

## By What Authority?

(The Gospel According to Mark, Chapter 11)

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### Mark 11:1-33 NIV

As they approached Jerusalem and came to Bethphage and Bethany at the Mount of Olives, Jesus sent two of his disciples, saying to them, "Go to the village ahead of you, and just as you enter it, you will find a colt tied there, which no one has ever ridden. Untie it and bring it here. If anyone asks you, 'Why are you doing this?' say, 'The Lord needs it and will send it back here shortly.'"

They went and found a colt outside in the street, tied at a doorway. As they untied it, some people standing there asked, "What are you doing, untying that colt?" They answered as Jesus had told them to, and the people let them go.

When they brought the colt to Jesus and threw their cloaks over it, he sat on it. Many people spread their cloaks on the road, while others spread branches they had cut in the fields. Those who went ahead and those who followed shouted, "Hosanna!" "Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!" "Blessed is the coming kingdom of our father David!" "Hosanna in the highest heaven!"

Jesus entered Jerusalem and went into the temple courts. He looked around at everything, but since it was already late, he went out to Bethany with the Twelve.

The next day as they were leaving Bethany, Jesus was hungry. Seeing in the distance a fig tree in leaf, he went to find out if it had any fruit. When he reached it, he found nothing but leaves, because it was not the season for figs. Then he said to the tree, "May no one ever eat fruit from you again." And his disciples heard him say it.

On reaching Jerusalem, Jesus entered the temple courts and began driving out those who were buying and selling there. He overturned the tables of the money changers and the benches of those selling doves, and would not allow anyone to carry merchandise through the temple courts. And as he taught them, he said, "Is it not written: 'My house will be called a house of prayer for all nations'? But you have made it 'a den of robbers.'"

The chief priests and the teachers of the law heard this and began looking for a way to kill him, for they feared him, because the whole crowd was amazed at his teaching.

When evening came, Jesus and his disciples went out of the city. In the morning, as they went along, they saw the fig tree withered from the roots. Peter remembered and said to Jesus, "Rabbi, look! The fig tree you cursed has withered!"

"Have faith in God," Jesus answered. "Truly I tell you, if anyone says to this mountain, 'Go, throw yourself into the sea,' and does not doubt in their heart but believes that what they say will happen, it will be done for them. Therefore I tell you, whatever you ask for in prayer, believe that you have received it, and it will be yours.

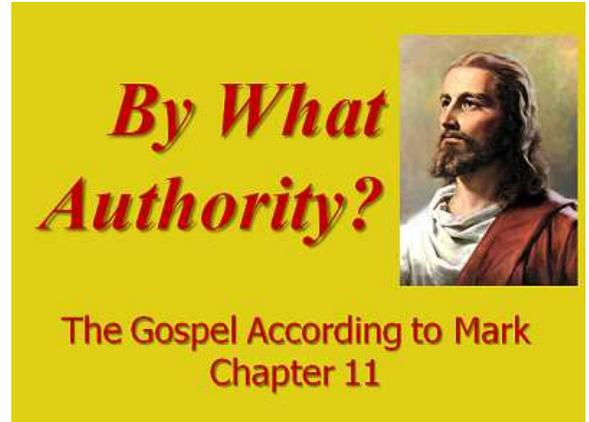
"And when you stand praying, if you hold anything against anyone, forgive them, so that your Father in heaven may forgive you your sins."

They arrived again in Jerusalem, and while Jesus was walking in the temple courts, the chief priests, the teachers of the law and the elders came to him. "By what authority are you doing these things?" they asked. "And who gave you authority to do this?"

Jesus replied, "I will ask you one question. Answer me, and I will tell you by what authority I am doing these things. John's baptism — was it from heaven, or of human origin? Tell me!"

They discussed it among themselves and said, "If we say, 'From heaven,' he will ask, 'Then why didn't you believe him?' But if we say, 'Of human origin' . . ." (They feared the people, for everyone held that John really was a prophet.)

