

## Jesus the Stone

Psalms 118:22–23, “The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone. This is the LORD’s doing; it is marvelous in our eyes.”

**Question:** If Jesus was rejected by his own people why should I accept him?

**Key Verses:** Isa 7:14; Matt 21:33-46; Acts 4:11

This simple sentence created quite a splash. Jesus quoted it during his final debate in the Temple the very week of his execution (Matt 21:42; Mark 12:10; Luke 20:17). Likewise, Peter quoted it in his first debate with the Sanhedrin (Acts 4:11) and later embedded it in his letter (1 Peter 2:7) as a condemnation to the enemies of the church. Finally, the Apostle Paul referenced to the cornerstone as the foundation of the church built on the Apostles and the Prophets (Ephesians 2:20). That’s quite a superstructure build on this cornerstone passage.

### The Parable

Let’s begin with a look at Jesus’ use of this poem and work our way back towards the Psalms itself. It was Tuesday, the last week of Jesus’ life. As he entered the temple (Matt 21:23) the religious elite accosted him with a question. They challenged his authority to teach in the Temple and asked him to justify it. As any good Rabbi Jesus used a question to guide them to the answer. He phrased it like this, “I also will ask you one question, and if you tell me the answer, then I also will tell you by what authority I do these things. The baptism of John, from where did it come? From heaven or from man?” (Matthew 21:24–25). This question put them in an impossible position. Why? Because they were complicit in John’s execution. Furthermore, the people held John to be a martyred prophet. Therefore, the leaders could hardly deny John was authorized by God. Neither could they affirm John’s authority, since Jesus could then rightly claim to inherit John’s authority. After all, John baptized Jesus and directed his own disciples to give Jesus their allegiance.

After discussing it, the leaders determined to play the agnostic, refusing to give an answer. “We don’t know,” they replied (v. 27). So Jesus responded, “Neither will I tell you by what authority I do these things.” Yet he immediately told three stories that, in fact, clearly answered their question about his authority. Each story is brilliant in its own right but our verse of the day stands in the central story. It is an agricultural parable about a vineyard. Vineyards, in the Bible are often metaphors for the nation of Israel (see Isaiah 5:1-7). The basic plot is simple. A rich man invested in a vineyard that he leased to tenants to manage. When harvest came, however, they refused to pay the owner his due. In fact, they tortured and murdered the servants sent to collect the profits. After two unsuccessful (and MIA) delegations, the Master sent his own son. He was certain the tenants would show him the deference he deserved. On the contrary, the wicked tenants assassinated the Son. They assumed his execution would ensure their own inheritance of the vineyard. It’s the kind of narrative that boils your blood. At

the end of it, Jesus asks a follow-up question: “What will the Master do to the tenants when he comes himself to collect the debt.” They gave vent to their fury. They knew all too well how God would respond to mutiny. “He will put those wretches to a miserable death,” they replied. As the words parted their lips, they realized what Jesus was doing. He allowed them to convict themselves with their own words. They were furious.

This parable is one of the precious few that the audience correctly understood. On the one hand, the audience was more educated than most. On the other hand, the story isn’t even close to subtle. It’s not that hard to interpret. Clearly, the owner is God. The servants are the prophets of old. The assassinated son is Jesus himself. This aggressive story exposes the Sanhedrin’s plot to murder Jesus. Jesus allowed their own words to convict them. That’s the parable. Jesus concludes it with a quote that converts the story from fiction to biography. “The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone. This is the LORD’s doing; it is marvelous in our eyes” (Psalm 118:22-23). This single sentence, plucked from the prophetic Psalm, describes the plan of God. Jesus’ execution by the leaders of Israel would result in her salvation. The divine irony is thick.

### **The Psalm**

Psalm 118 was not foreign soil for the Scribes. They wrote about it in what they called the Targum. Basically a Targum is what we would call a paraphrase. Long before Jesus was born the Targum of Psalm 118:22 had a curious variation: “The *lad* that the builders abandoned was among the *sons of Jesse*; and he was worthy to be appointed king and ruler.” Why on earth would they change the word “stone” to “son”? What does a *rock* and a *lad* have in common? That is perplexing in English but pretty straight forward in the original language. These two words in Hebrew are almost identical. “Son” is *ben*; “stone” is *eben*. A simple breath at the beginning of the word turns the lad into a stone. In other words, the Targum has a play on words that helps interpret the verse. God’s foundation stone turns out to be a person not an inanimate object. Well, that makes sense. God’s kingdom is built on people not property. Furthermore, the person upon whom the nation would stand was to be King David’s descendant or as the Targum phrases it, “the son of Jesse.” None other than a descendant of David could rightly represent God’s rule on earth.

Therefore, long before Jesus, the Rabbis understood that the prophesied Messiah would be rejected in his day. God would, however, reverse the rejection and establish him as the most important foundational role in the nation. If you were a Chief Priest in Jesus’ audience, this parable would be a punch in the gut that left you breathless. Not only did Jesus expose their plot, he argued from Scripture that that very plot was proof he was, in fact, the promised Messiah. If they killed Jesus, they expected that would prove he was NOT the Messiah. Jesus’ counter-proposal was that such rejection would, in fact, *establish* him as Messiah. This would be maddening to the Sanhedrin. They just couldn’t win with this guy!

