

# Matthew 21:42-44

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*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](#) and [Hebrews 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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**'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'?"**

**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."**