

The Stone from the Reject Pile

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Exodus 20:1-4, 7-9, 12-20, Psalm 118:19-29, Philippians 3:4b-14, Matthew 21:33-46

The stones had been cut and shaped at the quarry. They were then loaded onto carts that had been specially built to carry the extraordinary weight and hauled by teams of oxen to the building site. As they arrived, they were unloaded by teams of burly slaves and left in piles.

It was the job of some of the labourers to look through the stones and sort them by size and shape, as certain stones would be needed for various parts of the structure.

Reject Pile

But there was one stone that they didn't know what to do with. It had no faults or cracks, but it was neither perfectly square nor rectangular. It had an odd trapezoidal shape, and it didn't seem like it would fit in anywhere.

They didn't have a lot of time to consider. There were so many stones to sort and so little time to get the work done. So, they simply put the stone on the reject pile and moved on. And there the stone sat as the work on the great temple got underway.

The cornerstone was laid, and the expert builders went to work laying out the stones in perfect lines. They built without mortar because mortar does not last forever. Only the force of gravity would hold this structure together. The seams between stones would have to be just right. The distribution of weight would have to be perfect, for this was a building that was meant to stand until the end of time.

The Life Paul Had Built

As Paul of Tarsus, also known as Saul, looked at the life he had built, he felt as if he had built it right. He had started with the right foundation, his identity as an Israelite. This had been marked into his very flesh by circumcision on the eighth day of his life. He knew where he had come from, tracing his family to the tribe of Benjamin. He was a Hebrew through and through.

But he knew it wasn't enough for him to rely on his ethnic identity. He had embraced the covenant that God had made with his people entirely by vowing to live his whole life according to the law. That led him to become a Pharisee, part of the religious party that carefully studied the law of Moses and showed people that it was possible to follow it in very practical ways.

The Followers of Jesus

In fact, he committed himself so completely to following the Law that, when he heard of a group of people who had a different understanding of how to follow it, he devoted himself to eradicating their way of life from the earth.

They were followers of a teacher from Galilee named Jesus, a man who had been crucified by the Romans. They were obviously deluded fools because they claimed to have seen the man alive even after his death. But Paul knew that this man had taught things that did not fit with what he understood about the Law, so there couldn't be any truth in that.



The Stone from the Reject Pile

Jesus was unusual, a misfit, and so Paul did his best to make sure that the man and his ways were expelled, forgotten, and thrown on the reject pile of history. He became a zealous persecutor of all those who dared to follow in the way of Jesus.

Something Missing?

As Paul looked at his life, he saw that he had built it well with strong lines and firm foundations. Every part of his life was perfectly proportioned. The seams between his convictions and his actions were just right. And the distribution of priorities was perfect. When he held the law up against the life that he was living, he could look at it and declare that it was perfectly righteous.

And yet, deep inside, he felt as if something was missing. He could not say this to anyone, but he seemed to lack one thing that could tie the various parts of his life together and give it all meaning.

The Arch

The temple walls rose steadily. As the labourers laid each stone, the master masons came around with a simple plumb line, a lead weight on the end of a string, to check that each line was perfectly righteous.

But as the walls rose, they came to the place where they would have to join two sections across from each other to form a gate. The temple was not being built for the sake of God; it was for the people. They needed to be able to come and go – to step out of their ordinary lives and into the nearer presence of God.

And so, once the walls had risen above the head of the tallest man, they began to lay stones leaning outward across the void. These stones, because they were not laid flat, were not stable like the others. They had to build wooden scaffolding across the gate to support them, for otherwise they would all come crashing down. And the further out they built, the more unstable the entire structure became. Gravity, that force that was supposed to make the building firm, had now become their enemy!

A Building Crisis

There finally came the point when all the stones that could be laid without crushing the scaffolding were in place. The manual labourers were at a loss. The whole structure now seemed to be so unstable that they were afraid to even come near.

They called out to the master masons in their fear, and they came over. As soon as they saw the problem, they knew exactly what to do. They described to the labourers a stone that should have come from the quarry. It would have had an odd shape, not square but more of a trapezoid.

Finding the Rejected Stone

As they described it, one of the labourers remembered the stone they had not known what to do with and had left on the reject pile. They quickly went to the pile and, after a fair bit of searching (for a great deal of refuse had been cast there in the meantime) they found it and brought it back.