So they answered Jesus, "We don't know." Jesus said, "Neither will I tell you by what authority I am doing these things."



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Before Thanksgiving last year we were on a journey with Jesus through the Gospel of Mark. But as we traveled we came to chapter 11, which records Jesus' entrance into Jerusalem on what we now call Palm Sunday. So we halted our journey at that time, in order to focus on the Advent season and the celebration of

the birth of Jesus during Christmas and Epiphany. Today, as we approach the season of Lent when we recall the passion, or suffering, of the Lord Jesus, we'll resume our pathway through Mark's Gospel. From this point on, Mark focuses on events during the week leading up to Jesus' crucifixion and resurrection — what we now know as Holy Week. It's interesting to notice that nearly half of the story Mark tells is concentrated in that last week before Jesus' resurrection; and the other three Gospels, Matthew, Luke, and John, aren't very different in this respect. Obviously their story is coming to a climax, when the meaning of what they have been telling us about Jesus will be more clearly revealed.

<b>Mark's Outline</b>	
<b>Chapters 1-10 60%</b>	<b>Jesus brings the kingdom of God in teaching, healing, and mighty works</b>
<b>"Holy Week" Chapters 11-16 40%</b>	<b>Jesus' entry into Jerusalem Confronting his adversaries Instructing his disciples His suffering and death His resurrection from the dead</b>

Why is it important to study the Gospels, and everything Jesus did and said between the time of his birth and the time he went to Calvary? Sometimes Christians talk as if the only important thing about Jesus was that he died — and then, of course, rose again. As a favorite song says, "And when I think that God, his Son not

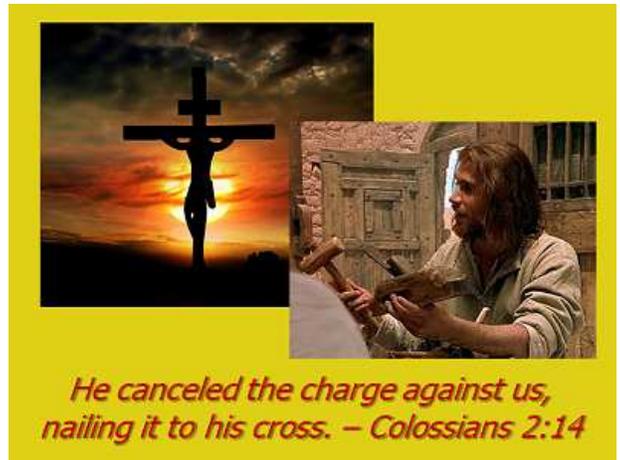
sparing, sent Him to die, I scarce can take it in." And, of course, the death of the Son of God is what broke the curse of sin and disobedience that has lain over our troubled world. Because of who he is, Jesus was able to absorb all this sin and take it to his cross. As Paul states in Colossians 2:15-16, Jesus canceled the charge against humanity, the condemnation because of disobedience to God; "he has taken it away," Paul says, "nailing it to the cross."

What a striking reversal of images is this! Instead of Roman soldiers nailing Jesus to the cross, we can picture Jesus himself — Jesus, the carpenter — *nailing our sins to the cross* and thereby canceling the indictment against people who choose to follow the corrupt and death-dealing ways of human culture instead of the life-giving way of the Creator. And Paul adds, "Having disarmed the powers and authorities, he made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross." The cross on which Jesus the Messiah died is not just the cross of shame and rejection; it is also the cross of victory and triumph over death, and over every enemy of the purpose of God in this world.

