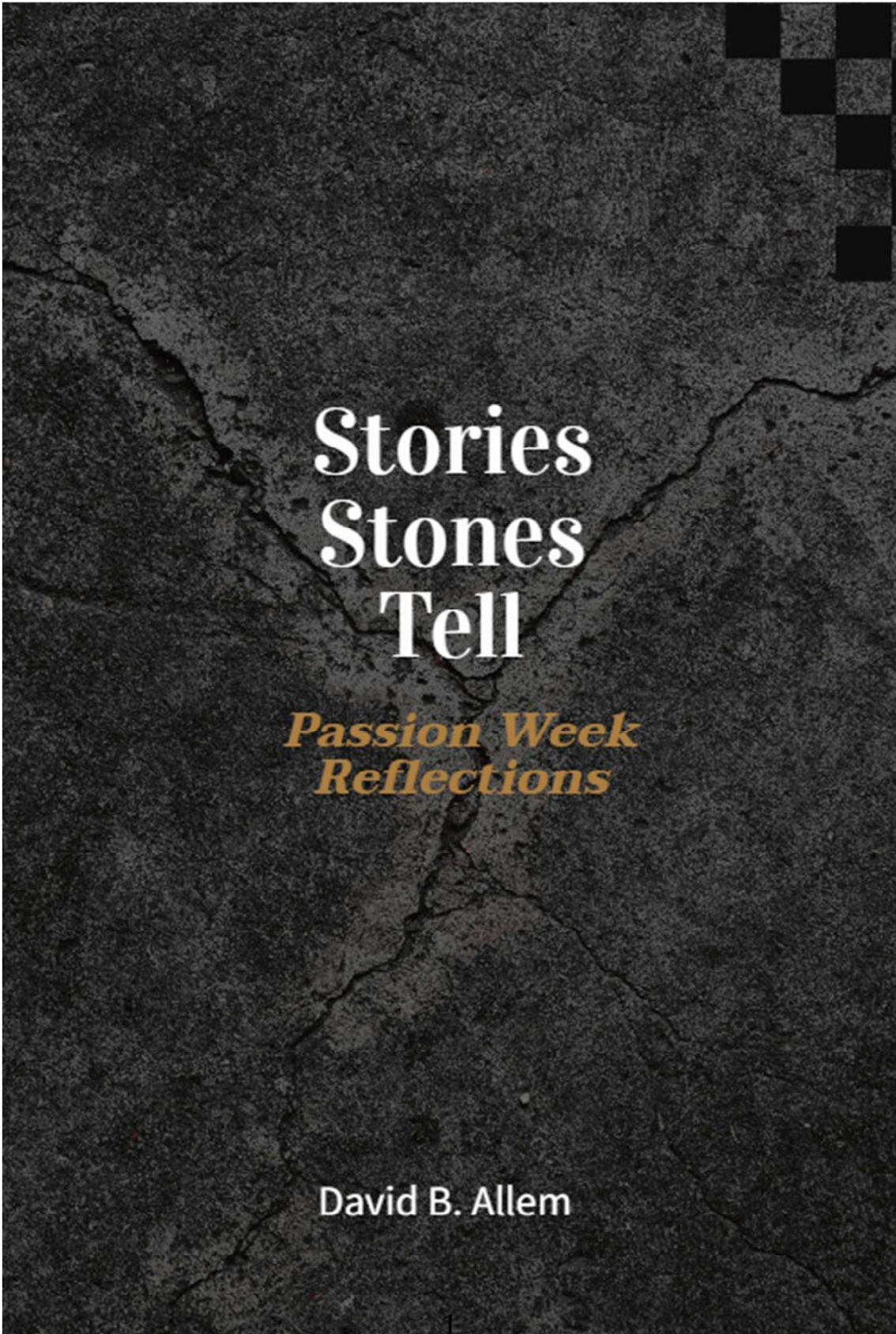




Stories Stones Tell

*Passion Week
Reflections*

David B. Allem

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The Greatest Stone



A lake with no water – only stones. My parents took us to *Boulder Lake* in the Pocono Mountains almost every summer. It was a short hike through the woods from the parking lot down a thin trail. It was always like a joke when we were told a lake full of boulders was just ahead. We were surrounded by trees under a canopy of branches. And then, abruptly the trail widens and opens up to a field of boulders, devoid of trees. Boulders of all sizes – basketballs, trash cans, loaves of bread and kitchen tables. What causes that?

The stones tell a story. Believe it or not, during the ice age glaciers reached all the way into Pennsylvania. Pennsylvania Glaciers? What?!?!

They rolled rocks, broke boulders and deposited them in the Poconos before receding for good. Their journey ground them into smooth stones rather than jagged rocks. So, they were perfect for jumping on several hundred yards away from your parents. It was also perfect for ignoring your parents' call to head for home – we were too far away to really hear.

Stones speak.

60 miles southwest of Casper, Wyoming a massive piece of granite protrudes from the prairie in a 27-acre monolith called *Independence Rock*. I crawled around on this enormous knob which stands 13 stories above the surrounding sagebrush.

During the mid-1800s, people relocating to Oregon or California aimed to reach this rock by July 4th, Independence Day, in order to reach their destinations before the snow fell on the mountain passages near the end of their journeys. Along the rock's perimeter, wagon ruts from the pioneer trails are still visible.

On the rock itself, from ground level to 80 feet high, names and dates are inscribed. Pioneers, emigrants, gold prospectors, missionaries – all etched their historical arrival at this rock. Truly, the

ancient and mighty stone south of Casper tells many, many tales.

In the last year and last week of Jesus' life, stones play as important a role as do His disciples. Stones picked up to kill, stones dropped in shame, stones discarded by human builders. Stones chosen by God to lay foundations. Stones tell amazing stories – stories that changed lives. The stones still speak. I pray that these stones bring deep impact to your life as well. Here are six stories that stones tell.



