

Matthew 21:33-46 [NIV]

Jesus said, "Listen to another parable: There was a landowner who planted a vineyard. He put a wall around it, dug a winepress in it and built a watchtower. Then he rented the vineyard to some farmers and moved to another place. ³⁴ When the harvest time approached, he sent his servants to the tenants to collect his fruit. ³⁵ "The tenants seized his servants; they beat one, killed another, and stoned a third. ³⁶ Then he sent other servants to them, more than the first time, and the tenants treated them the same way. ³⁷ Last of all, he sent his son to them. "They will respect my son," he said.

³⁸ "But when the tenants saw the son, they said to each other, "This is the heir. Come, let's kill him and take his inheritance.' ³⁹ So they took him and threw him out of the vineyard and killed him. ⁴⁰ "Therefore, when the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those tenants?"

⁴¹ "He will bring those wretches to a wretched end," they replied, "and he will rent the vineyard to other tenants, who will give him his share of the crop at harvest time."

⁴² Jesus said to them, "Have you never read in the Scriptures: "The stone the builders rejected has become the cornerstone; the Lord has done this, and it is marvelous in our eyes'? ⁴³ Therefore I tell you that the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people who will produce its fruit. ⁴⁴ Anyone who falls on this stone will be broken to pieces; anyone on whom it falls will be crushed."

⁴⁵ When the chief priests and the Pharisees heard Jesus' parables, they knew he was talking about them. ⁴⁶ They looked for a way to arrest him, but they were afraid of the crowd because the people held that he was a prophet.

Well, did everyone get what they wanted for Christmas?

Anytime anyone asked my grandpa what he wanted for Christmas or his birthday or whatever, his answer was always, "peace and quiet." I'm pretty sure he never got it, at least with us grandchildren around.

I wonder, have you ever received a gift that surprised you by turning out to be more significant or meaningful than you expected it to be at first?

That's happened to me a few times. One was probably fifteen years ago now. Don and Patti Butterworth gave me, I think it was for pastor appreciation, a subscription to *Hemmings Classic Car* magazine. I didn't even know it existed, but I loved it so much I've kept it going, and it's been a source of fun and, at times, escape through the years.

That's just one simple example of a gift that's turned out to be far more than I expected.

Jesus' arrival as a *baby in the manger* is, of course, the dominant image of Christmas – to the point that, for those who've celebrated more than a few Christian Christmases, the *baby-in-a-manger* image can become ordinary, and even commonplace.

[Display small nativity scene.]

But you know – Jesus is one of those gifts that turns out to be far more significant than He may first appear to be. He is much, much more than what He seems to be in our Christmas nativity scenes, which is what I've tried to highlight this year – to help us think about who else it is, other than a manger-bound baby, that comes at Christmas.

We've mentioned that the coming of Jesus is the coming to earth of the *Light of the World* – the One who is able to show us the very best way to go, to think, and to live.

In Jesus' birth we also have the earthly arrival of the *Bread of Life* – One who can satisfy our deepest, inner hungers in ways that no other person or thing ever can.

Christmas is also the earthly birth of the *Lamb of God* – the only One perfectly able to take away our sins and save us from eternal death.

On Christmas Eve, we talked about Jesus being the greatest of all of God's gifts – the Gift of Gifts, because Jesus restores our access to God Himself and to all of God's *other* tremendous gifts to us, both past and future.

So, you see, the deeper you go with Jesus, the more you realize the traditional nativity scene is just the beginning. The deeper you go with Jesus, the more you see that far, far more than a baby-in-a-manger came to us at Christmas.

And yet there's even more.

The coming of Jesus also means, according to Scripture, the coming to earth of – a Rock.

Now, by that I don't mean some sort of apocalyptic asteroid or meteor or anything like that, although the impact of Jesus did certainly shake the world.

And it is true that, wherever He lands, He tends to leave a crater – He tends to make His mark.

But that's not really the image that Scripture gives us of Jesus, the Rock.

Actually, the Bible uses "rock" to describe Jesus in several places, in several ways, for several purposes.

But there is one that stands out among them.

In all three synoptic gospels – in Matthew, Mark and Luke – Jesus refers to Himself as the One that Psalm 118 predicted, and the One the prophet Isaiah referred to, which is a Stone that, even though rejected by the builders, has become the cornerstone – the most important part of God's work of redemption.¹

¹Mt 21:42; Ps 118:22; Is 28:16

And this whole idea of Jesus, the Rock, must have been very popular in the first century, because the apostle Peter echoes this theme in I Peter, and so does the apostle Paul in Acts, Chapter 4.²

So, what does it mean to say that a Rock arrived on Christmas?

Well, Jesus calls Himself this (as a fulfillment of prophecy) in the middle of one of His parables. In Matthew 22, verse 45, He makes it clear that the point of this story – this parable He’s telling, was to call out the Jewish religious leaders for being unfaithful caretakers of the responsibilities entrusted to them.