In his own words Jesus says, “Therefore I tell you, the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people producing its fruits. And the one who falls on this stone will be broken to pieces; and when it falls on anyone, it will crush him” (Matt 21:43-44). The brilliance of Jesus is tangible. He took the very attempt to discredit him and turned it into apologetic evidence in his favor. One could predict the response from the Sanhedrin, “When the chief priests and the Pharisees heard his parables, they perceived that he was speaking about them. And although they were seeking to arrest him, they feared the crowds, because they held him to be a prophet” (Matthew 21:45–46).

### **The Apostles and the Psalm**

Fast forward a month and a half. We land in Acts 4. Peter and John healed a lame man. He was a simple beggar at the Temple gates who became a major witness to the power of the resurrection. As a result, all three were arrested but for what? Disturbing the peace? Anyway, after stewing in jail overnight, these uneducated fishermen find themselves nose to nose with the religious elite in a heated debate. When asked to defend their actions, Peter’s sarcasm is priceless, “If we are being examined today concerning a good deed done to a crippled man, by what means this man has been healed, let it be known to all of you and to all the people of Israel that by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom you crucified, whom God raised from the dead—by him this man is standing before you well,” (Acts 4:9–10).

Peter then follows closely in Jesus’ footsteps by citing Psalm 118:22, “This Jesus is the stone that was rejected by you, the builders, which has become the cornerstone” (Acts 4:11). If you were Peter, out-gunned and out-numbered, wouldn’t you mimic Jesus by quoting the very passage he used to silence his opponents? It worked! Point, set, match! Although this is hardly a model of how to *Win Friends and Influence People*. Insulting the Judge when you are on trial may not be your best play. Nonetheless, the Peter’s point is valid. Jesus’ rejection is not a valid reason for rejecting him. The prophetic Psalm points out that God saw this coming all along. The question is not whether Jesus died but whether he rose again. The lame man walking shows the power of Jesus to raise us from our own tombs and trials.

This leads explains Paul’s use of the Psalm. In his letter to the Ephesians, he argues for the unity of all ethnic groups based on the power of Jesus’ death and resurrection. “For through him we both have access in one Spirit to the Father. So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, *Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone,*” (Ephesians 2:18–20). Jesus’ denigration led to his exaltation. When he was laid low it was to establish him as a foundation. This is a global biblical principle: Humiliation precedes exaltation. Whenever someone humbles themselves, God lifts them up.

This spiritual law spans the breadth Scripture and bookends the life of Jesus. Just as his life ended with humiliation as a precursor to exhalation, so did his birth. He was born in a humble town to peasant parents and laid in a feeding trough. Yet his inception was through the

Holy Spirit in a virgin birth. In other words, the humblest birth was predicated on the most divine procreation. Isaiah predicted as much, “Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign. Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel,” (Isaiah 7:14). Look carefully, this special sign is named *Immanuel*, meaning “God with us.” The God of the universe robed himself in human flesh. His divinity shrouded by humanity.

Some will point out that the virgin in Isaiah was actually a maiden who procreated through the normal human process as a sign in Isaiah’s day. That is true; the Hebrew word *virgin* means “unseen” but no necessarily “untouched”. However, this prophecy had a double fulfillment—one during Isaiah’s day and one during Jesus’ birth. The second, and more important fulfillment, brought the Messiah into the world. It’s New Testament translation (Matt 1:23; Luke 1:31) *Parthenos* clearly means virgin, not merely a maiden. Despite claims to the contrary, this was a unique concept in religious history up to that point. It was a startling claim unparalleled in Greco-Roman history. Although it was not a necessary claim (certainly both Mark and John successfully completed their gospels without it), it was a compelling claim made by an eye-witness who walked the same streets as Jesus (Matthew) and a physician (Luke) who knew well the natural processes of procreation. Their testimony is compelling evidence for the divine nature of Jesus even amidst the humblest circumstances of his birth.

The point is this: God chose to appear as a baby. His humiliation preceded exaltation. The virgin birth was a reminder of the principle that this was no ordinary child and no ordinary promise. Jesus, the Son of Mary was actually the Son of God. He paved the way for us to walk. It is a way of humiliation that ultimately leads to foundational exaltation. Just when they thought they had rid themselves of Jesus, come to find out, the suffering they caused was essential to establishing him as king of kings. So too with you. As a follower of Christ, our path to exaltation is through the same rugged road of trials and tears. It is paved with humiliation ordained by God and essential to our exaltation and establishment as key stones in the temple of God.

**Key Points:**

- Jesus’ parable of the vineyard is actually Israel’s history and his establishment as king.
- The Rabbis before Jesus interpreted this stone as the offspring of King David.
- The principle of humiliation as a precursor to exaltation spans all of Scripture and applies to all of us.

**Action Step:** Practice one act of deliberate humiliation—make the bed, take out the trash, clean up the break room at work. See if those affected treat you with less or more honor.

**Further Resources:** The brief paragraph above about the virgin birth is part of a large and important discussion. The best book ever written on the topic is by J. Gresham Machen, *Virgin Birth* (1930).