But that brings us to the point of why Mark, and the other Gospels, tell the story of Jesus between Bethlehem and Calvary. The deliverance of the cross, and indeed of the resurrection, depends on *who it is that is crucified and raised from the dead*. Jesus was crucified between two "thieves," as they're traditionally called — two brigands or revolutionaries. But neither of their crosses became a saving cross. And if one of those thieves had risen from the dead and appeared to his friends, would *they* have been hailed as Savior and Messiah, the deliverer from death? In the Gospels and the Book of Acts other people besides Jesus are raised from death: the daughter of Jairus, the widow's son of Nain, Jesus' friend Lazarus, Tabitha of Joppa. No one hailed them as the long-desired Redeemer, and obviously they all died a second time. What was different about Jesus, that *his* cross and *his* resurrection should have the meaning they have for us? The Gospels are written to answer that question. That's why they tell us what Jesus did and said between "Christmas" and "Good Friday." So their story is one that we need to follow, for a full understanding of what the Christian faith really is.

Therefore we take up Mark's story once again, and it will be with us this year until Holy Week. His account, in chapter 11, begins with Jesus' entry into Jerusalem at the beginning of that week, but we'll postpone the Palm Sunday story until that day. Instead, we'll advance to the events of that week between Palm Sunday and Easter. There's plenty of material there to occupy us, chapter by chapter, till we reach that week.

The account continues, then, with three incidents that occur in the aftermath of Jesus' entry into Jerusalem: Jesus' cleansing of the Temple, the cursing of the fig tree, and the question about Jesus' authority.



As Mark tells it, after entering Jerusalem, Jesus goes into the Temple and looks around. He doesn't go into the Temple itself, which only the priests could enter, but he surveys at least the outer court, the Court of the Gentiles, where non-Jewish worshipers were allowed to gather. But since it's already late in the day he returns to Bethany to spend the night. Then, the next morning, he performs that action that we call the cleansing of the Temple. Mark describes it this way:



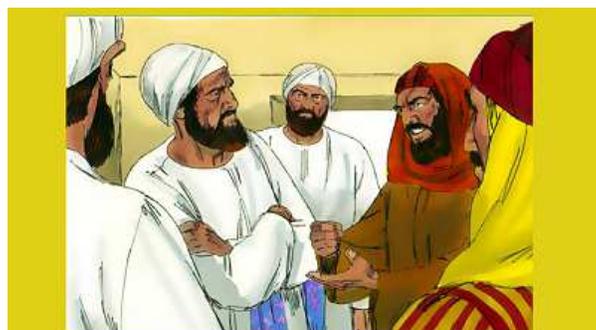
**Model of the Temple in the Time of the Gospels**

Jesus entered the temple courts and began driving out those who were buying and selling there. He overturned the tables of the moneychangers and the benches of those selling doves, and would not allow anyone to carry merchandise through the temple courts. And as he taught them, he said, "Is it not written: 'My house will be called a house of prayer for all nations'? But you have made it 'a den of robbers' (Mark 11:15-17).

Why did Jesus create such a disturbance — one that many scholars suggest was the main reason he was to be arrested, put on trial, and executed? Several factors are at work here. Sacrifices offered in the Temple (not inside the Temple, but on the altar outside the entrance) were of cattle or sheep, but most people couldn't afford these expensive animals. Instead, the Law permitted them to

offer doves, which were much cheaper. Worshipers coming to Jerusalem for the annual sacrifices didn't bring doves with them, so they bought them in the outer court of the Temple. But the catch was that they weren't allowed to use Roman coins, with Caesar's head and inscription, to buy these sacrificial offerings. Instead they had to pay for them with special Temple coins. So the moneychangers were there taking their cut — like the high charge a currency exchange exacts from people today when they take out a loan to tide them over till payday. So this money-changing business was bilking the poor, the ones least able to pay — just like the lottery. And Jesus, who at the beginning of his ministry has announced that he was bringing "good news to the poor" (Luke 4:18), finds this to be such an oppressive practice that he's compelled to do something dramatic to counter it.

