

Rejected Stone, Included Stones

Psalm 118, Ephesians 2 – May 8b

The Cornerstone. The gift of God is a person, Jesus of Nazareth, Lord of heaven and earth, with scars in his hands and his feet. The treasure in the field, which that fortunate wanderer found, is a person, Jesus of Nazareth, Lord of heaven and earth, with scars in his hands and his feet. The pearl of great price is that person.

Ultimately, the gift of God is not forgiveness or the Spirit or eternal life or the kingdom. It is that person. We worship him, we trust him, we serve him, and all the rest flows from our being one of his people. When the Scriptures call him the cornerstone, that's what they mean.

I read over the two Scriptures chosen as our theme, from Psalm 118 and Ephesians 2, to get a feel for how cornerstone was used. By "read them over" I mean quite a few times. I became intrigued with these two Scriptures, so we'll just talk about them. That's all I know how to do.

Cornerstones

The ancient world often made their important buildings with large stones. Imagine a stone the shape of a brick, but as big as one of those old fashioned low wide freezers, a big old chest freezer. They were solid stone, and could be cut very accurately: straight edges, 90 degree corners, flat sides, everything true and square.

We don't know exactly how they cut these stones, or how they moved them, because that's a very heavy stone, but they did cut them and move them to where they were building. The cornerstone was the first stone of the foundation to be placed. It was placed very carefully, and once it was placed, it became the reference point for the rest of the foundation. The rest of the foundation lined up with the cornerstone, everything was measured from the cornerstone and stayed level and square with the cornerstone.

The Stone that the Builders Rejected – Psalm 118:21-24

I will give you thanks, for you answered me;

You have become my salvation.

The stone the builders rejected

has become the cornerstone;

The Lord has done this,

And it is marvelous in our eyes.

The Lord has done it this very day;

Let us rejoice today and be glad.

Psalm 118 describes a joyful victory procession to God's sanctuary to praise God and thank him for his help. It seems that Israel's army won an important victory on that day. The army's leader is the main speaker in this psalm.

The leader tells how he cried out to the Lord when he was hard pressed, and the Lord answered him. "The Lord is with me," he says, "The Lord is my helper... I was pushed back and about to fall, but the Lord helped me, the Lord is my strength and my defense."

Verse 21 is the last line of the leader's praise, and it summarizes all he has said: *I will give you thanks, for you answered me; you have become my salvation.*

And then the crowd speaks. The victorious soldiers and the people of the city are all going along with the leader to God's sanctuary, and now this crowd speaks:

Verses 22-24 *The stone the builders rejected has become the cornerstone; the Lord has done this, and it is marvelous in our eyes. The Lord has done it this very day; let us rejoice today and let us be glad.*

Now something new comes into the victory story. *The stone the builders rejected has become the cornerstone.* The celebrating crowds are amazed at what's happened to this leader. Their leader was the stone the builders rejected. The builders here are the power people in Israel, the people who make the important decisions in the back rooms. The builders decide who the leader will be.

The builders, the power people, did not want this leader. They rejected him, the way builders would reject a stone that was cracked or not cut straight. They pushed this stone off to the side. But the battle that this leader won on that day has completely changed the situation. It became clear that this leader was *not* a rejected stone, he was the *cornerstone*. *He* has become the reference point for the rest of the foundation, and too bad about the builders.

The crowds that praise God on the way to the sanctuary are astonished at the turn of events for that leader on that day. How did this happen? How did this leader go from being the stone the builders rejected to being the cornerstone? *"The Lord has done this, and it is marvelous in our eyes. The Lord had done it this very day!"* So the leader praises God for God's help on that day. But the crowds praise God for making this leader the cornerstone.

When our Lord was in Jerusalem, just a few days before he was crucified, he told a parable to the Jewish leaders: the chief priests, the law teachers, and the elders. These were the builders of Israel. At the end of the parable, Jesus quoted these very lines to the builders of Israel: *"the stone the builders rejected has become the cornerstone; the Lord has done this, and it is marvelous in our eyes."*

The builders got it, they understood, and they did not like it. Jesus was actually giving them another chance. He was saying to the leaders, the builders, “can you see where this is going, if you reject me? Think again about you’re doing.” But they did not change their minds.

