**Matthew 21:42-44**

<https://thebiblesays.com/commentary/matt/matt-21/matthew-2142-44/>

Jesus follows up the Sadducees’ and Pharisees’ response to how the landowner will bring the wretched vine-growers to an end with a startling question and a condemning passage from the Psalms. He ends His rebuke by telling them that God will take away their place in His kingdom from them and scatter them like dust.

The parallel gospel accounts of this confrontation are found in Mark 12:10-11 and Luke 20:17-18).

Jesus had just told the priests and elders in the temple two parables about His authority, and how God viewed their stewardship of Israel as disobedient and abusive. The consequence of their disobedience would lead to the loss of their authority, and that authority would be given to repentant sinners who are more worthy followers of God (Matthew 21:28-41).

The second parable depicted wicked vine-growers who killed the landowner’s servants and son when they were sent to collect the produce on the owner’s behalf. This parable prophetically foretold how these priests would plot to kill Jesus and do so in order to advance their own authority. But it also served as a warning for them to recognize that God had sent His Son to them and that instead of murdering Him, they should listen to Him.

Jesus ended His parable by asking the priests and elders what would happen to the wicked vine-growers when the owner returned (Matthew 12:40). They answered that “He will bring those wretches to a wretched end, and will rent out the vineyard to other vine-growers who will pay him the proceeds at the proper seasons” (Matthew 21:41).

Jesus immediately followed up the priests’ and elders’ observation with a rebuking question:

Did you never read in the Scriptures,

‘The stone which the builders rejected,This became the chief corner stone;This came about from the Lord,And it is marvelous in our eyes’?

The structure of Jesus’s question is harsh. Its negative construction—“Did you never…?”—presumed that the priest and elders never had read this passage in the Scriptures. Or if they did read it, they have never understood it. The Jewish leaders would have been considered experts in the Jewish law, and it would be a slight to accuse them of not understanding a provision of the Jewish scriptures.

This passage is a direct quote from Psalm 118:22-23. It is difficult to imagine a more fitting verse that Jesus could have quoted to the priests at this moment. This scripture recollects the Messianic proclamations of the crowd days before. It highlights a fulfillment of a Messianic prophecy. And it reiterates one of Jesus’s main points from the preceding parables.

Psalm 118 is the same psalm that the crowds quoted when they were joyfully shouting “Hosanna” over Jesus as He entered Jerusalem earlier that week (Psalm 118:26; Matthew 21:9). The passage Jesus questioned the priests about immediately preceded the passage that the people proclaimed during His triumphal entrance. His use and insertion of this psalm served as an approving echo of the people’s Messianic shouts.

The quote is an architectural metaphor. In the days before steel beams, stones were the construction material of choice to strengthen structures. Builders inspected stones to determine their best use. Some stones were rejected and deemed unusable for construction while other stones were highly prized for their capability. The biggest and strongest stones were selected to be used in the foundation of the building. The chief corner stone was the strongest and best stone of all because it would be used to support the weight of the entire building.

This metaphor within Psalm 118 expresses a common theme throughout the Old Testament. The theme is this: God often overlooks the strong and selects the weak to accomplish His purposes. This theme was expressed in countless ways: God chose the aged Abraham and Sarah to give birth to His people (Genesis 12:1-6; Hebrews 11:8-12); His promise flowed through Jacob instead of his older brother (Malachi 1:2-3; Romans 9:13); God used stammering Moses to speak on His behalf before Pharaoh (Exodus 4:10); God summoned the enslaved children of Israel to be His nation (Deuteronomy 4:20; 5:6); He called skittish Gideon to lead His people against the Midianites (Judges 6:11-16); God chose the young, inexperienced, and perhaps illegitimate David to be the King of Israel (1 Samuel 16:7). Overarching all these illustrations is God choosing humans over the angels to rule over His creation (see commentary on [Psalm 8](https://thebiblesays.com/commentary/ps/ps-8/) and [Hebrews 2](https://thebiblesays.com/commentary/heb/heb-2/)).

By citing this psalm here, Jesus taught that this same theme applied to His role as the Messiah. Jesus was the stone which the builders rejected. The Pharisees and Sadducees He was speaking to were the builders who rejected Him.

The effect of Jesus’s question to the priests and elders was, “How is it that you have understood what would happen to the wicked vine-growers but are unable to recognize that you are behaving as they did? Can you not see that you are rejecting the chief corner stone of God’s kingdom?” Jesus is now making it plain to the priests and elders that the vine-growers in the parable represent them, and that Jesus is the Son of the Landowner, who is God.

Jesus’s use of Psalm 118 not only harkened back to the “Hosanna” shouts from the crowds, it underlined two prophetic fulfillments of the Scriptures. First, the priests would reject Jesus as the Messiah (Matthew 26:63-67). And second, Jesus would still be the Messiah and the foundation upon which the entire kingdom of God is constructed (1 Corinthians 3:11).