How were they unfaithful? Because they had been charged to take care of a vineyard – a people – that did not belong to them, but they refused to give the owner His due. They rejected messenger after messenger, which Jesus equates to the prophets of old, and then they finally rejected and murdered even the Owner’s son.

After describing the situation in those “hypothetical” terms, Jesus asks the Jewish leaders who were there listening, “If you were the owner of this vineyard, what would you do?”

And they answered Him sensibly and correctly and actually self-condemningly, “We’d sack those tenants and get new ones.”

They still didn’t understand that they were the ones He was talking about – they were the ones being judged.

And they certainly didn’t grasp who it was who was levelling the judgment.

That’s why Jesus then asked them, “Don’t you guys read the Scriptures?” which immediately captured their attention and incited their rage.

Jesus was saying, “Don’t you guys get it? Don’t you know what the Psalmist says? Don’t you see that I’m the Rock you’ve rejected, which means I’m the one who sits in judgement over you and your leadership? You’ve rejected me, but God says my role and authority far exceed yours.”

Well, after this, they realized what was happening, and from then on, as verse 46 says, they looked for a way to arrest Jesus, which, of course, they eventually succeed in doing. And, you know how it turns out.

But – what’s so important about this image of Jesus as Rock or Stone?

One interesting thing is that there is some ambiguity as to the precise architectural location of the rock that Jesus is calling Himself, relative to a building.

The word in verse 42 there that the NIV translates “cornerstone,” means, literally, “the head of the corner,” which means that, in English, it could translate, *cornerstone*, as in the rock that holds the foundation – the bottom – of a building together.

Or, it could translate, *capstone*, which is the stone that holds the top of a building together – where two walls join.

Or, it could translate, *keystone*, which is the center stone that keeps an arch from collapsing upon itself.

But the thing is, no matter which way you translate it (it could be that Jesus used that word specifically so the image would be all-encompassing), Jesus is saying that, according to God, although the builders of the day rejected Him for being inadequate (you might say, “not up to code”), they were irresponsible in doing so, because in reality, Jesus is the one, absolute, key element to any lasting spiritual structure.

Jesus is the *Rock* that *must* be included for any spiritual structure to endure.

And it doesn’t matter the structure, whether it’s an individual life, a marriage, a family, a church, a movement, a cause, a government, a nation.

Any of these that depend upon some key element – any that depend on some adhesive – *other than Jesus* to hold them together will, sooner or later, collapse.

Apart from Jesus being included, *most* structures will fail within a season, and *none* will endure for eternity.

And “being included” doesn’t just mean including Him for ornamentation.

There are some people who nose around the church on Christmas and Easter – and quite frankly there are some who come every Sunday without fail – but not because they want Jesus deeply involved in their lives. They come because they want to be sure to give God His moment, which they imagine allows them to keep the bulk of their moments for themselves.

They may sing that Jesus is their King, but in reality, they treat Him more like their slave than their king. Some people do that.

People like that may imagine otherwise, but the reality is that Jesus is neither the *keystone*, the *cornerstone*, nor *capstone* of their lives. He’s really more like a picture on the wall in a house they’ve built upon their own will. That’s what Jesus is to people like that.

You see this from time to time with engaged couples who stop in. They say they want a “Christian” wedding; they want a Christian ceremony, and yet they have chosen and lived against Christ’s will all through their relationship.

Other people want their child baptized or dedicated, but they haven’t in the least consulted God for their lives, their relationships, and their lifestyles, let alone their parenting. Not a minute is given wondering what God might think.

You see, people like this – they don’t really want Jesus as the *cornerstone*, *capstone* or *keystone* of their marriage or family. They want Him only as a part of the landscaping in front of a house that they fully intend to build by their *own* design.

Some people prayed a prayer when they were five years old in Sunday school, admitting they believe in Jesus. Then they move on and live their lives however they choose – ignoring any input from God or God’s Word. And yet they somehow believe that when they need Him, either at death or before, Jesus will be there – because all those years ago they made Him, they would say, the “foundation” of their life.

And yet the reality is, Jesus has never been a *keystone*, *cornerstone* or *capstone* of their lives. He has been nothing

² 1 Peter 2:7; Acts 4:11

more than a tiny stone sculpture sitting on a shelf that they walk by every day, but no longer even notice. They don't even remember He's there – or that He was, at one time, important to them.

But you see, Jesus did not come to earth to be an ornamental pebble in the flowerbeds of our lives. He did not come to earth to be a piece of gravel in our driveways to be walked or driven upon.

We may think that's the case if we think of Jesus as only some poor baby in a manger.

But you see, that innocent, helpless, manger-bound child grew up to be a rock that, He Himself says, will either break people or crush them, and there is no room in between.