Stones that Liberate

She knew it was wrong. He was married. But he promised to love her forever. He already helped her with grocery and housing costs. No one had ever helped her like that. How is this NOT the love she'd been longing for?

He was ready to divorce his shrew-of-a-wife. She already moved out and was living with her mother.

In his arms, she felt safe, cared for, and truly treasured. No one ever made her feel this way. Soon she would be his and his alone. But the

feeling wouldn't last. Because no one expected what happened next.

The bedroom door crashed open! In the doorway stood two angry priests. Shouting and spiting condemnations, they grabbed her arms and dragged her into the front room. She groped for her clothes but only managed to catch some linens from the bed. She had only seconds to wrap and cover herself before they pushed her into the street.

She landed on all fours, humiliated in the dust. Suddenly, they were under her arms and shoving her forward. Shocked market owners and shoppers joined the ugly procession, confident they were headed for the temple for a sentencing. Instead of marching to the high priest, the crowd stopped in a corner of the temple court in front a man, seated and teaching a group gathered about him.

They made her stand before the group and said to Jesus, "Teacher, this woman was caught in the act of adultery. In the Law Moses commanded us to stone such women. Now what do you say?" They were using this question as a trap, in order to have a basis for accusing him. John 8:3-6

If Jesus said, "Yes, follow Moses and stone her," He would be breaking a Roman law. Murder was just as illegal as it is today. However, if He said, "No, don't stone her," he would be breaking a law

from the old Jewish Covenant. The religious leaders, threatened by his popularity and authenticity, wanted to eliminate him - preferably through the court and not force.

Jesus' primary concern was never Rome or Religion. He took aim at something far more important. He took aim at the heart. The heart of the accused as well as the accusers.

Jesus bent down and started to write on the ground with his finger. When they kept on questioning him, he straightened up and said to them, "Let any one of you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her." Again he stooped down and wrote on the ground. John 8:6-8

With one instruction, He leveled the playing field. Both the "saint" and the "sinner" need redemption. Everyone needs rescue from condemnation – whether it is self-condemnation or condemnation from others. Or the condemnation that naturally follows our own personal screw-ups. We call that condemnation "shame".

We try hard to ignore it or suppress it or even delete it. What we really need is to be forgiven of it. To wipe our shame clean away – and be free.

With one wise request, Jesus reveals to every heart, "No one is without sin. No one can claim

superiority over another.” The accused and the accusers are both guilty. “All fall short of the glory of God,” the apostle Paul said (Romans 3:23). What happens next proves His painful point and offers a gracious path forward for a broken woman.

Those who heard began to go away one at a time, the older ones first, until only Jesus was left, with the woman still standing there. John 8:9

Can you hear the stones hit the dust? Can you see them drop, one by one at the feet of those previously-snarling men? Each drop was an admission that every single person - reverent or irreverent – carries his own guilt and shame. And so, no one has the right to condemn another.

Shaking at the center of the crowd and still holding her shame, the woman heard the commotion behind her. She turned to see stones dropping and priests leaving. The rest of the crowd, Jesus’ listeners, just watched the scene unfold. Like so many others, “They were amazed at His teaching because His words had authority.” Luke 4:32

They wondered, “What will He say now?”

Jesus straightened up and asked her, “Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?”

“No one, sir,” she said.

*“Then neither do I condemn you,” Jesus declared.
“Go now and leave your life of sin.” John 8:10-11*

Early in his gospel, the apostle John observed, “For God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through Him” (John 3:17).

In Jesus’ parting words, He demonstrates his saving purpose and power as He stares lovingly into the pained eyes of this broken woman. He knew her guilt and shame – and how to erase it. He didn’t verbalize forgiveness; he showed it.

*“Neither do I condemn you...Go now and leave
your life of sin.”*

When the stones fell, her path to personal liberation began. And Jesus was the way to freedom from her life the way it was.

“I am the way, the truth and the life,” He said (John 14:6). “Go now!” No longer is she the spectacle of shame, judged by others. No longer will she be on display to make others feel better about themselves. Jesus released her from shame – “Go now!”

He didn't say, "Go and grovel for awhile." There's no groveling when Jesus forgives. His forgiveness is complete.

In just a few months, she'll understand how He is able to take away sin and shame. Good Friday was just around the corner. But on that day, she left with dignity etched in her soul by a Holy Prophet who should have scolded her and condemned her – or at least that's what her world taught.

He chased away her accusers with a simple truth and offered her forgiveness, an open door to a second chance at life. She could leave her old life and begin a new life. No doubt, that life will include Him. The One who stood up for her and released her. What more would He have for her?

What story do these stones tell? When the stones were picked up, they declared the penalty for sin, the reason for shame. When the stones were dropped, they reminded us that we all are guilty to some degree. No one stands alone in shame.

And when Jesus refused to pick up a stone, he told us He was not here to condemn us. He is here to rescue us from our shame. To release you to new life with a clean heart. In a phrase...

To forgive you and free you!

Let's ask some heart questions. Are you burdened by regret? Is there a hidden shame that still clings to you, no matter how hard you try to shake it?

These stones speak forgiveness and freedom to you! If you would stand alone in front of Jesus, will you not see the love in His eyes? Listen to Him say, "I'm here to rescue you, not condemn you." Will you receive His forgiveness and go now in freedom? Let the stones liberate you!