Keep this in mind, my brothers and sisters: the builders rejected our cornerstone, and they have not changed their minds. Make peace with that. There are still builders, and they still reject our cornerstone. Our cornerstone tells us to do everything we can possibly do to be a peace with the builders, but don’t expect them to be other than they are. We follow the rejected stone, and that flavours our life on this earth. The rejected stone tells us to pursue peace with everyone. He says, “as much as lies within you, be at peace with everyone.”

The pastor who wrote Hebrews understood this. He says this to his people. “*Jesus suffered outside the city gate. Let us then, go to him outside the camp, bearing the disgrace he bore. For here we do not have an enduring city, but we look for the city that is to come.*” Let’s bear the disgrace he bore. Let’s do that. That’s our Lord, the rejected stone, the cornerstone. Let’s not fight the disgrace he bore, because a better place waits for us.

Now we will go to Ephesians 2, and talk about the included stones. The church in Ephesus had both Jewish believers and Gentile believers, as did many first century churches. And that difference often caused problems.

In Ephesus, the Gentiles felt inferior, they were somehow second-rate citizens among the people of God. They did not think they were the real people of God the way Jewish believers were. In some cases Jewish believers might have agreed with that. In this letter, though, Paul speaks mostly to Gentile believers, to explain that they are included in every way, and how they got included. That’s the message of Ephesians 1-3.

Detour: Who has the Holy Spirit? – 1 Corinthians 12:3

Our Ephesians text mentions the Spirit twice, so we should answer this: who has the Holy Spirit? When the Gentiles trusted in Christ and were baptized, God gave them the Holy Spirit. To the apostles and early Jewish leaders, this was huge. God would never give the Holy Spirit to someone that was not one of his people.

If God gave believing Gentiles the Holy Spirit, then Gentile believers were as much a part of God’s special people as anyone could ever be. And all the Gentiles did to receive the Spirit was trust in Christ.

Those of us who don’t have the more obvious gifts of the Holy Spirit can get anxious about this. Do I really have the Holy Spirit? How do I know that? Paul wrote 1 Corinthians to a church that had dramatic evidence of the Spirit, but also had some wrong ideas about the Spirit.

So at the beginning of his teaching on the Spirit, Paul gives a real simple way of telling when a person has the Holy Spirit. He does this to clear away a lot of nonsense. “*No one can say ‘Jesus is Lord’ except by the Holy Spirit.*” That’s a critical line.

“Jesus is Lord” was the central doctrinal statement of the early church, and the central confession of faith. It is perhaps the central message of the New Testament. When a person said, “Jesus is Lord,” they were ready for baptism. “Jesus is Lord” means “Jesus is Lord of heaven and earth, and he has full rights to my life.” When you and I have said that, we have said a lot: “Jesus is Lord of heaven and earth, and he has full rights to my life.”

None of us can say that honestly unless the Holy Spirit has done a great work in us, unless the Spirit opened our spiritual eyes and renewed our minds. So we are going to do this right now, all of us together will confess our faith. Say it with me: “Jesus is Lord of heaven and earth, and he has full rights to my life.” 2x That may be the most important thing that ever from of our mouths.

That is the one unmistakable evidence of the Holy Spirit. Paul wanted to clear that up at the start in a church with Holy Spirit confusion. Bringing that out of us is also the most important work that the Spirit will ever do in you and me. Everything else is fine tuning. If we can say that, God has opened our eyes and renewed our minds.

Be transformed by the renewing of your minds. Romans 12. “Your mind is renewed,” Paul means, “now let that new mind transform your life.” We sometimes take Paul to mean that we need to renew our minds in order to be transformed. He does not mean that at all. Romans 8 makes clear that everyone with faith and the Spirit has the new mind.

The problem is *not* that our minds aren’t renewed. If we can say, “Jesus is Lord,” our minds are renewed. The problem is that our *lives* are not yet transformed by our renewed *minds*. So he says, “let your new mind transform your lives. If we can say Jesus is Lord, the Holy Spirit has opened our eyes and renewed our minds. Detour is over.

