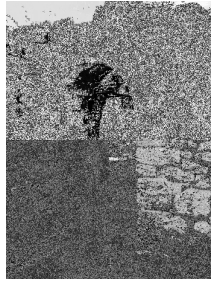


THREE BUILDING BLOCKS OF FAITH



CORNERSTONES, KEYSTONES, STUMBLING STONES
"SELECT YOUR CORNERSTONES CAREFULLY" – JHC

LET HIM BE OUR CORNERSTONE,
NOT A STONE THAT CAUSES PEOPLE TO STUMBLE. - ISAIAH

Scripture:

Romans 9:30-33, 10:1-4

- 30 What shall we say, then? That Gentiles who did not pursue righteousness have attained it, that is, righteousness through faith;
- 31 but that Israel who pursued the righteousness which is based on law did not succeed in fulfilling that law.
- 32 Why? Because they did not pursue it through faith, but as if it were based on works. They have stumbled over the stumbling stone,
- 33 as it is written, "Behold, I am laying in Zion a stone that will make men stumble, a rock that will make them fall; and he who believes in him will not be put to shame."
- 1 Brethren, my heart's desire and prayer to God for them is that they may be saved.
 - 2 I bear them witness that they have a zeal for God, but it is not enlightened.
 - 3 For, being ignorant of the righteousness that comes from God, and seeking to establish their own, they did not submit to God's righteousness.
 - 4 For Christ is the end of the law, that every one who has faith may be justified.



BUILDING BLOCKS

During the holiday season ahead, I am going to focus upon a group of scriptures under the heading, "Spiritual Building Blocks."

Building blocks, and the walls and buildings that are built from stone, provide a good metaphor for the rocky Holy Land. Stone was, and continues to be, the chief building material.

ANALOGY OF A STONE ARCHWAY

A large portion of the scripture reading from Romans can be summarized simply by looking at the picture on the bulletin cover. This is a picture I took of a stone archway in Caesarea Philippi. This

is in Northern Israel near the base of Mount Hermon. It was an important Roman as well as Pagan location. If you remember the picture of the Gates of Hell that I showed a little while ago, this is within a mile of that location. When Jesus told Peter, "Upon this rock I will build my church," this is the city where he said it.

This is a Roman Arch. It is not a Romanesque Arch, because it is NOT a copy of a Roman archway, it's the real thing. This archway was part of the foundations of the city, and a series of passageways that connect different buildings. It has been restored. Today we can wander among the hallways of Caesarea Philippi. Archways are important architecture discoveries. Without them there are no windows, and no doors, just walls. It is quite likely that the archway you are looking at was

in the same location for Jesus, Peter, and other disciples to look at too.

Each stone in the arch is important, and each has a different function. The writers of the New Testament often referred to them in giving us lessons about how to build our lives.

CORNERSTONES, KEYSTONES, AND STUMBLING STONES

- Cornerstones.
- Keystones
- Stumbling stones.

This archway has them all. Your life has them all. Your faith has them all. So let's call them out.

CONSTRUCTION

This arch was built by shaping rocks into cubes and trapezoids, and placing them over a wooden form until every thing was set in place. When the last stones were ready, the building forms were removed, and people held their breath to see if the archway would hold up. One of the lasting Roman inventions was concrete -- it is composed of lime, sand, stone, and binding materials used in various proportions. Concrete was one of the most important technologies of the Roman Empire, used to build not only buildings but used underwater to construct harbors. You can see Roman and modern Portland cement in this picture, as well as the stones.

BUILD READY

With cornerstones, keystones, stumbling blocks and concrete, now we are ready to build.

CORNERSTONES

Cornerstones or foundation stones are put in place first. They were heavy, large, and carefully chiseled because everything else had to rest on the cornerstones. Choose your cornerstones carefully. You can see that the stone on the left side of this archway was large and linked the foundation with the archway. (There are probably more foundation stones below the stones that we see.)

CORNERSTONE THOUGHTS

Deep down, I'm a Texas girl looking for that big romance every girl dreams about. Biologically, I look forward to being a cornerstone of a family. I'll be in my glory when I have a child on my knee. --
Renee Zellweger

Doing what you love is the cornerstone of having abundance in your life. -- Wayne Dyer.