Prayer

*God, I need liberation. You know my shackles.
You know the shame I carry that I so desperately
want to be rid of. Thank you for your Love that
buries my shame in your grave.
Thank you for covering me with
the forgiveness of the cross.
Give me the grace to get up and go – now!
And live your new life. Amen.*



Stones that Endure

The tallest obelisk in the world is 142 years old and has a 9-inch aluminum tip inscribed with the Latin, *Laus Deo* – “Praise God”. It contains 193 plaques and engravings, some of which point readers to God’s guidance. Here are some examples:

Holiness to the Lord (Exodus 28:36)

Train up a child in the way he should go (Proverbs 22:6)

Ye who love the LORD hate evil (Psalm 97:10)

When the foundations are destroyed what can the righteous do? (Psalm 11:3)

The memory of the just is blessed (Proverbs 10:7)

*The Lord our God be with us as he was with our fathers.
(1 Kings 8:57)*

The Washington Monument at the time it was completed was the tallest structure in the world. The inscription on the shiny tip, *Laus Deo*, faces east. Theoretically, you could be 30 miles away in Annapolis, Maryland looking west toward the monument and see the tip lit up by the sunrise while you are still in darkness.

The monument was physically built to withstand 145 mile an hour winds. Symbolically, it was built to withstand the winds of time, politics and conflicts. Interestingly, the scriptures were included to point to the foundation of this nation’s strength

– a confident trust in God and His principles. A trust that they will work and endure human frailty and rebellion.

Placed in the cornerstone of the monument were a copy of the U.S. Constitution, Declaration of Independence and Washington's Farewell address. A Bible, selected sermons and currency were also inserted. Even a piece of Washington's original coffin plate was placed inside.

As important as the monument is, the cornerstone was the most important stone.

How important is the cornerstone? If any building (not just a monument) is composed of stone, all the measurements are taken from the cornerstone. The width, its height, its depth – their measurements align foremost with the cornerstone. The walls are plumbed to the cornerstone. The floors are leveled to the cornerstone. All other aspects and every subsequent measurement is precisely oriented to the cornerstone.

Careful alignment to this stone prevents the collapse of the building and provides stability to every part. It is the first stone and the most important stone.

Often the builders and benefactors gather around the cornerstone for a dedication. That's an

interesting use of the word “dedication”. A ceremony of honor and dedication at the first stone. Ancient builders made sacrifice of wine, wheat or blood on the cornerstone. Modern cultures hide documents or memorabilia in the cornerstone. The stone is honored, dedicated, precious and structurally critical.

A few days before the Cross, Jesus brought up a cornerstone in a controversial speech before his admirers and adversaries. It rocked the world of all His listeners.

During the week before the cross, Jesus spent much time slipping into and out of the temple area. His preaching was provocative and authoritative. He made more sense than the professional priests and teachers. Children praised Him. He healed many, frustrating the profiteers of religion.

At night, he stayed two miles outside the city with friends in a town called Bethany. He ventured each day back into the temple courts and told parables, debated scholars and avoided arrest – for a few days anyway.

After telling some parables pointing out the façade of faith the priests built, He threw the stone forward and said:

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.” Matthew 21:42

He was identifying with a cornerstone of major significance. The disciple Peter echoed His Master’s words in his second public sermon:

Jesus is the stone you builders rejected, which has become the cornerstone. Salvation is found in no one else. Acts 4:11-12

In his first letter preserved for us he continues:

For in Scripture it says: “See, I lay a stone in Zion, a chosen and precious cornerstone, and the one who trusts in him will never be put to shame.” 1 Peter 2:6

This may be the biggest stone in all of Scripture! It’s not taller than the Washington Monument. It’s not larger than the asteroid that created the Gulf of Mexico. David’s stone toppled a giant and won him a kingdom. But this stone’s impact far exceeds any other stone, meteor or mountain. Look at its impact. Peter quotes the prophet Isaiah:

Now to you who believe, this stone is precious. But to those who do not believe, “The stone the builders rejected has become the cornerstone and a stone that

causes people to stumble and a rock that makes them fall.” Isaiah 8:14

This Jesus-stone is a precious cornerstone to those who believe. We look to Him to measure the depth, breadth and height of our lives. We build our thoughts, our desires and our confessions on Him, our precious foundation. He is our reference point for all our subsequent decisions and plans.

Our cornerstone, He prevents collapse, provides stability and deserves our honor and dedication. He is the first and the foundation stone from the moment we decide to follow Him.

This same stone, however, gets in other people’s way. They stumble over Him. And for some, He is a rock that makes them fall. We see that happen all the time.

People stumble over His authority – “Why should I listen to Him?” Others stumble over His identity – “Who is this dusty Nazarene teacher?” Some fall over His superiority – “Why is Jesus the only way to God?” Many fall over the need for Jesus – “I don’t need His saving for anything!”

Paul would say, “You need to know Him like I know Him. I persecuted His followers – jailed them, helped to sentence their deaths. Then I met the real Jesus.”

Peter would say, “You need to meet Him like I did. I was arrogant, pious and impetuous. He broke me down with grace and called me to a higher life. I met the real Jesus.”

Jesus was the precious cornerstone, the new start for the woman caught in adultery. But He was a stumbling stone to the pious, dropping their rocks and slinking away through the crowd.

Most people today meet a caricature of Jesus, not the real Jesus. The media, higher education and even the church perpetuate a sloppy view of this God-man. Nice teacher, social activist, idealist and unfortunate victim. But following that Jesus wouldn’t “turned the world upside down” (Acts 17:6). There’s so much more to Him than what you’ve been shown.

Jesus pushed the metaphor even farther:

*He who falls on this stone will be broken to pieces,
but he on whom it falls will be crushed. Matthew
21:44*

The one who accepts Christ as the Cornerstone will fall onto Him, broken. And The He will put him back together to become a beautiful part of His building. However, the ones who reject Him will

find life disintegrating and crushed as they attempt to build a life on their own in futility and frailty.

But if they would just depend, lean on and build on Christ the Cornerstone, they will find One who openly holds life and breath and love. Measuring life – its breadth, depth and height – in line with Jesus brings life.

