

Jesus: a Crushing Rock or a Saving Stone?

1 Peter 2:4-8

March 22, 2015
Steve DeWitt

Our Scripture passage this week is both wonderful and challenging. The truth is wonderful. The challenge is that Peter uses illustrations and mixes them which doesn't make for easy explanation. My role is to make this understandable.

In this passage Jesus is described as three kinds of stone. You may say, why stone? This was before cement, steel, iron, asphalt, and other materials that make up the architecture of our cities. In the first century, stone was used in many different ways. They paved the streets with stone. They built houses with stone. They built grand buildings by hewing stones and putting them on top of each other. Everywhere you went and looked, there were stones. So let me read the passage and see if you can figure out the three kinds of stone that Peter uses to describe Jesus.

"As you come to him, a living stone rejected by men but in the sight of God chosen and precious, you yourselves like living stones are being built up as a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ. For it stands in Scripture:

*'Behold, I am laying in Zion a stone,
a cornerstone chosen and precious,
and whoever believes in him will not be put to shame.'*

So the honor is for you who believe, but for those who do not believe,

*'The stone that the builders rejected
has become the cornerstone,' and
'A stone of stumbling,
and a rock of offense.'*

They stumble because they disobey the word, as they were destined to do." (1 Peter 2:4-8 ESV)

Did you pick them out? Jesus is described here as the *living stone, the cornerstone, and the stumbling stone*. Does it strike anyone that of all people, Peter talks about Jesus as a stone? After all, Jesus gave Peter his name. His birth name was Simon, but Jesus changed it, "*You are Peter.*" (Matthew 16:18) *Peter* means rock. So Jesus calls Peter a rock and here Peter calls Jesus a stone.

I can't help but note that Peter, the rock, doesn't insert himself at all in this description of the church. He is not a stone of significance. He is not the foundation of the church. His spiritual descendants are not the foundation of the church. Christ and the gospel are and always will be the foundation of the church.

Jesus = The Living Stone; Us = Living Stones

"As you come to him, a living stone..." (1 Peter 2:4)

Jesus is a living stone? What does that mean? It must be a description of his resurrection. Stones typically represent inanimate objects. They aren't alive. They don't speak. Jesus referred to this when at his triumphal entry the Pharisees complained that everyone was singing his praises. Jesus said, "*If these were silent, the very stones would cry out!*" (Luke

19:40). Singing rocks? Maybe the Rolling Stones? Rocks don't sing and stones don't live. A living stone is a most remarkable thing.

We see in the rest of the verse the illustration Peter is working. "A *living stone, rejected by men but in the sight of God chosen and precious.*" (1 Peter 2:4) Peter refers to Isaiah 28:16 in verse 6, "*Behold I am laying in Zion a stone, a cornerstone chosen and precious.*" He applies the "chosen and precious" of Isaiah 28 to Jesus in 1 Peter 2:6. How is Jesus chosen?

Isaiah is foretelling the coming Messiah using the picture of a mason laying the most important stone in the whole building—the cornerstone. What would a mason do before starting? He would carefully go through all the stones in the quarry or his inventory. The cornerstone was the one that decided the shape and character of all the other ones. It is the most important stone in the whole structure. It had to be just the right stone. When it was selected, it was the chosen stone.

These words praise three aspects of Jesus' person and saving work.

- *Living Stone* Resurrected to an indestructible life
- *Chosen* Messiah – The Chosen/Anointed One of God
- *Precious* His glorious worth

Peter's goal is practical and encouraging. ***Who Jesus is defines who we are when we are in a faith relationship with him.*** Saving faith is my personal intersection with the power of his resurrected life and the glory of his personhood. This changes us and it changes our status. How?

"*You yourselves like living stones.*" (Verse 5) We are living stones. Living bricks. We are connected by faith to the eternal life of Jesus himself. His eternal life turns us also into living stones.

Jesus = The Cornerstone; Us = We are a Spiritual House/Priests

These "*living stones are being built up as a spiritual house.... For it stands in Scripture: 'Behold, I am laying in Zion a stone, a cornerstone chosen and precious, and whoever believes in him will not be put to shame.'*" (1 Peter 2:5-6)

Here is that quotation is from Isaiah 28. Isaiah prophesied that a Messiah would come whose life and ministry would be like a cornerstone. Chosen and precious. The living stone is also the cornerstone of a great house and we, the living stones, make up the house. Peter mixes the metaphors here, but I think we can understand this. He is using building material imagery (stones, cornerstone) to describe a spiritual reality.