Education is the cornerstone of our communities and our country. -- Bill Frist

I tell you, in my opinion, the cornerstone of democracy is free press – that's the cornerstone. --
Milos Forman

Self-respect is the cornerstone of all virtue. -- John Herschel

Social Security, a critically important, great program which does serve as the cornerstone of support for senior citizens, now faces challenges that threaten its long-term stability and well-being. The facts are there. The facts are crystal clear. --
Bill Frist

This is the moment when we must build on the wealth that open markets have created, and share its benefits more equitably. Trade has been a cornerstone of our growth and global development. But we will not be able to sustain this growth if it favors the few, and not the many. -- Barack Obama

What is sacred among one people may be ridiculous in another; and what is despised or rejected by one cultural group, may in a different environment become the cornerstone for a great edifice of strange grandeur and beauty. -- Hu Shih

**These are all great cornerstones.
But can we believe it?
We have something even better.
We have Jesus Christ.**

¹⁷So Jesus came and proclaimed peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near; ¹⁸for through him both of us have access in one Spirit to the Father. ¹⁹So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God, ²⁰built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the cornerstone. ²¹In him the whole structure is joined together and grows into a holy temple in the Lord; ²²in whom you also are built together spiritually into a dwelling-place for God. (Ephesians 2:17-22)

KEYSTONES

Look at the top of the arch. Can you see the keystone? All the stresses come together on the keystone, and some keystones were highly decorated to show off their importance. There are also some sideways stresses pushing outward from the bottom of the rounded portion, and you can see how the wall reinforces this delicate area so that it will not explode to the sides.

Keystones are the guiding principles, inspirational people, and the worthy goals that hold our lives together.

Humanity is the keystone that holds nations and men together. When that collapses, the whole structure crumbles. This is as true of baseball teams as any other pursuit in life. -- Connie Mack

I believe fundamental honesty is the keystone of business. -- Harvey Firestone

The keystone of successful business is cooperation. Friction retards progress. -- James Cash Penney

The presence of the Holy Spirit is the keystone of all our hopes. -- John Nelson Darby

STUMBLING STONES

We have cornerstones below, and keystones above.

Now look at the floor of the archways. Because of my bifocals, I seldom look out the bottoms of my eyeglasses. The part of the world around my feet is the fuzzy part. So can you imagine me walking through this archway looking up at the keystone, and touching the walls and thinking about how long this had been in place? Then I would discover the third stone: the stumbling stone. That is the step at the bottom of the arch that I would never have noticed. And I remember practicing my stumbling right in this place.

It is often the way we confront our stumbling stones that determines success or failure.

Paul built a foundation for faith but he finds stumbling stones in the Jewish laws. That is the core of today's lesson. Paul says that the Jewish insistence upon following the books of law in the Hebrew Scriptures has created a stumbling block for those who are not Jews. "The Jews have zeal for God, but we believe that the laws point to Jesus Christ, and in him there is a righteousness for everyone who believes."

For Christ is the end of the law so that there may be righteousness for everyone who believes.
(Romans 10:4)

If you confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. (Romans 10:9)

¹¹The scripture says, 'No one who believes in him will be put to shame.' ¹²For there is no distinction between Jew and Greek; the same Lord is Lord of all and is generous to all who call on him. ¹³For, 'Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved.' (Romans 10:11-13)

Stumbling stones can build faith. Don't be afraid of your doubts. Don't be afraid of people and the ideas that are new to your experience. Be aware of stumbling stones: One of the ways to discover what you are for is to compare it with what you oppose.

One of the ways to discover what you can do is to test yourself against challenges you are not sure you can do. One of the ways to appreciate success is to fail at a few things.

A TEAM TO CHEER FOR

One of the ways to appreciate the World Series champions is to suffer fifty-three years of torture. (Go Giants!) Wasn't that a moment of good news? Which did you prefer watching: the Giants win the World Series, or the horrible political commercials about how bad everything is in California and across the globe?

I need something to cheer about. When we were in college it was fun to be the village cynics and be grumpy about things, and ideas, and people. But I outgrew that. You have outgrown that too.

NO WHINING

No more whining! Give me a team to cheer for. Give me a congregation to cheer for. The next time you encounter a grumbler, give them a hug. That's what they really want. We are smart enough to know that.

When we have something to cheer for, we are not obsessing about the stumbling stones.

THE DALAI LAMA

The Dalai Lama says, "Science and technology are the new faith. But they can also be barriers to faith."

What do we use technology for? Our own comforts. But science and technology cannot cure spiritual pain.

Mental state is important for our health. How do we create a healthy body and a healthy mind? Mental health cannot be produced by recreational drugs, and can not be purchased from the supermarket. It comes by faith.

ARCHWAY

Let's go back to the archway where we began.

Paul had something like this in mind when he talked about cornerstones. Jesus Christ is our cornerstone.

Keystones inspire us, just as the Holy Spirit lifts us toward the lasting and the eternal.

And if stumbling stones cause you to stumble, get back up. If something is out of place, be your own janitorial staff -- put it in its proper place. And know that you are part of something more important. No whining. (Agreed?)

Our church is part of something far bigger than our congregation; our mission extends beyond our doors to our city, and our world. Our elders and deacons and your ministers were ordained to the Christian Church that is worldwide. You were baptized into the Christian faith. That is a big house. So remember whose house you belong to.

Now, come and have lunch with us, because this year that has tested us in so many ways, has given us so much to be thankful for.

(The Stewardship Luncheon was served in Bowen Hall following the worship service.)



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