The priests and elders could not stop this from happening because this came about from the Lord. Despite the mistake of the priests and elders, Jesus would still be the chief corner stone of the “building” that is the kingdom of God, and Israel as well as the Church, that is the Body of Christ. In other words, their rejection of Him did not diminish the fact that Jesus was still the Messiah. Ironically their rejection of Jesus as Messiah worked to fulfill this Messianic prophecy in Psalm 118. Their rejection could not disqualify Him as their King. They could not diminish, limit, or hinder Him from accomplishing everything the Messiah was supposed to do. Even though they would reject Him, Jesus will still become the foundational corner stone of God’s kingdom. They could not stop God from accomplishing His will.

After Jesus rose from the dead, Peter quoted Psalm 118:22-23 “He is the STONE WHICH WAS REJECTED by you, THE BUILDERS, but WHICH BECAME THE CHIEF CORNER stone” during his trial, as he tried to persuade the Sanhedrin that Jesus was the Messiah (Acts 4:11). It was likely that many of the same priests and elders who heard Jesus originally quote Psalm 118:22-23 here, during the week before He was crucified, were also present months later when Peter referenced it once again.

Jesus concluded this quotation of Psalm 118 with Psalm 118:23: This came about from the Lord, And it is marvelous in our eyes. The word marvelous means “wonderfully unexpected” or “amazing.” It is more than amazing that it came about from the Lord that the Messiah was rejected by His own people (John 1:11). But it was through Israel’s rejection that the Gentiles were allowed to be grafted into the goodness of the tree that is Israel (Romans 11:11,19,24).

It would have been marvelous and dumbfounding to the Jews at this time to realize that the Messiah’s kingdom would house Gentiles from foreign lands. And yet this is what would happen. Decades later, Paul was still marveling at this wonder in His letter to the predominantly Gentile believers of Ephesus.

“So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints, and are of God’s household, having been built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus Himself being the corner stone, in whom the whole building, being fitted together, is growing into a holy temple in the Lord, in whom you also are being built together into a dwelling of God in the Spirit.”  
(Ephesians 2:19-22)

These lines from Psalm 118:22-23 are also referenced in 1 Peter 2:7-8.

The line that Jesus quoted from Psalm 118 was also reminiscent of a prophecy from Isaiah.

“Therefore thus says the Lord God,  
‘Behold, I am laying in Zion a stone, a tested stone,  
A costly cornerstone for the foundation, firmly placed.  
He who believes in it will not be disturbed.’”  
(Isaiah 28:16)

In addition to this quotation’s recollection of the people’s Messianic hopes and its pointing to a prophetic fulfillment of the scriptures, it also served to underscore a key point from Jesus’s parable of the vineyard as it applied to the priests and elders; namely that they were rejecting the landowner’s son. Jesus explained this point in what He taught next.

Therefore I say to you, the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people, producing the fruit of it. This was Jesus’s affirming in unmistakable terms what the priests and elders had just responded to Him when He questioned them about what should happen to the murderous vine-growers, saying “He will bring those wretches to a wretched end**”** (Matthew 21:41a). Jesus connected their own observation to the Messianic quote from Psalm 118, showing that in rejecting Jesus as the chief corner stone, they were like the wicked vine-growers who killed the landowner’s son.

Next Jesus said And he who falls on this stone will be broken to pieces; but on whomever it falls, it will scatter him like dust. This was another allusion to Isaiah.

“Then He shall become a sanctuary;  
But to both the houses of Israel, a stone to strike and a rock to stumble over,  
And a snare and a trap for the inhabitants of Jerusalem.  
“Many will stumble over them,  
Then they will fall and be broken;  
They will even be snared and caught.”  
(Isaiah 8:14-15)

Here Jesus was telling the priests and elders, “who are the inhabitants of Jerusalem” (from Isaiah 8:14), that He is an unavoidable stone of offense. Along the road of justice and social harmony everyone falls short (Romans 3:23). Sooner or later, everyone encounters the giant stone that is Jesus. He is unavoidable. Every individual will either “stumble over” Jesus and “be broken” (Isaiah 8:15) by Him. Or as Jesus said, he who falls on this stone (Jesus) will be broken to pieces. Additionally, upon whomever the stone that is Jesus falls upon, it will scatter him like dust. This could foreshadow the looming dispersion of the Jews to the nations under Roman persecution, after they continued to reject Jesus, even after they were offered another opportunity to receive Him as Messiah after He rose from the dead (Acts 3:19-20).

The first scenario of falling on this stone and being broken to pieces might describe those who encounter Jesus and are broken to pieces by His holiness and mercy. When they encounter the person of Christ, they are struck by His holy perfection and their sin. Though it is painful, they are moved to repentance, and stumble into receiving eternal life through faith (John 3:14-16).