If you enjoy *The Lord of the Rings* and *The Hobbit* series, this will be easy for you. Why? They often refer to people groups as the house of somebody. So you have the house of Rohan which refers both to the name of the royal family and all the people in that kingdom. The house of Gondor is another kingdom in Middle Earth. The house of Gondor is a house but it's not made of brick and stone; the house is people who make up the kingdom and serve in the kingdom.

Those are fictional houses; this passage describes a real house. The house of Jesus Christ is not made with brick and mortar. It is made up of all who put their faith in Jesus as the cornerstone of their faith and hope.

"William Barclay recounts a story...about a Spartan king boasting to a visiting monarch about the walls of Sparta. As the visiting king looked around, he could see no walled city and asked, *'Where are the renowned walls of Sparta?'* The Spartan king pointed to his army and replied, *'These are the walls of Sparta, every man a brick.'*" (Karen Jobes, *1 Peter*, p. 149.)

"*To be a holy priesthood...*" (Verse 5) We are priests in this house. How so? In the Old Testament, a priest would offer sacrifices in the temple. He represented the people to God. But in the New Covenant, we don't go through any man to have access to God. We are the priests. We have direct access to God which Jesus provides for us. Perhaps you have heard the theological phrase, *the priesthood of all believers*. Here is one of its best proof-texts.

"*To offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.*" (Verse 5) What sacrifices do we offer? Not bulls or goats. Here are some passages that describe our sacrifices (Wayne Grudem, *1 Peter*, p. 101):

- Offering of our bodies to God for his service (Romans 12:1)
- The giving of gifts to enable the spread of the gospel (Philippians 4:18)
- The singing of praise (Hebrews 13:15)
- Doing of good and sharing our possessions (Hebrews 13:16)

Grudem adds that this varied list indicates that anything we do in service to God can be thought of as a "spiritual sacrifice."

This is an exciting truth for us. Everything good and holy can be offered as worship. All of it part of our priestly service to God "*acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.*" (Verse 5) Our vocations, our giving, our time, our words, all of it like lambs on the Old Testament altar, offerings to God.

If you are a Christian, you are a priest. The issue is whether or not you are a good one. What are you offering to him? How are you serving him? How might the quality of your service improve if you saw each category of your life as a daily offering to God?

Jesus = The Stumbling Stone

Peter turns this in an unexpected direction. To do so he quotes two Old Testament passages. The stone that is a cornerstone to the house of faith is also a crushing stone for those who do not believe.

"*So the honor is for you who believe, but for those who do not believe, 'The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone,' and 'A stone of stumbling, and a rock of offense.'*"

They stumble because they disobey the word, as they were destined to do." (1 Peter 2:7-8)

These sobering words are drawn from the Old Testament in Psalm 118 and Isaiah 8. Both of them use this "stone" language to illustrate a fearful truth, we either believe in him and have life everlasting, or we do not believe in him and stumble over him.

To stumble over a stone was probably a daily occurrence in the ancient world. Have you ever walked on an uneven cobblestone street? All their streets were like that. Their paths would wear down and reveal the edge of a buried boulder or rock (see picture below).



If you've been hiking, you know that the same rock if properly stepped on, pushes you forward to greater heights, but if overlooked, may cause you to trip or stumble or fall. Jutting rocks on a path are either your friend or your enemy.

Jesus is like that rock in the path of every human being. His life juts out in history and in our search for meaning in this life. God made us with spiritual yearnings, and when we explore those longings we are confronted with Jesus of Nazareth. His teachings, miracles, and claims of deity are so radical that he simply cannot be ignored.

Oxford and Cambridge professor C.S. Lewis himself struggled with the life of Jesus in his own search for meaning. He later wrote that you can only come to one of three possible conclusions. Jesus of Nazareth was either the greatest liar in history, the greatest lunatic in history, or actually who he claimed to be—Lord. *Liar. Lunatic. Lord.* Which of these options you choose ends up being the single decider of your entire eternal destiny. (Thought from C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, p. 52.)

Even in Jesus' earthly ministry, many rejected him. One example is Caiaphas the high priest. If there was ever someone who would seem spiritually knowledgeable and likely to identify Jesus properly, it was the high priest of Israel. Yet, not only did Caiaphas reject him, he led the conspiracy that killed him. Really smart and qualified people can totally miss who he really is. Jesus is the stone that the builders rejected.