Beyond this, we need to understand that in the ancient world the temples were the banks — and don't some older bank buildings in our nation look like temples, with great columns and ornamental stonework, because what we really worship is money? A temple was a sanctuary, and people believed their wealth could be entrusted to such a place of security. As for the Jewish Temple in Jerusalem, an elaborate structure begun decades earlier by King Herod, it was still under construction at this time; recall how Jesus' disciples marveled at the huge stones then being put in place in this wonderful building (Mark 13:1). Great wealth was flowing to Jerusalem from Jews all over the Roman world, so much so that some local Roman governors complained about the drain on resources in their regions. Any disturbance in the Temple would be viewed as an attack on the economy and the banking system, which means that both Jewish and Roman authorities viewed Jesus as the Bernie Sanders of their day. As Mark tells us (11:18), it was after Jesus cleansed the Temple that the authorities began to look for a way to eliminate him.



**The chief priests and the legal experts heard, and looked for a way to get rid of him. — Mark 11:18**



**He overturned the tables of the money-changers and the benches of those selling doves. — Mark 11:15**

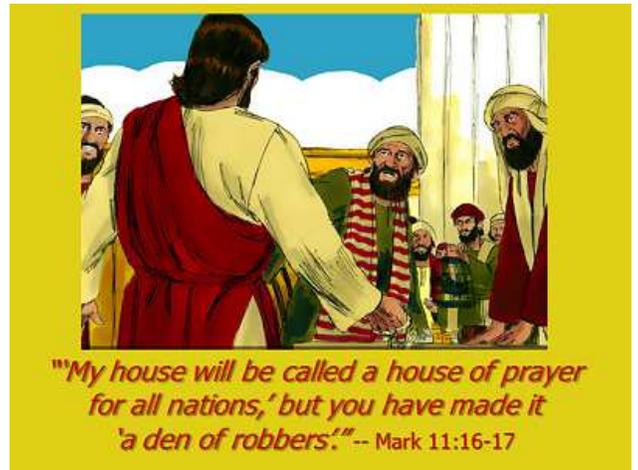
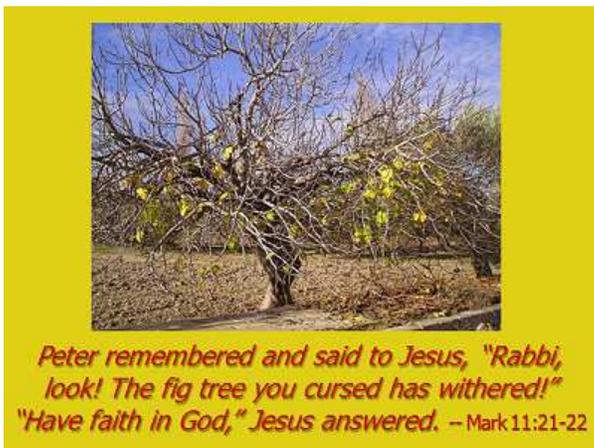
But this dollars-and-cents angle is only part of the explanation of what's going on here. The real clue is found in

the Scripture Jesus quotes when he drives out the traders and overturns the tables: "My house will be called a house of prayer for all nations," but you have made it "a den of robbers." Jesus is quoting from Isaiah 56:7 and Jeremiah 7:11. The vision of the prophets of Israel was always that *all nations* would worship the Lord, whether or not they were Israelites. When the Lord called Abraham, he called him to be a blessing to all families of the earth (Genesis 12:3). The only place where non-Jews could worship at the house of the Lord was the outer court, the Court of the Gentiles. But when Jesus surveyed the Temple he found that the court was crammed full of commercial activity dealing with Jewish issues, like changing money and buying doves. The Lord's purpose for his Temple — the intersection of heaven and earth, where he would meet with all his worshipers — had been compromised. There was no place there for anyone who didn't belong to the in-group.

Friends, we need to make sure that our "temple" — our house of worship — doesn't get so filled up with "churchy" business, organizational maintenance, in-group activities, cliquishness, and the like that a visitor feels that he or she has no place and doesn't belong. Our "court of the Gentiles," so to speak, needs to remain open and welcoming, so that people who might show up for the first time, or who only come occasionally, don't feel excluded.

