

Matthew 21:33-46

42b: The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone. The Lord has done this, and it is marvelous in our eyes... And 44: And the one who falls on this stone will be broken to pieces; and when it falls on anyone, it will crush him.”

I saw a meme online that made Jesus out to be an extortionist. The picture was him standing at the door, knocking, and he said, “Let me in or I will burn you.” Or something like that.

Is that what Jesus is? Our text does say this stone will shatter those who stumble upon it. It’s an ultimatum. It’s pretty harsh. Very fear, driven, no?

Imagine a different picture: Imagine a firefighter on a ladder near the window of a burning house. And he says, “Come to me or you will burn.” Is that an extortioner? He gave them a stern ultimatum. Or is that a rescuer?

And we might say, “Well a good firefighter will get off that ladder into the burning building so he might drag those people out!”

Congratulations you have just described the incarnation! God takes on flesh, comes into this burning building of a world—tell me it’s not going to hell in a handbasket (that’s a saying for a reason!)—he comes that he might drag some out.

An extortioner, or a rescuer?

But yes, our text is clear, and it is a strong statement: there is no other rescuer! To tell the firefighter, “No thanks, I will make my own way out!” To say “How dare you invade my privacy and be outside my window!” To say, “everything fine in here go away!” Those are certainly things someone could say, but if that’s what you insist on: you’re going to get burned.

Now we might say, “But why does the ultimatum have to be so harsh?” But don’t we talk this way all the time? We see horrors on the news and we know these things deserve justice. Notice in the parable it’s the Chief Priests *themselves* who give the harsh punishment: THEY say he will kill the tenants and give it to another. They say that, and we do too when we see injustice: “hang em high!” But then we read that God will bring justice to these horrors and we then think “Well that’s too harsh, God! You’re mean!” We want Justice, but we want it on our terms and how we think it should go.

And perhaps we don’t lose too much sleep over the terrorists and murderers, but we worry more about the children who didn’t ask to be born sinful, or in a place that didn’t confess Christ, or some poor girl who isn’t allowed an education in her part of the world so she won’t hear about Jesus... is there any rescue for them? Or is this ultimatum, the stone, going to crush them?

But if Jesus is a Rescuer, and has claimed his Work is for the world, if he on his ladder outside the burning home, is he ignorant of the child hiding under the bed, or in the back room? Or is he strong and good enough to do what is Just, what is Right, and perhaps even Rescue them according to His Word and promise to reveal to the little infants, and his heart for the needy?

Because this parable and this stern ultimatum is not given to a scared child. It is given to those actively plotting to kill the Rescuer! Do you remember this story? It was here in Idaho—up north, where an evil man called the fire department out into the woods and shot them. That will not end well for him, nor those who despise the rescuer. They, at best, will be left to themselves in a broken world and whatever hairbrained schemes they have for getting the inheritance of life: “let’s kill the son, that will get us the inheritance!” What? That’s how silly our games are to try and earn life too. Pray 5 times to the east, be a “pretty good person,” eat real healthy, cryo freeze our brains... really? That’s the best we got to try and get life? We will all die. There’s no two

ways about it. So if there is news of a Rescue—not extortion—well that could change everything!

So let us not be like those who aren't allowed to learn. Let us rejoice in the Calling Word of the Rescuer. Let us consider if there is any truth to this Jesus—does he hold all things together in the universe and justice—or is he a stone to be rejected? Bear with a few points I feel obligated to share with you, not even about the creation of matter, and the laws of relativity or the moral argument, or fine tuning, which are real and convincing, but our text today is about this Cornerstone—so bear with some actual facts and sources about Jesus:

1. The Historical Jesus. Did this guy really live? Let alone the New Testament, which is evidence by the way: amazing manuscript evidence dwarfing other ancient writings by a hundred fold. But set that aside and listen to a man named Tacitus in his Annals:
“Consequently, to get rid of the report, Nero fastened the guilt and inflicted the most exquisite tortures on a class hated for their abominations, called Christians by the populace. Christus, from whom the name had its origin, suffered the extreme penalty during the reign of Tiberius at the hands of one of our procurators, Pontius Pilatus, and a most mischievous superstition, thus checked for the moment, again broke out not only in Judæa, the first source of the evil, but even in Rome.”

And from Josephus' Antiquities: “About this time there lived Jesus, a wise man, if indeed one ought to call him a man. For he was one who performed surprising deeds and was a teacher of such people as accept the truth gladly. He won over many Jews and many of the Greeks. He was the Christ. And when, upon the accusation of the principal men among us, Pilate had condemned him to a cross, those who had first come to love him did

not cease. He appeared to them spending a third day restored to life, for the prophets of God had foretold these things and a thousand other marvels about him. And the tribe of the Christians, so called after him, has still to this day not disappeared.”