When they believe, they are born again, and receive a new nature. In Him they have new life. They are born again (John 3:16) and are a new creation (I Corinthians 5:17). Jesus will then become an available sanctuary, and available as a great source of comfort and rest as their new life finds a home in Him. He who falls on this stone and will be broken to pieces is like the one who loses his life (Greek “pusche”) to save it (Matthew 16:25).

The conversion of Peter (Luke 5:8) and Paul’s perspective post-conversion (Philippians 3:7-11) are possible pictures of what it looks like to stumble on Jesus and be broken to pieces in terms of initially coming to faith (being justified before God). Peter’s repentance when Jesus asked him if he loved Him (John 21:15-17) might be a picture of being broken and returning to fellowship with God (sanctification through a walk of faith.)

Jesus’s line but on whomever it falls, it will scatter him like dust might refer to those who reject Jesus and His righteousness. This refers to whomever trusts in themselves; whomever thinks they are fine without Jesus; and whomever does not believe in Him; whomever sees no need to repent. But these whomevers are mistaken.

Here too, Jesus is unavoidable. God is just. Whomever will not believe upon Him condemns himself (John 3:18). When Jesus deals with them it will be like a massive slab of rock suddenly falls on them. This heavy stone will crush them and scatter every aspect of their lives, including their self-righteousness like dust. The whomever who rejects Jesus will have this stone fall upon and crush him is like the one who desires to save his life (“pusche”) and loses it (Matthew 16:25). This principle could apply to those who have yet to believe, like Paul prior to his encounter with Christ on the road to Damascus (Acts 9), and it could apply to believers who are walking in disobedience, like Peter when he chastised Jesus for saying He was going to die (Matthew 16:23).

The repentant tax collectors, prostitutes, and sinners were like the ones who were broken to pieces by Jesus. They believed God’s message (Matthew 21:32). They repented of their ways (Matthew 21:28-29). Their old lives were broken. But He healed them, and He was making them whole. They were being granted entrance into the kingdom (Matthew 21:31). And for their faithfulness they were being given positions of influence in the kingdom of God (Matthew 21:41, 21:43). This represents their new birth (being justified in the presence of God through faith) as well as their new life (walking in faith as a new creation in Christ in fellowship with God).

The religious leaders to whom Jesus was saying these things were like the ones this same stone falls on. When it came to true righteousness, they were all show and no substance (Matthew 21:30). They were missing the kingdom (Matthew 21:31). They did not believe God’s message when they first heard it, and they did not believe and repent even now (Matthew 21:32). They sought to maintain their old way of life, with their rules, customs, and traditions of self-righteousness. They remained obstinate about the marvelous work that God was doing before their eyes (Matthew 21:42). They were the vine-growers who killed the landowner’s son to claim his inheritance (Matthew 21:39-39). They were the builders who rejected the chief corner stone of God’s kingdom (Matthew 21:42). This stone would fall upon them and scatter them like dust (Matthew 21:41). For all these things, Jesus said God will take away their place of honor in His kingdom and give it to a people who are actually producing fruit (Matthew 21:44).

These religious priests and elders were behaving like the barren fig tree that Jesus cursed on His way into the city. Unless they soon repented, they too would wither as the tree did, never to produce fruit again (Matthew 21:19).

We are not told whether the religious leaders were deemed by God to have believed sufficiently to be justified in the presence of God. The amount of faith required is the same amount required to look upon the bronze snake in the wilderness, hoping to be delivered from the poison of vipers (John 3:14-15). Jesus declared that the teaching of the scribes and Pharisees was sound, but their life choices did not match with their teaching (Matthew 23:3). This could indicate that they were in God’s family, as those who believed in the scripture, and that Messiah would come.

If this is the case, then Jesus’ excoriating chastisement of the Pharisees in passages such as Matthew 23 might be a shadow of what it will look like for believers’ deeds to be judged in the refining fire of God’s holiness at the judgement seat of Christ, as this picture painted by the Apostle Paul indicates will be the case for all who believe and are born into God’s family:

“For no man can lay a foundation other than the one which is laid, which is Jesus Christ. Now if any man builds on the foundation with gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, straw, each man’s work will become evident; for the day will show it because it is to be revealed with fire, and the fire itself will test the quality of each man’s work. If any man’s work which he has built on it remains, he will receive a reward. If any man’s work is burned up, he will suffer loss; but he himself will be saved, yet so as through fire."  
(1 Corinthians 3:11-15)

**Biblical Text**

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Therefore I say to you, the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people, producing the fruit of it. And he who falls on this stone will be broken to pieces; but on whomever it falls, it will scatter him like dust.”**