Finally here, in the history of Israel and Judah it was the *king* who took responsibility for the Temple, the house of the Lord. David envisioned it and established the music for it. Solomon built the Temple. Jehoash ordered it to be repaired (2 Kings 12:6-7). Hezekiah had the Temple cleansed and sanctified (2 Chronicles 29:4-5). Josiah restored the neglected Passover ceremony (2 Kings 23:21-22). When Jesus cleansed the Temple he fulfilled the role of the anointed King of Israel, the Messiah. Surely this implication was not lost on both the Jewish and Roman authorities, who feared what else he might do.

There's so much more we could say about Temples in the Bible: how a temple is the place where heaven and earth meet; how the imagery of the temple frames the way the Bible describes God's creation of the world; how the church, and every individual worshiper, is a temple of the Holy Spirit, the life of God in the life of each believer. But we need to move on through the chapter.



The next morning, Jesus and his disciples come upon the fig tree that Jesus had cursed earlier because he found no fruit on it. The tree has withered up, and the disciples point this out to Jesus who, of course, is not at all surprised. He uses the withered fig tree to teach them about *faith*. "Have faith in God," he says, and he adds, "If anyone says to this mountain, 'Go, throw yourself into the sea,' and does not doubt in their heart but believes that what they say will happen, it will be done for them. Therefore I tell you, whatever you ask for in prayer, believe that you have received it, and it will be yours" (11:22-24). What's going on here?

Preachers often speak of "mountain-moving faith"; things we encounter in life that seem impossible to deal with can be overcome through believing prayer. That's a New Testament teaching, and we need to lay hold of it and practice it. It does no good to pray our doubts, or prayer will have no answer. It does no good to pray the problem, because we'll just get more of the problem. We need to *pray the answer*, and to pray it in the faith that it will come. As John writes in his first letter, "This is the confidence we have in approaching God: that if we ask anything according to his will, he hears us. And if we know that he hears us — whatever we ask — we know that we have what we asked of him" (1 John 5:14). Sometimes we're hesitant to pray like that, because we're afraid we'll be looked upon as fools if the answer doesn't come. But Jesus *doesn't teach us cautious prayer*, he teaches *believing prayer*. The outcome of prayer is up to the Lord, but he doesn't give us an option about how we're supposed to pray.

Before we leave this incident, there's more to explore. Jesus tells his disciples, in English translation, "Have faith in God." But the Greek text actually says *echete pistin theou*, "have the faith of God." What does that mean — if God has faith, whom does he have faith in since he's the One God? Let's understand that in the Bible faith has several aspects. It isn't just "saving faith," that trust in Jesus that brings us into the family of God. It isn't just "believing faith," that confidence that God will answer prayer and respond to the needs of his people. Faith, in the Bible, is more properly *faithfulness* — fidelity, reliability, loyalty, commitment. To have faith in God means to be *committed to him*, loyal to him. And the Lord has that same faithfulness and commitment toward all those who've entered into agreement with him, an agreement or treaty the Bible calls the covenant. It's on the basis of God's faithfulness to us that we can approach him through a corresponding faithfulness of our own.

But if we lack that commitment to God's covenant with us, and neglect his purpose for us in sealing that agreement through the blood of Jesus, then we've *stepped outside the realm of faith*. That's what Jesus is suggesting here in the incident of the fig tree. Let's recall that, in Mark's account, the story of the withered fig tree frames the cleansing of the Temple. There must be a connection between these two events. In Scripture the fig tree is a symbol for Israel, the people of God. If God's chosen ones fail in their mission — to take the name of the Lord to all peoples of the world, and be a blessing to them — then severe consequences will follow. They will lose their effectiveness; they will wither away to nothing. Jesus declares the Lord's judgment on both the unproductive fig tree and the unwelcoming, corrupt Temple; they are one and the same, something the Lord called to be fruitful but which has failed to perform its mission.

