). No wonder the apostles ask for more faith! They knew how hard it is, humanly speaking, to forgive the same offense over and over. They thought they would need much more faith than they had to be able to follow Jesus’ teaching.

They must have been surprised by His answer: “If you have faith the size of a mustard seed, you would say to this mulberry tree, ‘Be uprooted and planted in the sea,’ and it would obey you.” Jesus makes it clear that it is not the volume of faith that makes impossible things happen, because faith “the size of a mustard seed”—very tiny—can accomplish the impossible. What did He mean?

When the apostles heard that they must extend forgiveness in such an expansive (and impossible) way, they assumed they had to conjure up this kind of love themselves. If they had more faith, they could do it. By telling them that even faith the size of a mustard seed would be enough to work wonders, Jesus immediately shifts the emphasis

away from the wonder worker and on to the Worker of wonders. It is not the size of our faith but its Object that makes all the difference. If we are thinking about the size of our faith, we are thinking about ourselves. If we are thinking about the impossibility of what needs to happen, such as forgiving others endlessly, we would do well to think about God and His unlimited power. To believe that God can do anything in and through us simply takes faith. Jesus uses the metaphor of a mustard seed to emphasize that impossible things are accomplished when our faith in God—our trust in Him to hear our prayers and act on our behalf—is exercised. It is not the amount of faith that matters but its quality. Faith is the human action through which the power of God is released in the world. With God, nothing is impossible (see Gen 18:14; Mt19:26; Lk 1:37).

To help His apostles understand that they must think about God, not themselves, when they set out to do the impossible work He is going to eventually ask them to do, Jesus goes on to describe a scene familiar to everyone in His day. When household servants do the work their master has commanded them to do, they do not expect to be lauded and immediately rewarded for it. The master is not grateful for the servants doing the work they were supposed to do. “So it shall be with you,” He tells them. Jesus knows that when He finishes His earthly work and ascends to Heaven, the apostles, through faith in His Name, will do many mighty works, truly impossible things (i.e., see Acts 3:11-16). They must understand that it is God Who works through their faith. They are to think of themselves as merely “unprofitable servants [who] have done what they were obliged to do.”

Faith the size of a mustard seed is powerful when it is focused this way. As Scripture says, “Faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen” (see Heb 11:1). When faith keeps God as its Object, nothing is impossible (even serial forgiveness!).

*Possible response:* Lord Jesus, thank You for helping me know of the impossible things that are even now happening through my simple but true faith in God.

### **First Reading (Read Habakkuk 1:2-3; 2:2-4)**

Habakkuk was a prophet in Judah who probably lived sometime around the late 7<sup>th</sup> century B.C. In the first two chapters of his book, he and God have a conversation about the terrible covenant infidelity Habakkuk observes among God’s people. He longs to see God execute punishment on those who create violence, strife, and clamorous discord. He wonders how long it will take Him to put a stop to all this: “I cry out to You, ‘Violence!’ but You do not intervene. Why do You let me see ruin; why must I look at misery?” This is a question people have put to God all through the ages, isn’t it?

The Lord tells Habakkuk he must be patient, because “the vision still has its time.” In this case, Habakkuk (and all God’s righteous people) must have the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen. They must believe God has heard their cry for deliverance and justice. Even beyond that, they must believe the prophecy God gives to Habakkuk that although He will use the terrible pagan nation of Babylon (the Chaldeans) to execute justice on Judah, the time will come for that nation to be judged

for its wickedness as well. The first part of this promise was fulfilled in the Exile, when the Babylonians destroyed Jerusalem and the Temple, carrying the people away from the Promised Land. It seemed to the Jews that it would be impossible for God to use a pagan nation to punish them, but that is exactly what happened. It was through this terrible chastisement that Judah was actually “reborn.” They had to lose everything the covenant with God had given them in order to long for it again and desire to live it fully. As for the Babylonians, eventually they were crushed by the Persians, a divine judgment they could not avoid.

The people who heard Habakkuk’s prophecy had to live by faith in just the way Jesus described in the Gospel. God can do the impossible; He is to be trusted, no matter what. Habakkuk expressed this eloquently in the third chapter of his book (see Hab 3:17-19):

“Though the fig tree do not blossom, nor fruit be on the vines, the produce of the olive fail and the fields yield no food, the flock be cut off from the fold and there be no herd in the stalls, yet I will rejoice in the LORD, I will joy in the God of my salvation. GOD, the Lord, is my strength; he makes my feet like hinds’ feet, he makes me tread upon my high places.”

Did the Jews believe this? Do we?

*Possible response:* Heavenly Father, I want to remember to pray this way: Though all looks lost, “yet I will rejoice in the Lord.”

### **Psalm (Read Ps 95:1-2, 6-9)**

The psalm calls God’s people to worship and give thanks to Him, to trust that “He is our God, and we are the people He shepherds, the flock He guides.” How often are we tempted to doubt God’s love and care for us? What circumstances in our lives, even today, make us lament, with Habakkuk, that “I cry out to You... but You do not intervene”? If we find that in us today, we should take the psalmist’s warning to heart: **“If today You hear His voice, harden not your hearts.”** We must choose to believe that God will not disappoint us, no matter how things look or feel. While we wait, “let us sing joyfully to the Lord; let us acclaim the Rock of our salvation.”

When we do this, we have faith the size of a mustard seed. That is all it takes.

*Possible response:* The psalm is, itself, a response to our other readings. Read it again prayerfully to make it your own.

### **Second Reading (Read 2 Tim 1:6-8, 13-14)**

In the epistle, St. Paul urges St. Timothy to have faith the size of a mustard seed. He is encouraging his young friend in his difficult duties as the ordained bishop of Ephesus, in whose ordination St. Paul himself took part. This letter was likely written during St. Paul’s final imprisonment in Rome, right before his martyrdom. The conditions for the spread of the Gospel were probably looking dark to St. Timothy. Was he feeling fear for his own future? St. Paul urges him to “stir into flame the gift of God ... Who did not give

us a spirit of cowardice but rather of love and power and self-control.” St. Timothy would have to shake off his fears and bear his “share of hardship for the Gospel with the strength that comes from God.” This was no time to forget that servants are required to obey their masters and not expect anything in return.

Surely St. Paul wanted St. Timothy to remember that when God is the focus of our faith, all things are possible. “Guard this rich trust with the help of the Holy Spirit that dwells within us,” St. Paul writes to St. Timothy. Good words for us, too.

*Possible response:* Heavenly Father, how often I capitulate to “a spirit of cowardice.” I know this isn’t from You. Help me guard “the rich trust” of love, power, and self-control that You have given me.

By **Gayle Somers**

Gayle Somers is a member of St. Thomas the Apostle parish in Phoenix and has been writing and leading parish Bible studies since 1996. She is the author of three bible studies, Galatians: A New Kind of Freedom Defended (Basilica Press), Genesis: God and His Creation and Genesis: God and His Family (Emmaus Road Publishing). Gayle and her husband Gary reside in Phoenix and have three grown children.