As my life lengthens, I keep it in line with my Cornerstone. And I have no fear of the future. I don't know my future but I know who holds my future. That truth helps me with my anxiety, my planning and even my mistakes. “For I know the plans I have for you,” declares the LORD. ‘Plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.’”

The depth of who I am and how I'm designed is drawn from my Cornerstone. Identity is a big deal nowadays. The depth of who I am: my uniqueness, my giftedness, my confidence and my security - I look back to my Cornerstone to experience the eternally loved measurement of myself. “See what great love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called the children of God!” (I John 3:1)

The breadth of my life, how wide my understanding can grow depends on staying in alignment with my Cornerstone. He teaches, he guides, He imparts wisdom. He widens the impact

we have on those around us. Life opens up in new and fresh ways under His wisdom. We can “have the full riches of complete understanding, in order that [we] may know the mystery of God, namely, Christ, in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge.” (Colossians 2:2-3)

During this week of confrontation and controversy Jesus called out to anyone who would align himself: “Come and share your master’s happiness...Come, you who are blessed by my Father. Take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world.” (Matthew 21:23,34)

The invitation is still open. Open to you.

Do you remember the game “Don’t Break the Ice”? Plastic ice cubes were fit together like a raised table top. Players would knock out one cube at a time with little mallets. Slowly, as cubes fell, the surface became fragile. The player who knocked out the cube that caused the collapse was the loser.

Difficulties and difficult people strike our carefully constructed life-surfaces like the mallets in the game. Christ is the cube that holds it all together. The difference is that no matter how many mallets you endure, He will never fall. He will never fail. And so goes for you – as you trust in Him, your Cornerstone.

Your Cornerstone will not fade, crumble or be moved by any person, crisis or situation. This Cornerstone will endure forever – and you can be confident placing your hope in Him.

I pray for you the cornerstone-prayer in Ephesians 3 - that you may “grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, and to know this love that surpasses knowledge.” (Ephesians 3:18-19)

Prayer

*Lord, when all around me seems ready to crumble,
You are my foundation. You hold everything together;
So hold me together today. Search my heart
and tell me where I'm not lining up with You,
my Cornerstone. Give me wisdom to turn back
into alignment with your purpose, your mercy,
and your love for those around me. Amen.*



Stones Never Thrown

MAGA, Woke, Trump, DEI – all words that make people choose sides. Whatever “side” someone lands, these words are triggering and alienating. Because once a side is chosen, the other side is alienated.

We live in an alienating culture. I’m not writing to prove right and wrong or persuade you to a side. Just stating a fact. Alienation is normal today. And it has consequences.

In May 2023, the retail giant Target featured pro-LGBT products and removed indications that toys were for boys or girls. Enough consumers and stock holders were alienated by the campaign that the company lost \$25 billion in market capitalization, \$16 billion in one day, as a result of fall in sales and stock price.

A lawsuit was filed accusing the company of failing to predict the potential financial impact of the diversity campaign to shareholders. As of January 2025, Target is still trying to settle the suit and the campaign was terminated.

That’s just the financial cost of alienation. The personal cost of alienation, on both sides of the issue, is something that’s more “appropriately” left

for social media. That brings me to wonder about the alienation arising in the final months of Jesus' ministry. So I wonder...

Why would a person riding a popular wave of approval purposely alienate the most powerful in society?

Why would a person who wanted to expand his influence worldwide use words so divisive that people were ready to kill him?

Why would a person with loving hopeful admirers ignore their warnings and dive headlong into a hostile city full of rabid opponents?

This is exactly what Jesus did the week before the cross. It's exactly what his friends didn't want Him to do. They didn't understand. But He did. For two years He had been saying, "My hour has not yet come." (John 2:4) But this week, it was different:

"My soul is troubled, and what shall I say? Father, save me from this hour"? No, it was for this very reason I came to this hour." John 12:27

The stones I want to show you now are stones that were never thrown. They were picked up, locked and loaded but never launched. The target? Jesus.

A few months before the cross, Jesus and his disciples were in Jerusalem for Hanukkah. Jesus was walking along Solomon's Colonnade in the temple area, most likely teaching as He went.

The Jews gathered around him, saying, "How long will you keep us in suspense? If you are the Messiah, tell us plainly." John 10:24

He wasn't keeping them in suspense – they weren't listening. He spoke in parables that were understandable only by those willing to open themselves to God. Those who thought they had it all figured out were in the dark. The dual response was so clear:

At these words the Jews were again divided. Many of them said, "He is demon-possessed and raving mad. Why listen to him?" But others said, "These are not the sayings of a man possessed by a demon. Can a demon open the eyes of the blind?" John 10:19-21

The cross was coming soon. Jesus decided it was time to draw the line. He spoke about His sheep following Him and how no one could snatch them out of His hand. Neither could anyone snatch them out of His Father's hand. And then the mic drop:

"I and the Father are one." John 10:30

No one full understands that claim. But understanding and trust aren't always acquired simultaneously. Some trusted the evidence. Others could not. And they picked up stones...on Hanukkah. They were ready to kill someone during Hanukkah!

Jesus said to them, "I have shown you many miracles from the Father. For which of these do you stone me?" John 10:32

The quick-witted question was certainly rhetorical but revealed much. Would any sane person attempt to kill a miraculous healer? If people were legitimately helped and no crimes were committed, why would anyone pick up stones to kill a benefactor?

It makes no sense. Unless their world would be rocked by following this benefactor and his word. If trusting this man would result in major life change and societal rearrangement, it might be better to shut Him up.

But it wasn't just upsetting personally to admit Him in your life. It was disruptive theologically. And this was most upsetting. It wasn't His words or His actions. It was what they meant - their meaning.

Why did they stand locked and loaded, ready to murder an innocent man in broad daylight at the temple?