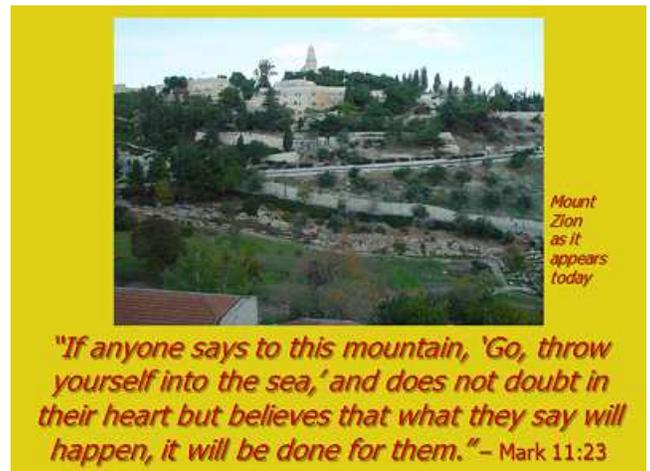
So Jesus calls his disciples, by contrast, to the faithfulness of God through which the Lord's purpose will indeed be achieved. "If anyone says to this mountain, 'Go, throw yourself into the sea,' and does not doubt in their heart but believes that what they say will happen, it will be done for them." What real, rock-and-dirt mountain is he

talking about? The mountain where they are, Mount Zion in Jerusalem, where the Temple stands. Through the faithfulness of Jesus' disciples, the presence of the Lord — the presence he makes known in his Temple — will be taken across the seas to all nations. Which is exactly what we read about in the rest of the New Testament; so that the apostle Paul, in his letter to the Colossians, can refer to "the word of the truth, the gospel which has come to you, as indeed in the whole world it is bearing fruit and growing" (Colossians 1:5-6).

As a congregation of believers we must be neither the unwelcoming Temple preoccupied with its internal minutiae, nor the unproductive fig tree failing to bear fruit and so withering away to nothing. Through the prayer of faith, through *reflecting God's faithfulness to us* back to him, we can be the church he has called us to be and bless this community and the larger world into which our mission extends. But to exercise the prayer of faith, *we need to have a vision*. Jesus gave his disciples a vision to pray for: the Temple of the Lord being a house of prayer for all people, the presence of the Lord on his holy mountain being carried across the sea to bring deliverance and new life to every man, woman and child. "Go therefore," the risen Jesus told them, "and make disciples of all nations" (Matthew 28:19). "Go into all the world and preach the gospel to the whole creation" (Mark 16:15).

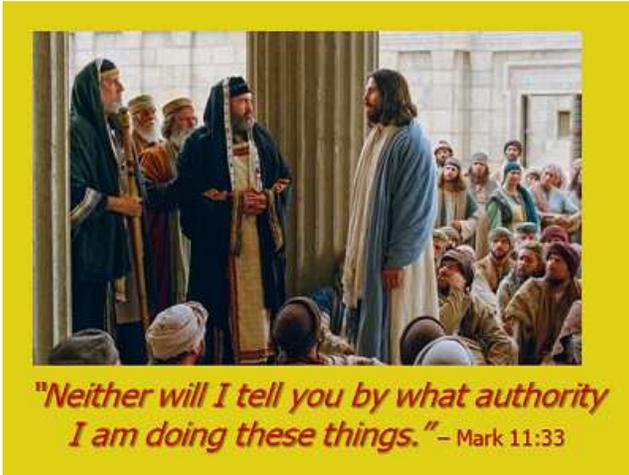
We need a vision that goes *beyond* what we're already doing, as important as those things are: hosting the Food Pantry; supporting the LaMoine Christian Service Camp and One Family, One Purpose; or building homes in Mexico. We need a vision for these empty seats to be filled with people from our own community — neighbors, friends, family members — so they can hear the Word of life, enter the Lord's healing presence, and be delivered from sickness, addiction, financial problems, relationship issues, dysfunctional behavior patterns or just plain ignorance and indifference to the reality of God. We need that vision so we can pray the prayer of faith, and ask the Lord to move in this community, and *not take No for an answer!*

Finally, let's look at the concluding section of Mark 11, the discussion between Jesus and the religious leaders about his authority. Jesus' "Palm Sunday" entrance into Jerusalem and his cleansing of the Temple



have made it obvious that Jesus is acting as a Messiah would act, the deliverer for whom his people have been longing for centuries. How does Jesus presume to perform these actions, they want to know. "By what authority are you doing these things?"

