

Is Jesus your Rock or your stumbling block?

1 Pet. 2:6-8, Jer. 8, Jn. 6:48-58

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Introduction: Jesus is one or the other: either the rock that holds you steady and firm (your sure foundation), or the stumbling block that will ultimately expose the falseness of your life and bring about your downfall. Our life cannot be true, genuine, and authentic until we allow the worthy King of the universe His rightful place in our heart (the only One who can rescue us from ourselves and fine-tune our priorities, values, goals, relationships, etc.).

1) Paul writes in Rom. 9:33, ***“See, I lay in Zion a stone that causes people to stumble and a rock that makes them fall, and the one who believes in him will never be put to shame.”*** The contrast here is between the people of Israel who pursued the law as their way of righteousness, stumbling and falling, and the Gentiles who didn’t pursue righteousness at all, but by believing, they were made righteous through faith in Jesus (therefore, will not be put to shame)! Where did Paul get these concepts? He’s quoting two passages from Isaiah: ***“The Lord Almighty is the one you are to regard as holy ... He will be a holy place; for both Israel and Judah he will be a stone that causes people to stumble and a rock that makes them fall. And for the people of Jerusalem he will be a trap and a snare”*** (8:14). “Stumble and fall” are reinforced here by “trap and snare.” The second part of Paul’s quote comes from a different Isaiah passage: ***“So this is what the Sovereign Lord says: ‘See, I lay a stone in Zion, a tested stone, a precious cornerstone for a sure foundation; the one who relies on it will not be dismayed’”*** (28:16).

Yet Paul isn’t the only New Testament writer to cite this passage. Peter uses it in his first letter (2:6-8): ***“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.’ 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.’”*** First, he cites Is. 28, later Ps. 118:22, then Is. 8:14. The contrast for Peter is directly between believers and unbelievers in relation to this Stone: it’s precious for believers, but rejected by unbelievers, thus a source of stumbling and falling. Peter may have learned this from Jesus, who also quoted Ps. 118 when He told a parable about wicked tenants who refused to share the fruits of their harvest with the landowner. And those listening to the parable were especially the chief priests and elders who were questioning His authority. So He warned them that if they persisted in this opposition to Him, they would fulfill the prophecy about the builders who rejected the cornerstone, and the result would be twofold: they would fall on the stone (active), which would break them to pieces like ceramic pottery crashing onto a stone, but they’re also described in terms of the stone falling on them (passive), crushing them (Greek verb *likmao*, suggesting winnowing, blowing away like chaff). This image of the rock that crushes is also taken as suggestive of the rock cut from the mountain not by human hands (Dan. 2:34-35), which destroyed the statue that Nebuchadnezzar had dreamed about (gold/silver/bronze/iron/clay), and that rock (identified with Jesus) then grew till it filled the whole earth. If we follow the logic of these verses,

Scripture teaches that refusing to let Jesus be the Rock of your life (foundation/cornerstone) means that this Rock will inevitably become your stumbling block and the stone that will crush you!

2) A big part of our spiritual problem is that we don't think deeply about the Gospel, which is the only place that impels us to think deeply about what's *wrong* with us and our world: what was so broken in us that it had to manifest as the murder of our Creator? ("Wait, if I'd been there, I wouldn't have gone along with that!" Check out Is. 53:6, Ps. 14:3, Ro. 3:23.) What was that *inner rottenness* in us that could only be satisfied by committing such a heinous crime?! What was done at the cross was actually just the culminating manifestation of what all of us decide: "I don't want God *ruling* me; I'd rather do that myself!" All the blame, we tried to pin on Him, and He received it from us, from our hands, in His face, all the worst in us, our greatest crime, and still forgave it, in our very face. Yet He was simply ratifying and confirming on earth what the Father and Son had agreed on in eternity!

If we don't delve deeply into these questions, we tend to give superficial answers to life's greatest dilemma, and apply *less than serious solutions*. It was the problem in Jeremiah's day (it was a time when society was imploding around them from all the corruption, and Jeremiah saw the judgment that was coming): the supposedly "wise" ones of his age had abandoned God's word as the true source of wisdom and guidance, so what sense did they make? (Jer. 8:9). They were trying to solve their society's problems with irrelevant remedies and foolishness: "*They dress the wound of my people as if it were not serious* [only a "trifling"]! *'Peace, peace,' they say, when there is no peace*" (Jer. 8:11). Do we see there a reflection of what's happening in our own day? It was also going on in Jesus' day. Jn. 6 shows us the superficial mindset that characterized many who saw Jesus' miracles and thought He would be the perfect remedy for what ailed their personal lives, and when Jesus refused to go along with their plan and began to teach them about the true cost of discipleship to Him, many decided they no longer wanted to follow Him – His teaching was suddenly becoming "too hard" to swallow. Is there some "hard word" from the Lord that will have the effect of making Jesus into a stumbling block for you? We need to take a fresh look at Jn. 6.