Jesus says Himself there in verse 44, those who welcome Him as the *capstone*, *keystone* or *cornerstone* of their lives give themselves to be broken by Him. They let Him shape them. They let Him dictate the way that their life, their marriage, their church, their family, their community is built. They give Him the authority and control that He demands to have in the design and construction process.

And in so doing, if we give Him that, Jesus will break, never our spirit, but certainly our will. He breaks our insistence upon getting our way and doing as we choose, so that He is able to give us *His* way and do with us as *He* chooses, you see?

Those who will give Him His rightful place He *will break*, for their *good*.

But those who refuse to allow Him His place as *capstone*, *cornerstone*, *keystone*, the day will come when He will crush them. Literally, the Greek says, "grind them to powder."

There's a vivid image, right?

It's not that He does so happily or willingly. On the contrary, Jesus wants all people to receive Him for who He is.

But Jesus cannot change who He is.

He is, and for anything we build to endure, He must become to us the most important stone in the structure.

For many He is a stumbling block. There are some who insist upon refusing Him, and in that, they run into him again and again and again – the image is like beating your head against the wall.

And sadly, some people stumble over Him for years and years and years, and they never give in.

But in the end, those people don't just end up with a sore head, because when Jesus returns in glory to judge the world, He will crush all who oppose Him – all who have let themselves imagine that He is, in any sense, less than who He actually is.

You know, maybe the image of Jesus as a rock like an asteroid or meteor isn't so far off after all. Because on the day He returns, all who have imagined Him to be little more than a helpless baby will be shocked at the heat and the size and the power. They're going to be shocked!

Friends, we live in a nation that imagines it no longer needs Jesus as any part of its successful building. That's the fact of it.

In removing Him as the *keystone* of our history books, we have allowed the arch of wisdom to collapse. We don't learn from history.

In throwing Him out of our schools, we have removed the *capstone*, and the walls of knowledge are separating. They're on the edge of falling over.

In ignoring Him in our government, we are actively destroying the very foundation, which is causing today the whole building to shake. The whole building is shaking. The truth is, it's not really about racial issues; it's not about the virus; it's not about political divides; it's not even about the bomb in Nashville on Christmas. Those things are not really what is shaking the building. The issue is a spiritual issue, and it runs much deeper than any of those things.

Those things are just the symptoms.

But they are very real symptoms, and it's only wise to face the reality that, apart from some sort of great awakening, sooner or later, the building is going to fall. The building is going to fall.

Now, we fight against that. We pray against that. Sure, we do.

But you know, just the same, there's only so much that you and I can do about it. There is only so much we understand about what God is up to in it all. We can't let the state of our nation steal our joy or ruin our faith. We do what we can, but what we can do about the whole is limited.

That is not entirely our responsibility.

Yet what is entirely our responsibility is the building of the life that is me, the family that is mine, and the neighbors that are ours. Those are our responsibility.

In all of those things, we have to honestly consider, "Have we made Jesus truly the foundation, or is He just decoration? Is He the *keystone*, *capstone*, and *cornerstone* of our house, or is He really just a wreath on our door that comes and goes with the season?"

Friends, Jesus longs to be the former – to break us for our best, and He will never be satisfied to be the latter, and unfortunately, He will crush all who force Him to be so.

Jesus comes at Christmas as so much more than the baby in the manger.

He comes, not as one to be cared for, but as One who will care for us.

He comes, not as one that we have to hold, but as One who will hold us.

He is the Rock upon which we can build with confidence.

So, will you let Him take His place as *cornerstone*, *keystone*, *capstone* of all that you build – all of the structures of your life? That's what He wants.

Will you receive Him as the essential Rock today? Not as a baby, but as the key element in your life.

Prayer: Lord, thank You for all of these different images that show us who You are, because one image isn't enough. One image won't do it. But, Lord, help us to understand the weight of Your words, the significance and importance of what You said to those religious leaders? Would you help us to see You as the key part,

the Rock that You are and that You must be our lives and in anything we build, if anything we build is to endure? Draw yourself to us in this way.

We pray in your name, Jesus. Amen.

Closing Song: *Rock of Ages*

Benediction:

The Bible gives us over 120 references to rocks. They're used as images because they are solid. They support things and hold things in place. They are consistent. They provide a strong foundation. They signify for future generations important events. Even when they are broken, God uses them to provide for His people, which was the case in Jesus.

As this hymn talks about, Jesus is the Rock that was cleft, separated not only from God His Father but was even separated from Himself. He was split, physically – put to death – so that we might hide ourselves in Him, return to God the Father and find life.

Jesus is the beginning and end of life itself, the rock who brings and holds all things – all that we build – together. May we see Him for – and make Him in our lives – all that He is and all that He came to be for us – at Christmas.

Thanks for coming to worship this morning.

The Lord bless you.