Here is another one of Mark's favorite kind of incident, which scholars label "controversy stories," where Jesus gets into a discussion with the religious authorities and quashes their arguments. Actually, as in the case of the later question of whether or not the Jews should pay taxes to Caesar, Jesus doesn't give his adversaries

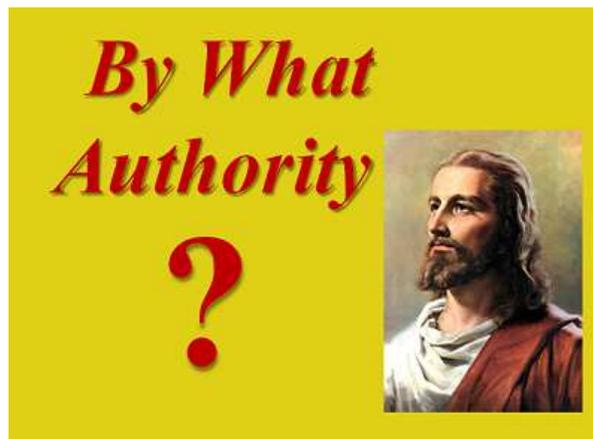


a straight answer. Instead, he frustrates their question by putting *them* on the spot. "If you'll answer my question," he tells them, "I'll answer yours." Then he asks them a question they don't dare answer. Was what John the Baptist did, baptizing people for the forgiveness of sin — was that from God himself, or was that just John's own goofy idea? And the priests, teachers, and elders in Jerusalem can't answer Jesus, because either answer will get them in trouble. If John's baptism was from God, why didn't they believe him? But if they claim it wasn't, then the people, who regard John as a prophet of God, will be up in arms. So their response is, "We don't know." "Okay," says Jesus, "then I won't answer your question either, or tell you by what authority I've done what I've done."

Sometimes we're like these religious leaders who questioned Jesus' authority. Does Jesus really have the right to change me, to set the pattern of life I'm to follow? And by what authority does Jesus put himself forward as the Messiah, the anointed One through whom God will establish his kingdom throughout the world? The risen Jesus told his disciples, "All authority has been given to me in heaven and on earth." Not many people seem to believe that, or the world would be a different kind of world. We'd like Jesus to prove to us he has that authority, perhaps by performing some stupendous miracle. Or maybe we're expecting to hear a voice from heaven, the same voice that came to the disciples at Jesus' transfiguration: "This is my beloved Son; listen to him" (Mark 9:7).

Instead, we get the same answer Jesus gave the priests and teachers of ancient Jerusalem: If you won't commit yourself to what God is doing, one way or the other, I won't explain myself to you. "Neither will I tell you by what authority I do these things." We understand Jesus' authority *only when we respond to him in faith, and follow his vision* — only as we exercise "the faith of God," our loyalty to the agreement God has made with us. When we do that, the authority of Jesus as the Son of God becomes clear enough, and the life of God's new creation opens up to us: the life that came into this world through Jesus' resurrection from the dead.

And let's go a step further. By what authority do *you and I* pray the prayer of faith? As treaty partners with God, we reflect into this world the authority of the Creator of all things. As members of the body of Christ we're "partakers of the divine nature," and if Jesus is "the image of the invisible God" *so are we*. Therefore we pray the prayer of faith in the authority of Jesus, which is also the authority of the believer.



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