“We are not stoning you for any of these,” replied the Jews, “but for blasphemy, because you, a mere man, claim to be God.” John 10:33

Here’s the (unwanted) answer to their question, “Who do you think you are?” He claimed to be God, sent from heaven onto planet earth! If His claim to be God was legitimate, then He had a claim over their lives. He could exercise authority over everything! Instead of investigating His claim based on His words and actions – the miracles – they rejected it all outright.

And this wasn’t the first time. This was the winter before the cross. They had stones in their hands before.

Six months before the cross, He was in Jerusalem for another feast, walking the temple grounds teaching. As he often did, He confronted the religious teachers on their hypocrisy, causing them to ask, “Who are you?” (John 8:25)

When He answers His critics with with the Hebrew name for God, YHWH (translated “I AM”), they pick up their stones.

“I tell you the truth,” Jesus answered, “before Abraham was born, I am!” At this, they picked up stones to stone him, but Jesus hid himself, slipping away from the temple grounds. (John 8:58-59)

That’s the most critical question you can ever consider, investigate and answer. “Who are you, Jesus?”

In another eBook, “Divine Possibilities”, I propose the only four possible answers to that question. He was either liar, lunatic, legend or Lord. In brief, He exhibited no traits of a liar or lunatic. The written record of His life was far too close to the events and surrounded by far too many contemporaries who could easily refute them. Legends take a long time to develop according to legend-expert C. S. Lewis.

His opponents knew exactly what He was claiming. And after His resurrection, His followers staked their very lives on His claim.

His claim was so outrageous, He alienated the rich and powerful, the religious and privileged. They picked up stones, but the stones were never thrown.

What do the stones tell us? First, His claim really is outrageous. Jesus’ claim to be sent from heaven to be made human on our planet – it’s outrageous!

But His life and teaching and actions prove Him true. Jesus evokes deep thought, strong emotions and serious commitment. Either side a person lands on – Jesus evokes a decision.

Secondly, the stones-never-thrown tell us that God has His timing and a plan which no amount of human effort will thwart. So many times, opponents tried to stone Jesus, push Him off of a cliff, arrest Him and trap Him. He was a hunted Man.

But He was on a journey that ended on at a cross. That was the plan. No one, not even His enemies, could prevent Him from climbing that Golgotha hill. You see, His goal wasn't just to debate people or vindicate Himself. His goal was to voluntarily give His body and blood on the cross for our forgiveness. To take the penalty for our sin.

Your rescue was more important than His vindication. The stones were powerless because of Who is He and What He's planned. The stones melted in His Presence and fell to His Plan.

Have you answered the question, "Who are you, Jesus?"

Read the gospel of John and decide for yourself. Don't rely on secondhand information from a bad church experience or some reel on social media.

The question of whether God visited this planet in human form is so critical to who you are, where you're going and what's in store – you need to search out the answer yourself.

Maybe you've already decided that Jesus is irrelevant. He was rebel Jewish rabbi who got himself killed and that's that. I encourage you to make an Amazon \$9.64 investment and read the short book, "Who Moved the Stone?" by Frank Morrison. He was a skeptic, too.

If you're a Jesus-follower like me, think on this. Are there times when you buck His authority? At times do you squirm when you know He's moving you out into new territory? I've deliberately told Him, "No!". Have you?

What we're doing is bending down, picking up a stone and feeling it in our hands. We are ready to say, "You have no claim or authority on me, Jesus."

My friend, that stone is better left unthrown. Don't alienate yourself from the One who loves you and has a plan for you. Drop that stone of pride, disobedience and self-will. He'll replace the hard stone with a soft heart, a willing spirit and the quiet strength to follow Him, the shepherd of our souls.

My sheep listen to my voice; I know them and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish;

no one will snatch them out of my hand...no one can snatch them out of my father's hand. I and the Father are one. John 10:28-30

Prayer

God, I praise and acknowledge the power of your Person, the authority of your voice and the truth in your teaching.

No one can hold a candle to the light that you bring to our world and to my heart. Try as they might,

no one can dethrone you. Seat yourself on the throne of my heart today.

May your kingdom come! Amen.



Stones that Weep

You've heard the story. I'm sure a friend has told you the story.

A family member developed dementia. It started out with forgetfulness of appointments, words and wallets. Family member check-ins to make sure she's safe. All of life's processes slowed down. Then immobility and staring set in.

The saddest stage arrives when she's unable to identify who her loved ones are. I have a dear friend who lovingly fed his wife lunch everyday while she had no idea who he was – other than a nice man she had lunch with.

How heart-breaking. What dedication and love! And unfortunately, too common an experience.

We know of only a few times that Jesus wept. At least only a few times recorded. Being fully human, I'm sure he experienced sadness and disappointment many more times than recorded.

But the strangest moment of sadness came upon Jesus right before He was hailed and praised and welcomed into the city on Palm Sunday. People lined the road descending the Mount Of Olives from which a person could see the whole city from above, including the gleaming Temple. The crowd

waved palm branches life flags and threw blankets on the dusty trail like a red carpet invitation.

They shouted blessings on Jesus, smiled and danced because they believed His arrival would remove the Romans and initiate a golden age for Jews everywhere!

But He wept. The ancient and happy walled city made Him cry.

As he approached Jerusalem and saw the city, he wept over it and said, ‘If you, even you, had only known on this day what would bring you peace—but now it is hidden from your eyes. The days will come upon you when your enemies will build an embankment against you and encircle you and hem you in on every side. They will dash you to the ground, you and the children within your walls. They will not leave one stone on another, because you did not recognize the time of God’s coming to you. Luke 19:41-44

The stones will fall, the walls will crumble – because they didn’t recognize Jesus. They saw Him, but didn’t recognize and understand who He really was.

Surrounded by praise and adoring crowds, Jesus wept. He knew they were seeing but not recognizing what was happening. He knew they

were hearing but not understanding their condition. He was heartbroken and cried.