The master masons told them exactly where they had to place it on the very centre of the arch. As they put it in place, all the instability disappeared in a moment. The force of gravity that had threatened to destroy all their work a moment before now pulled all of the stones together so tightly that it was clear that this arch would stand forever. And it was all thanks to that one odd stone from the reject pile.

Building Over the Void

Paul felt as if there was some force in his life that, like gravity, was dragging him downwards. It didn't make any sense; he felt as if he had built his life around all of the right priorities.

The problem was that he felt increasingly uncomfortable with persecuting the followers of the way. Yes, he still thought that they were living out the Law wrongly, but there was no question they were good people who were living lives of compassion and care. He didn't want to admit it, but he increasingly felt that they didn't deserve to be so abused.

Doubling Down

But, as people often do, he attempted to drown out the objections of his conscience by becoming even more extreme in his abuse. He **“went to the high priest and asked him for letters to the synagogues at Damascus, so that if he found any who belonged to the Way, men or women, he might bring them bound to Jerusalem.”** (Acts 9:1-2)

As he headed down the road to Damascus, he kept telling himself that he was only doing what needed to be done. But he couldn't shake the feeling that the structure of his life was off balance and that, at any moment, everything might come crashing down all around him.

Finding Jesus

When the risen Jesus, the very person whose memory he had been trying to eradicate, appeared to Paul, he told himself that he must reject him. How many times had he said that this man was the origin of everything that was wrong with the world? But somehow, he couldn't do it. He fell to his knees in wonder and in awe.

And suddenly, at that very moment, everything just kind of clicked into place. When he had rejected this Jesus, it had felt as if everything in his life was about to fall apart. But now he realized that, if he allowed Jesus to have a place in his life, everything could make sense.

But not only did it bring meaning to his life, but it also opened up new possibilities – new doorways and entrance arches, you might say. For if Jesus could appear to the man who persecuted his followers, what else was possible? Maybe, Paul thought, a way could be opened for even Gentiles to be justified outside the Law.

The Story of the Stone

The master masons who planned the temple had always known that an oddly shaped capstone would be needed to hold the whole building together. But they didn't explain those kinds of things to the common labourers who were supposed to just do what they were told without needing to understand it.

So, when the labourers expressed their surprise at how a stone that they had thrown in the reject pile had come to be placed in such an exalted position, the masons did not contradict them. The story of the rejected stone became a tale that was repeated to every worshipper who came to the temple.

Soon it came to be considered an essential part of the tour. Visitors who came to Jerusalem insisted that they could not leave without having someone point out to them the stone that the builders rejected.

Processional Psalm

In fact, it became so famous that, when one of the Levite musicians wrote a processional Psalm to mark a special festival, he included this verse to be sung as the procession passed under the arch:

“Open to me the gates of the Temple; I will go in and give thanks to the LORD!

This is the gate of the LORD; only the righteous can come in.

I praise you, LORD, because you heard me, because you have given me victory.

The stone which the builders rejected as worthless turned out to be the most important of all.

This was done by the LORD; what a wonderful sight it is!”

And once a reference to the stone had made it into the scriptures, well, talk about it increased all the more. Before long, the stone that the builders had rejected became a symbol for the Messiah, the one whom God would choose, even if he was rejected by others, to bring hope and salvation to the whole nation – to bind them together as the capstone bound the arch on the temple together.

The Most Important Stone

And so, Paul of Tarsus realized that the stone that he had rejected because it didn’t fit with his preconceptions of the world or of God, the stone that he had cast on the garbage pile because he thought it was useless to the life that he had built, was actually the stone that he needed the most. And the more he allowed that stone to bind his life together and give meaning to it, the more he found that the other parts of his life that had seemed so important began to fade away, to seem like garbage by comparison.

Jesus and the Stone

One day, near the end, when he was in Jerusalem, Jesus gestured towards the stone in the temple arch, and he said, **“Haven’t you ever read what the Scriptures say? ‘The stone which the builders rejected as worthless turned out to be the most important of all. This was done by the Lord; what a wonderful sight it is!’”**

He said it as a challenge to you and to me to move Jesus from the reject pile – that place where you put all the things that don’t matter, that don’t really influence or change you – to put him in that position where he has the power to pull your life together and begin to transform the world. Paul put Jesus in that position in his life, and it really did change the world. I expect no less from you when you do the same.