How would this encourage Peter's audience? Remember who he is writing to—Christian exiles in a region hostile to Christians. These people lived every day with varying levels of rejection. Who knows all the things they went through? Peter reminds them that even Jesus was rejected but man's rejection in the end matters very little.

I think of our students. If you have any boldness at all about your faith at school, you are likely to face some mockery. You may get smirked at. Maybe lose opportunity. An example that

comes to my mind is my own brother Scott. His high school basketball coach was not a fan of Christianity. Scott was pretty upfront with his faith. He sometimes missed practice because of youth group. Guess what happened? He sat on the bench despite being one of the best players on the team. I saw games where he would get in with four minutes left in the game and nearly be the high scorer for the team. Some of you know that he later spent a brief time on a professional team in South America. Yet, he didn't get playing time on the high school team—a mediocre one at that.

I also remember a professor in our church who was up for tenure but the process was slowed out of concern that he was an evangelical Christian. Was this about my brother's playing ability or the competence of this professor? Not at all. This is about a stone. A stone that was rejected and today is still rejected.

This rejection is not about us, it is about Jesus. *"Indeed, all who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted."* (2 Timothy 3:12) All rejection or persecution for the Christian is a temporary reality. Even when we consider the atrocities of what ISIS is doing to Christians in the Middle East or Pastor Saad who languishes in an Iranian prison for his faith, these are all temporary rejections by men.

This passage is a warning. Jesus is the living stone. He is the cornerstone. And he is the stumbling stone for those who reject him. *"They stumble because they disobey the word as they were destined to do."* (Verse 8) Those who reject Christ and live in rebellion against God are also operating under the sovereignty of God. They are accountable to God for their choices—especially their rejection of Jesus.

This is where Jesus stands in history as the final determiner of the destiny of every human being. Either I believe him to be as he claimed, Son of God dying on the cross for the guilt of my sin OR I choose to disbelieve and for me, Jesus is a stumbling stone.

"Christ is laid across the path of humanity on its course into the future. In the encounter with him each person is changed: one for salvation, another for destruction... One cannot simply step over Jesus to go on about the daily routine and pass him by to build a future. Whoever encounters him is inescapably changed through the encounter: Either one sees and becomes 'a living stone,' or one stumbles as a blind person over Christ and comes to ruin, falling short, i.e., of one's Creator and Redeemer and thereby of one's destiny." (Leonhard Goppelt as quoted by Karen Jobes, *1 Peter*, pp. 155-156.)

It's terrifying and awesome to even consider. It doesn't seem this way right now. Now it seems like those who scoff at Christ are winning. To suggest that we are moral beings accountable to our Creator is right up there with believing in the tooth fairy and unicorns. *You can believe them if you want, but there's no reality to it whatsoever.* It feels like we are losing and we feel a frowning culture all around us.

But that is all going to change. Why? The stone that was rejected has become the capstone which is metaphorical language saying that Jesus was rejected by men but accepted by God and is the all glorious king of the universe. All who reject him will be rejected by Christ and that rejection is final, unchangeable, and deserving of eternal condemnation and punishment in hell.

"Whoever has the son has life; whoever does not have the Son of God does not have life." (1 Jn. 5:12) In the end, what we do with Jesus decides our entire eternal destiny. He is that important. You can get a lot wrong in life but if you get Jesus right, you get eternity right. By the same token, you can get a lot right in life. People can praise you. Admire you. Listen to you. You can be somebody. Achieve greatness. Accomplish your dreams. But if you stumble on

Jesus, if you don't get him right, then all the acceptance and praise of men means nothing. It's what you do with Jesus that matters.

So can I ask you, what is he to you? The Living Stone or a Stumbling Stone? Cornerstone or Stumbling Stone? Savior or the One who will punish your rejection of him forever in hell?

He becomes our living stone and the cornerstone of our faith when we repent of our sinful life and turn in faith and personally believe in Jesus for salvation and eternal life.

Have you? If not, let today be the day where instead of rejecting him, you embrace him and truly believe, and join the spiritual house of faith with Jesus as our chosen and precious cornerstone.

Scripture quotations are taken from *The Holy Bible, English Standard Version* Copyright © 2001 by Crossway Bibles, a division of Good News Publishers.

© 2015 by Steve DeWitt. You are permitted and encouraged to reproduce and distribute this material in any format provided that: (1) you credit the author, (2) any modifications are clearly marked, (3) you do not charge a fee beyond the cost of reproduction, (4) you include Bethel's website address (www.bethelweb.org) on the copied resource.