Have you ever considered a crying Jesus? Caricatures of Him abound. Like the detached other-worldly Jesus who stares in the distance at nothing.

The gospels show a Messiah that connects with broken people. A teacher who listens carefully and argues precisely. A Jesus who protects dignity and destroys hypocrisy.

Strong but sensitive. Confident and crying. Fully human.

After His bogus conviction (even the Roman government declared Him innocent), He dragged His cross through the narrow streets. At one point, maybe when He stopped to gather His strength, He spoke with labored breaths to the women weeping around Him. He said:

“Daughters of Jerusalem, do not weep for me; weep for yourselves and for your children...For if people do these things when the tree is green, what will happen when it is dry?” (Luke 23:28,31)

Consider: He was beaten, bruised and bloodied – in pain. But He stopped to feel *their pain*. “Don’t weep for me. Weep for what is to come.”

A time is coming when the stones of the city will be tossed and crushed. And so will its inhabitants. 40 years after the Passion week, His prophecy came true.

In response to a Jewish rebellion, in 70 A.D. Emperor Titus and his Roman army flattened Jerusalem and its temple, homes and shops. The walls of every building laid waste.

The historian Josephus claimed 1,100,000 Jews were slaughtered. Some scholars call this an exaggeration but admit hundreds of thousands were murdered, starved and left to disease. Another 100,000 were enslaved.

Jesus saw the coming devastation and wept, even as the mob of admirers welcomed Him with praise into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday.

His suffering began before a single blow from a Roman soldier. Jesus cried at the front of the parade.

Jesus knows pain. He knows your pain – what you're going through today. And what you will encounter in your future. We can go to Him in our distress and know He feels it too. You're not alone and He'll be there when it hurts.

We do not have a high priest who is unable to empathize with our weaknesses. Hebrews 4:15

Have you cried through a prayer? Have you ever been so upset that you couldn't finish a prayer? God welcomes those prayers – the fears, the sighs, the groans. The Bible calls them, “laments”. A whole book of the OT is called, “Lamentations”.

Our prayers aren't just about “getting” – blessings, safety, healing, etc. They're about “expressing”, if you're truly in a relationship with God. A relationship would be quite shallow if it was just an exchange of requests.

So express even the gut-wrenching confession and disappointment to Christ when you pray. He doesn't shy away from it. He won't be repulsed by it. He feels it as much as you do. He'll enter in. He welcomes your laments. He welcomes you – especially in your pain. He said:

Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls Matthew 11:28-29

As the Palm Sunday parade began, His disciples must have been confused, at least those who noticed Him crying. The procession was a good

thing, right? People were happy, singing, excited – anticipating the springtime return of the rebel Rabbi who spoke truth to power during the fall and winter feasts. “So, why the crying?” they must have thought.

Later in the week they got their answer. As they walked along the city walls on their way to their favorite olive grove, their Master said:

“Do you see all these things?” he asked. “Truly I tell you, not one stone here will be left on another; every one will be thrown down.” Matthew 24:2

The first coming of Christ was not about building it all up; it was about tearing it all down. It wasn’t about buildings, politics or power. Those who expected this were sorely disappointed. He was sad about their misplaced expectations.

The same is true today. If people see Jesus first coming through the lens of politics or power or institutions, they’ll be disappointed. Or they’ll twist the narrative to fit their expectations. And this makes Jesus sad.

His first coming was about tearing away whatever covered up the heart. Mending the brokenhearted, cleansing the shame and sin, saving our very souls.

This beautiful restorative work required a major tearing down of the walls we hide behind.

But the stones won't weep forever, even as they fall like rubble.

Because there is a second coming. The walls of the New Jerusalem at Christ's second coming won't be weeping; they'll be shining. They won't be made of stone either.

Near the end of the first century, the aged disciple John received a vision of the New Jerusalem from which Christ will reign in righteousness over the whole planet. All evil will be erased and the government will be on His shoulders (Isaiah 9:6).

The foundations of the city walls were decorated with every kind of precious stone. The first foundation was jasper, the second sapphire, the third agate, the fourth emerald, the fifth onyx, the sixth ruby, the seventh chrysolite, the eighth beryl, the ninth topaz, the tenth turquoise, the eleventh jacinth, and the twelfth amethyst...I did not see a temple in the city, because the Lord God Almighty and the Lamb are its temple. The city does not need the sun or the moon to shine on it, for the glory of God gives it light, and the Lamb is its lamp. Revelation 21:18-23

The walls aren't stones; they're gems - specifically, anisotropic gems. These are gems that refract pure

light into many multi-colored paths. It wasn't until the mid-1880s that scientists could formulate the physics to explain the difference between isotropic and anisotropic gems. Notice diamonds and rubies aren't mentioned in the walls – because scientists discovered the their molecular structures are isotropic. They can't split pure light into numerous paths.

I find it fascinating the OT Testament gems in the high priest's garments and the foundation walls of the New Jerusalem consist of only isotropic gems. Someone calculated the odds of randomly choosing twelve isotropic gems from all the gem types in the world to be 1:16,715! And yet, thousands of years before scientists understood their properties, God knew.

His New Jerusalem architecture would have walls that naturally burst forth in a kaleidoscope of every color imaginable to display His glory and light and life for His followers to enjoy!

In 70 A.D. the stones wept. They won't weep forever, and neither will we. In every direction, from every direction – a laser show unlike anything you've ever seen will wash over the streets and walls of the New Jerusalem drawing us in awe to our King who weeps no more.

The pain will be replaced with celebration! The curse will be reversed and no darkness will ever cast its shadow against your soul again. And the stones of the new city will make your heart sing for joy, in awe of God's mercy, grace and kingdom.