3) The *context* of this hard teaching: the day before had been so beautiful – relaxing on the sunny shores of the Sea of Galilee, enjoying a huge convocation, hearing the beautiful teachings from the most popular rabbi in Israel. And then He turned the day into a spectacular feast of fresh bread and the best fish you ever tasted, and everybody was super-delighted! Some among the crowd were even discussing the possibility of crowning Jesus as Messiah King, and when the disciples got word of these rumblings, they started going ecstatic! Just the kind of popular uprising they'd been waiting for! So Mt./Mk. tell us that Jesus went over and ordered the disciples to take a boat ride to the other side of the lake – "goodbye!" – while He would go up on the mountain to pray for a while. What a damper He put on their excitement.

But you remember how in the middle of the night, after Jesus had spent multiple hours in prayer, He decided it was time to go join the disciples, who were having trouble rowing across the lake because the winds were so contrary. They'd been at this all night and were getting tired, so Jesus would just walk on out there to meet them – the deep waters are no obstacle to Him! *Your deep waters* are no obstacle for Him either – He'll still come to you, no matter how deep the waters that feel like they're about to sink your boat or take you under! After Jesus gets into the boat and calms their ramped-up fears (they had thought He was a ghost), Mt. and Mk. tell us that they *can't do anything but worship Him*: they'd never seen anything like this man who calms storms, multiplies food for thousands, walks on water. They can't get over Him – they're "reduced to worship and awe!" Ever happen to you? The depth of His love, the intensity of His compassion, the overwhelming kindness of His sacrifice – all the works of His hands and heart can just reduce you to worshipping, so you can't do anything else! That's the Holy Spirit seeking a deeper grip on your soul!

Once Jesus is in the boat, it doesn't take them long to reach the other side of the lake. And the next morning as the crowd from the other side of the lake begins to arrive, curious about how Jesus got

there. But He knows their true motivation – He sees everything there is inside us. Nothing can be hidden from Him. So He begins a tense dialogue with them: ***“It wasn’t because you really saw the signs I performed, but because you filled your bellies! Instead of working so hard for food that spoils, you should be more concerned about getting the food that lasts forever, which the Son of Man will give you”*** (Jn. 6:26-27). Then the Jews quarreled with Him about Moses, who had fed the Israelites in the desert and they were waiting for a repetition of that miracle; so Jesus clarifies that it wasn’t Moses who gave them the manna, but God Himself, and Jesus Himself was the real living bread from heaven, and His very life would be their true nourishment, if they were willing to eat His flesh and drink His blood. This was the hard teaching that soon turned many would-be disciples away.

Conclusion: The teaching about “eating Jesus’ flesh and drinking His blood” made Jesus a stumbling block to many at that point in His ministry; they were no longer attracted to Him. Too often we tend to reduce the meaning of these words to the communion service (as if Jesus were merely prophesying about a ceremony we would partake of in His memory). But Jesus wasn’t teaching about the communion service! The church celebration is only the *commemoration*, the symbol and the testimony of Jesus’ life-giving sacrifice. The Lord’s primary interest was never in rituals or ceremonies as an end in themselves. These were always intended to be parables pointing to deep spiritual truth. In fact, He despised ritualism for its own sake (see Ps. 40:6/Heb. 10:5-6; Ps. 51:16, 69:30-31); Jesus was especially fond of quoting Hos. 6:6 (Mt. 9:13/12:7): ***“I desire mercy, not sacrifice.”*** What Jesus longs for is not for us to “feed on” religious ceremonies, but to “feed on Him” – spending time in His Word (what He taught us), soaking in the grace and kindness He incarnated. Our default mode is to live according to our appetites, our feelings and ego (a dictator!). So eating His flesh and drinking His blood is actually about crucifying our old self with Him and having real intimacy with the Savior who laid down His life for us even in the face of our rejection, so that He could conquer the “strong man” who had us trapped as hostages; He poured out His forgiveness and mercy on us even as humanity poured out all our wickedness and violence on Him.

Eating His flesh and drinking His blood, then, is something you do in your everyday life if you are living according to His Word and Spirit! Feeding on Him every day is the spiritual nourishment for your soul, your inner being: your identity, your life vision, your goals and ambitions – bringing every dimension of life to bow to His Kingship, intentionally submitted to His rule (let Him “reign in my brain”). This is where you get your “humanity” recharged and the image of Christ in you refurbished! Participating in the Lord’s Supper is basically a re-commitment to walking according to the Spirit and not according to the flesh (Rom. 8:4). So participating in this moment of ceremonial communion is an outward sign that Jesus is the inner reality of my daily life – my Rock! He becomes my **LIFESTYLE** only by making Him my daily sustenance! At the same time, of course, communion is also an invitation to others to come be a part of this intimate fellowship of the cross, because we’re also recommitting to participation in the same destiny as our Lord’s: identifying with the suffering and the needs of others as the true “road to glory” – a reminder of our constant need for deep intimacy with the Lord Jesus, feeding on His grace and truth.