Included Stones - Ephesians 2:18 – 22

Through him we both have ACCESS to the Father by one Spirit. You are no longer foreigners and strangers, but fellow CITIZENS with God’s people. You are also members of his HOUSEHOLD, LIVING STONES built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone. In him the whole building is joined together and rises to become a holy temple in the Lord. And in him you too are being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit.

There are four inclusions in this text: Included in Access to the Father,
Included in the Nation as Citizens,
Included in the Household as Family, and
Included in God’s Temple as Living Stones.

To keep this all to a reasonable length, let's focus on the second and fourth of these, included in the nation as citizens, and included in God's temple as living stones. These are the two that our Scripture develops the most, so we will stay with those two.

Included in the Nation as Citizens

Consequently, you are no longer foreigners and strangers, but fellow citizens with God's people

We are not well informed about how strongly the NT joins us Gentiles to national Israel. Earlier in Ephesians 2 Paul said, "you Gentiles remember when you were *excluded* from *citizenship* in Israel and *foreigners* to the *covenants* of promise, you remember when you were without hope and without God in the world." *Excluded* from *citizenship*, and *foreigners*.

But now, through Christ, we are no longer foreigners and strangers, but fellow citizens with God's people. Peter, in a similar paragraph, tells all Christians that on this earth, we are foreigners and exiles. Why are we foreigners and exiles in this world? Because we follow the stone that the builders rejected.

But, says Peter, before God we are *the chosen race, the royal priesthood, the holy nation, God's treasured possession*. Peter uses the OT words that God used of Israel. The gospel does not disband Israel, it rather reconstitutes Israel around the Cornerstone, our Lord the Christ.

These Ephesian Gentiles feel like second rate believers because they are not Jews, not Israelites. Paul's words to the Ephesian Gentile believers bring them into this holy nation, this chosen race, as do Peter's words.

I like being Canadian. My favorite day being Canadian was the last day of the 1972 Canada Russia hockey series. Does anyone here remember? All the good Canadian hockey players were professionals in the NHL, so they could not compete in the Olympics, which are for amateurs. Our best could not compete against Russia's best.

So in 1972 someone organized an 8 game hockey tournament between Russia's best players and Canada's best players, professional or not, 4 games in Canada then 4 in Russia.

The Soviets were a lot better than anyone here expected. After 5 games, 4 in Canada and 1 in Russia, Canada had beaten the Russians only once, lost 3, and tied 1. To win the series, Canada needed to win the last 3 games, all in Russia.

Canada won the 6th and 7th games. In the 8th game, Canada was down 5-3 after two periods. During the 3rd period Canada scored twice to tie it up 5-5. There was no overtime or shoot out, a win had to happen in regulation time.

With about 30 seconds left in the 3rd period of the 8th game, there was a scramble around the Soviet goal, and Paul Henderson scored the Canada's winning goal. Canada had won the game and the series.

It was the middle of the day, but many Canadians were tuned to that game. I was listening on the radio, driving in our car on a trip with my mom and brother. I know which car and where we were driving. We shouted and hollered. A great time to be Canadian!

A few years earlier, the first astronauts walked on the moon, and that also was televised live in the middle of the day. More Canadians watched the last game of the Canada Russia series than watched the first man walk on the moon.

I think Canada is the best country in the world, and I thank God that I live in Canada. But in the Bible, God tells me to be careful. God says, "you follow my Son, Ed, you are now a foreigner and an exile in Canada, you have joined the disgraced people, because you follow the rejected stone. You're a part of *my* chosen nation, you're a part of *my* holy race, and the only citizenship you have that counts is your citizenship with me."

I have a friend whose Christian belief will not allow him to sing any national anthem. He's Canadian, and grateful for it, but he will not sing "O Canada" because he takes his God citizenship so seriously. At first I thought he was taking it too far. But that was 25 years ago, and since then, just from reading Scriptures like this in the New Testament, I think he's got a point.

We spiritualize these things until they have no meaning, and that's unfortunate. For the Gentile Ephesian believers, this was no use if it was not real.