And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "Look! God's dwelling place is now among the people, and he will dwell with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away." He who was seated on the throne said, "I am making everything new!" Revelation 21:3-5

Unlike the people of the parade, I pray you do recognize the time of God's coming to you. He is here now. Let the pain remind you – there is One who knows your pain. Go to Him and lament with Him. And also remember: the stones won't always lay in rubble. There's coming a day, unlike any other day, when they will shine – colors shifting, changing, even dancing – celebrating the lavish grace God cascades upon those who love Him.

The Palm Sunday tears will become showers of blessings descending from the throne of the risen King Jesus. Just you wait – and pray.

Prayer

*Lord, please don't let me ever forget what
it cost you to rescue me.*

*Disrupt me if my devotion to you becomes common or lazy.
Break my heart with what breaks yours. Teach me to weep
for those who are lost. Give me the strength to
stand up for them and show them the
way out to a glorious future. Amen.*



Stones that Sing

Approximately 45 minutes from my home in PA lies a 7-acre park in the middle of a forest called, “Ringing Rocks Park”. When visitors strike the rocks with a hammer, they produce varying level of bell-tones. Actually +, only a third of the rocks ring like this.

It is a strange sight – people navigating around boulders holding hammers. I’ve crawled over these rocks many times and can tell you, they don’t sound like rocks at all. They resonate like a dull metallic bell.

Studies show a high iron content, high internal stress and a dense volcanic rock. The composition

acts like a taut guitar string – it resonates when struck.

Amateur geologist Luke Ranieri calls them a “Sea of Singing Boulders”. Did you know singing boulders almost burst into song on Palm Sunday?

As Jesus crested the hill on palm Sunday, His twelve disciples (and many more welcomed Him with boisterous joyous noise:

When he came near the place where the road goes down the Mount of Olives, the whole crowd of disciples began joyfully to praise God in loud voices for all the miracles they had seen: “Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord! Peace in heaven and glory in the highest!” Luke 19:37-38

Everyone anticipated His arrival because He joined the feasts in the fall and winter. Surely He’d be coming for the spring Passover.

Some of the Pharisees in the crowd said to Jesus, “Teacher, rebuke your disciples!”

“I tell you,” he replied, “if they keep quiet, the stones will cry out.”

If somehow the Pharisees could shut up the people, the boulders, stones and gravel would

shout and sing their dusty praise to Jesus! There's no containing the joy of Jesus coming to town.

I wonder why that is? Where He went, He healed the sick. Wherever He went, He spoke life-altering words. Where He went, He demonstrated love. Wherever He went, He confronted injustice. Wherever He went, He called for repentance – to leave the life we demand to have for a far better a surrendered life.

When Jesus comes to town, even the hardest stones would sing if His disciples were silenced.

Singing stones shouldn't surprise the Bible reader. Mountains sing, hills bow down, seas lift up their voices and trees applaud their Creator. Forests sing and earth shouts. Day after day and night after night (Isaiah 44:23; 55:12; Psalm 93:3).

The peculiar language of nature cannot be translated – not by human means. It's indiscernible syllables communicate from creature to Creator.

The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of his hands. Day after day they pour forth speech; night after night they reveal knowledge. They have no speech, they use no words; no sound is heard from them. Yet their voice goes out into all the earth, their words to the ends of the world. Psalm 19:1-4

Although we can't translate their language, we can understand what they're saying:

What may be known about God is plain to them, because God has made it plain to them. For since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities—his eternal power and divine nature—have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that people are without excuse. Romans 1:19-20

God is eternal and powerful. His nature is far above our own. And we have no excuse if we do not worship Him.

C.S. Lewis attempts to describe this nature-language using his fantasy novel, *Perelandra*. This planet is yet unstained by sin – so its nature is still in complete harmony with the Maker. He writes of a Constanta, vibrant voice always driven to her Creator, aware of the balance maintained by His great Mind.

Since it is a place unaffected by separation from God, no distinction between the natural and the supernatural exists. He refers to a harmonious hum without tone, a dance of physically imperceptible sounds. All is vibrant and immersive, overwhelmed by the experience of God's unhindered reign.

The planet *Perelandra* is not real – and yet I appreciate Lewis' attempt to describe what it's; like

for creation, untouched by sin, to sing the praise of its Maker.

So if the mountains, hills, trees, forests, seas and stones sing their songs to Christ, will you join them? If you do, join them with the same thankfulness for being made precious in His sight.

Join them with the same surrender to His will and purpose. The mountains don't succumb to their barrenness. The seas don't dismay about their ups and downs. The trees don't obsess over their broken branches or fallen leaves.

Shall what is formed say to the one who formed it, "You did not make me"? Can the pot say to the potter, "You know nothing"?

*Yet you, Lord, are our Father. We are the clay, you are the potter; we are all the work of your hand.
Isaiah 29:16; 64:8*

All of creation is in complete surrender to its Maker's will, His care in all seasons and His purpose in all difficulties.

As Psalm 19:2 reminds us, they pour out their praise every day and every night. Join them day and night. Join me in praying this prayer when you awake and when you lay down. And see if you – like the stones, skies and seas – experience the joy

of communion with your Creator – the Maker of
heaven and earth and the Maker of your heart.

Prayer

*Applauding You with swaying trees,
I raise my arms, on bended knees.
Surprise me, Lord, with crashing seas,
full waves of joy, peace on the breeze.*

*Summons stone and gravel's voice
to fill the skies. We all rejoice!
My heart will follow forest choice
in anthems deep in solemn noise.
Amen.*



The Greatest Stone

I grew up playing in a cemetery. I've felt guilty for
years – so don't start on me about how
inappropriate that was.

We rode our bikes up and down the driveways. We
played hide and seek. We charged our power rings
on the most elaborate stones. We defended our
quadrants from our sibling enemies. Our parents

were rightly appalled when they found out and warned us not to go back. It was disrespectful.