Josephus also makes mention of “James, the Brother of Jesus, who is called the Christ,” and he accounts the historical arrest of John the Baptist.

One last one: Pliny the Younger, a poor roman who didn’t know what to do with these blasted Christians! “They were in the habit of meeting on a certain fixed day before it was light, when they sang in alternate verses a hymn to Christ, as to a god, and bound themselves by a solemn oath, not to any wicked deeds, but never to commit any fraud, theft or adultery, never to falsify their word, nor deny a trust when they should be called upon to deliver it up; after which it was their custom to separate, and then reassemble to partake of food—but food of an ordinary and innocent kind.”

Jesus lived in History. I don’t have enough faith to believe otherwise.

2. “But that doesn’t mean he holds all things together!” One might say. “And some go as far as to say he never made any of the claims about being God, that was all made up by Paul or Constantine or something.” And someone could claim that, but, it would go against the evidence. And I do find a bit of an irony when those who say they “only make decisions based on the evidence” wind up going against the evidence. What evidence? Mosaics that say Jesus is God, what we just read from Pliny, as “they sang hymns to Christ, as to a god.” All of these 200 years before Constantine. And, before Paul? Well, the Gospels,

from their writers. Luke, before the Conversion of Paul talks about Saul holding the coats while St. Stephen is killed and what is St. Stephen doing but calling out to the Risen Lord Jesus as he dies. Why do that if Jesus is some demi-god or lesser being? That's idolatry! Let alone that he, Jesus, receives worship in the New Testament, let alone the many verses that state he is God upholding the universe by His power, let alone John 1:1, or Colossians 1, or the testimony that only God can forgive sins—and, boom, Jesus forgives sin. But let him speak for himself as he says, “before Abraham was, I AM.” Yahweh, in the flesh. He claimed it, and we know he did, or else they wouldn't have killed him for the charge of Blasphemy. Much can be said about these topics, that we can't cover now, but please see there is evidence He made these claims.

3. “But just because he lived and claimed things, doesn't mean his claims were true!” Fair enough. What is the evidence he can keep his claims? This all hinges, as Paul says, on the Resurrection. And each easter, each funeral, we go through this don't we? The evidence for those disciples through Irenaeus, Polycarp, Eusebius and more real documents attesting that the disciples are real people too! Scared, if we believe the Gospels, on the night Jesus dies, brave not long after. What changed? “They beat up the Romans (not killing any) and stole the body and went to their deaths knowing their leader was rotting away?” This, by the way is distinct from the other cults where the leader has their followers die for him while he is still alive, promising things that may or may not be true. This leader goes first, into death, and if he stays there he is a fraud and they know it. And they still die? Not one denying? We know they all say he is alive, and we know there was no body found, and we know the word spreads-early. Could it have been a mass delusion or grief onset? For all of them, and not got worse and went insane, and not got better and

said “Just kidding it was a dream”? No. Could it have been a fairy tale legend made over time? The early creeds are out, very early, before Paul is even writing his letters! Quite the folk tale, and, again, a folk tale started and based on what? Followers that saw him die? A weird message that got started in Jerusalem that happened to be consistent with all the prophecies? Or was the story made up and retrofitted to the prophecies? Could be, but again, that’s not what the evidence would say – because that would all be based on a lie too! Instead—we might see that he lived, he claimed great things, and he kept those claims.

4. Which is great news because he makes claims that involve you. That you are fearfully and wonderfully made, not an accident, that his work was to forgive you, that you have been called by name in the waters, that his word in your ear now is not an accident but proof that he wants you, and that because of what he has done you will not be shattered or crushed or burned but rescued and built on the Cornerstone into a house of living stones forever.

Christ is the Cornerstone. The Chosen of God to balance Law and Gospel, Justice and Mercy. Christ is the Cornerstone: holding all things in heaven and on earth together – literally as he upholds the laws of space and time and brings reason and rational to spinning molecules as He is the Word of God.

And yet it has pleased the Father to make this One--the Word beyond space and time, one with the Father--it has pleased him that this One should, willingly, take on flesh and step into creation. And he took the form of One that was poor and lonely, so overlooked, shunned, rejected. Why did it please God to do this? To show that His Work, In the Word, in Christ, is for the lowly, the poor, the defenseless, the needy, outcast and ill-born, and to shame those with their proud

contentions, who have it all figured out, so they can make their memes and plot their persecutions—Oh may they be real careful, lest they stumble and fall on this stone. This, the rejected Stone being the Cornerstone, is dramatic reversal, it is the unexpected, it is the Prince and the pauper, it is the underdog comeback, it is the story of stories. It's also the real history of God's love to unworthy people like us. This is marvelous in the our eyes because it is true. He will be forever praised. Amen.