Peter tells us that in this world we are all strangers and aliens, because we follow the stone that the builders rejected. Hebrews says, let's go outside the camp with him, to bear the disgrace he bore. The good news is that we're included in the chosen race, the holy nation, the royal priesthood, the people that are God's treasured possession. We have the ultimate citizenship.

You are no longer foreigners and strangers, but fellow citizens with God's holy nation.

Included in God's Temple as Living Stones

The house is built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone. In him, the whole building is joined together and rises to become a holy temple in the Lord. And in him you too are being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit.

There are five temples in the Bible. First was the tabernacle, the portable temple Moses built in the wilderness. Most don't include the tabernacle as a temple, but I do. Second was the splendid temple Solomon built, which the Babylonians destroyed 350 years later.

Jewish exiles in Babylon returned to Judah in the time of Ezra, and built the third temple, much smaller than Solomon's. The fourth temple was another wonderful temple, built by the King Herod of Matthew 1.

The fifth and final temple is the human temple, the temple that the Spirit built and is still building with living stones, living human stones. The final and enduring temple is the congregation. Ephesians *implies* that we are living stones, but in a similar paragraph Peter is *explicit*: we are living stones being built into a spiritual house.

God likes temples. They are his home. For God, home is a group of people that say Jesus is Lord of heaven and earth. In one place Paul tells us that our body is the temple of the Holy Spirit. We like that, but it's unusual in the New Testament. Normally in the New Testament, the group is the temple, the congregation is the temple of God.

Let us never gather on the Lord's Day or any day, gathering in the Lord's name, and then ask God or the Spirit to show up. Let us never gather and then ask God to come to us. It is biblically impossible that God by his Spirit is not already there. We are his home. Where else would he be?

No Israelite ever went to the Jerusalem temple and asked God to come now to the temple. Of course God was there. They went to the temple because they knew he was there. And he was! It's good to tell each other that we are gathered in front of the Throne of thrones. It is good to thank God that he's brought us together in front of him.

The question is not whether or not *God* will show up. The question is: will *we* show up? Will *we* gather and say, "Jesus, you are Lord of heaven and earth, you're our Champion, you're the ruler of the kings of the earth, and you have full rights to my life"? That's *us* showing up.

To God, by his Spirit we are home. And if we read Jeremiah and Ezekiel, we learn that God stayed at the Jerusalem temple even while some of the worshippers were worshipping idols on the same day, and there was even idolatry in other parts of God's temple. He did not leave. When the Lord had had enough, he brought the Babylonians to destroy the temple. He did not leave until then. Jesus said that the gates of hell would not overcome this temple!

As long as there are those gathering who confess Jesus as Lord, God by his Spirit is with us. Don't ask him for it, thank him for it.

What does God want from heaven? When God thinks about heaven, for what does he long? We sometimes talk about what *we* think heaven will be like, or what *we* hope it will be like. What does *God* long for? God wants home. He wants his home back. He lost his home a long time ago, and he's been working a long time to get it back.

Putting Adam and Eve out of the Garden was even more painful for God that it was for them.

For God, home is being in the middle of all the living stones. All those people who say Jesus is Lord, together in one place, with him in the middle. That means every congregation now is eschatological. Congregational life is the future dragged back into the present. Congregations live out ahead of time what we will do after the Lord returns.

Congregations live out the future in the present. Our mission is to live out now, with each other, with the Lord present among us, what life will be there when we're all together. That's why we're already included in the last temple, the real temple, where Christ Jesus himself, the rejected stone, is the chief cornerstone. Amen.

PRAYER: O God, we are included in the best things of all. You sent your Son to save us, and you sent your Spirit to open our eyes and renew our minds. We have open access you, we are citizens in your holy nation, your chosen race. We've been adopted into your family, and you've made us your favorite temple, your eternal temple. All glory and praise and thanks to you. Amen.

BENEDICTION: May the God of peace, who brought back from the dead our Lord Jesus, that great Shepherd of the sheep, equip us with everything good for doing his will, and may he work in us what is pleasing to him, through Jesus Christ, to whom be glory for ever and ever. Amen. Go in God's peace to love and serve the Lord.