We did anyway. Usually at dark. We barely gave a passing thought to the dead lying all around us. Or that one day we would share their fate.

There is one grave for which I still hold a solemn respect. In another graveyard was my baby sister's pink granite gravestone. I remember as a kid it was a bit of a drive to get there for a visit. She loved barely one day with a heart complication. She is my next oldest sibling and passed thirteen months before I was born.

I knew standing there, my parents were sad. I couldn't possibly understand their grief – but it was a silent grief. However, before we piled back into the station wagon, my parents always reminded us, “Someday, at the resurrection, we'll see Karen again.”

Impressed quite early that death was real, I knew that a gravestone speaks of a stone cold finality. People of all ages die.

However, I also felt deeply that a gravestone was a permanent sign of hope I could return to time and time again. I would meet my baby sister some day – at the resurrection.

As a result of those visits to her grave, as strange as it may sound, I've never had a fear of death. Today, the gravestones of my parents next to Ksren's, make me sad; but they also generate hope. A tremendous hope that started with the most significant stone of any stone on planet Earth. The greatest stone was also in a graveyard.

Cutting the tomb and chiseling the stone-door took weeks. It was expensive, certainly not fashioned for the common man. The tunnel and cave was cut. The entrance stone was slightly cone-shaped so it would fall into the entrance like a cork. Only the wealthy could afford a grave like this one. It's careful construction, it's location in a garden, it's proximity to the city. A rich and influential person purchased and planned this tomb.

Joseph of Arimathea paid the masons well to create a beautiful resting place for his body. He was heartbroken watching the trials and beatings experienced by the Rabbi he chose to follow. He knew it was all over the potential loss of power for his colleagues in the religious elite.

He was sickened by it all.

And when Jesus died, he knew the right thing to do – the kind thing to do. It was his offering to God – his tomb. He knew what to do but didn't know he

was fulfilling the prophecy. The messiah would be buried in a rich man's grave (Isaiah 53:9).

Joseph dangerously approached the Roman governor to request the body of Jesus for burial. He had some clout. But no Jew had enough influence to expect an automatic "Yes" from Pilate. Without his inquiry, the body would be left on the cross to be eaten by animals and birds, eventually thrown into a pit grave with other decomposing criminals.

Joseph wouldn't allow that for Jesus. The Roman governor Pilate permitted the transfer of the body to his possession. We have no details of how it all transpired. But Joseph returned to the site of the crucifixions with Pilate's order in hand.

With the help of the soldiers, he removed Jesus body from the cross, wrapped it in linens and spices, and had him carried or carted to his garden tomb.

What a precious solemn sight it was! Gently laying Jesus on the limestone bench, covering him with more spices as was the Jewish custom. The two Mary's were seated across the tomb watching (Matthew 27:61). They made their Sunday plans to return here after the Sabath.

It was time for covering the tomb. To deter grave robbers, seal the stench of decomposition and most importantly, give Jesus a permanent resting place, the rock keeping the two-ton stone from rolling was removed. It rolled downhill a foot or two and lodged itself over the tomb's entrance as designed.

Joseph remembered the sounds for a long time. The hammer's ping against the stop, the crackling of the gravel as the stone slid forward and the final thud into the small entrance. It was the sound of finality. The death of a Man and His dream. The death of hope in all of His followers.

How important was this stone? Sixteen Roman guards in four shifts watched the stone! That's right. They watched the stone to make sure no one moved it. By order of the governor, the stone was sealed with rope and a clay or wax stamp to indicate any tampering of the tomb.

That's an important stone. The message of the stone was simple – it's over! "All this Jesus stuff – it's done. Everybody move on."

Then came Sunday's sunrise. The stone rang out with a much different message! When the women arrived at the tomb that morning:

They found the stone rolled away from the tomb, but when they entered, they did not find the body of the

Lord Jesus. While they were wondering about this, suddenly two men in clothes that gleamed like lightning stood beside them. In their fright the women bowed down with their faces to the ground, but the men said, "Why do you look for the living among the dead? He is not here; he is risen!" Luke 24:2-6

The guards were gone, the seal was gone, the stone was moved and Jesus was gone! The discarded stone told them loud and clear and in white lightening words, "What was dead isn't dead anymore. He is alive!"

The stone tells us that nothing can hold Jesus down, not even death.

The women who followed Jesus and the disciples John and Peter saw the pushed out and stone rolled away. The guards woke up to the stone rolled away. Certainly, subsequent Roman investigators visited the tomb and saw the stone rolled away.

The message swirled through Jerusalem, "Jesus is risen! The stone was rolled away and the tomb is empty. And the Romans don't know what happened."

His followers knew. Jesus appeared to them, ate breakfast with them, showed them his scars but in

a new body. Because He lives, I can live with hope and confidence.

Death has been swallowed up in victory. ‘Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting?’ The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. But thanks be to God! He gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ. 1 Corinthians 15:54-56

Today, it’s traditional to put stones on a gravesite at a Jewish burial. At the Messiah’s grave - the stone was placed, then removed. Violently, supernaturally, triumphantly.

And that discarded stone tells us that anything, anyone can be resurrected. What seems dead, what is dead – can be resurrected!

Any situation in your life that is dead or seems like its withering away – can be resurrected in Christ. What seems hopeless can be reversed. Your disillusionment, like the disciples’ experience, can be turned around – because resurrection is what Jesus is all about.

What great hope we have in Christ! The One who rolled the stone away gives never-ending life to anyone who would believe!

Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! In his great mercy he has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead. 1 Peter 1:3

Prayer

I praise you, Lord – the only one with the power to escape the grave and the weight of our sin, to craft a new body and resurrect to a new life! My sin and shame, buried forever – what a love! Show me the power of making dead things live again. You are my resurrected King who is always resurrecting me! Hallelujah and Amen!



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