

Today

Nov/Dec 2018

refresh, refocus, renew



THE JESSE TREE

ALSO: ROCKS AND STONES

Friends:

I had a tree in my yard that I did not want, so I cut it down. I tried to cut it low so that my lawn mower would pass over it easily. As grass grew around it, I thought that would be the end of the tree. But then the stump started to grow shoots. New trees came up out of the ground with vigor! That tree was not done growing.



Scripture describes Jesus as a shoot growing up from the stump of Jesse. Jesse was the father of King David and an ancestor to Jesus of Nazareth, but by Jesus' time, the kings of David's line seemed long gone. Jesus, however, was not only a king but also the Lord and Savior of all.

This December, we will examine with Kurt Selles the "Jesse Tree" tradition, an Advent calendar that prompts us to reflect on a new symbol every day as we retell God's story leading up to the coming of Jesus.

But first, in November, Julia Prins Vanderveen helps us consider another biblical image—focusing on rocks and stones. Rock is everywhere, solid and secure. How is our living God like rock and stone?

May you be refreshed, refocused, and renewed in God's Word!

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Steven Koster".

—Steven Koster

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“Rocks and Stones”
Julia Prins Vanderveen



“The Jesse Tree”
Kurt Selles

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ReFrame
Media

november

Rocks and Stones

Julia Prins Vanderveen

The Bible uses all kinds of metaphors to reveal truth to us. God knows that sometimes the most obvious things around us can give us deep insights. For example, rocks and stones—nonliving materials all over the earth—are often mentioned in the Bible, from Genesis to Revelation. Jacob used a stone for a pillow; Moses struck a rock in the wilderness; the devil taunted Jesus to turn stones into bread; Jesus told a parable about building a house on a rock.

Rocks and stones are commonplace, everyday things, and yet the lessons they hold are like rare gems to be examined and treasured. So let's look at some of the Bible's geologic metaphors and images this month. Perhaps you can look for more references to rocks and stones as you continue reading the Bible. And hopefully even the rocks where you live can be reminders of all the ways God speaks to his people.

Julia Prins Vanderveen works and lives in Vancouver, British Columbia, with her husband, Trevor, and their three young sons. Julia has served in campus ministry and as a copastor with Trevor at a church in Vancouver. She now works at Vancouver Christian School as its campus pastor and as a part-time teacher. Her upbringing on a farm and her passion for environmental studies has filled her with a deep love of creation and prompts her to look for ways to view the created world through the lens of Scripture.

THE FOUNDATIONS OF THE EARTH

He set the earth on its foundations.

—Psalm 104:5

I was fortunate to grow up under the broad, blue skies of the Canadian prairie in Alberta. My three brothers and I spent many happy days of our childhood outside, exploring. Sometimes we stumbled on a bird's nest or a fawn. We picked saskatoon berries and climbed trees. We also found some amazing rocks, prizing especially the ones that sparkled and glittered with strands of quartz or mica. They were like treasures, and I kept them close.

Now I have children—three boys—and we live in the city of Vancouver. There's wildlife, including coyotes, raccoons, and eagles. There are trees to climb and berries to pick. But rocks seem to be rare in the world of pavement, concrete, and manicured parks—until you see streets of cobblestone, steps of granite, statues and walls of

marble, and much more. Rocks are everywhere!

Rocks are amazing not just because they are pretty, but also because they are like windows into reality. God speaks to us in the Bible using all kinds of references to things he created: plants, water, wind, animals, rocks, and much more. All of it is good and beautiful—and like a window into his goodness.

So this month let's go rock-finding in the Bible and see what stones and gems can teach us—about God's character, our own character, and our need for God in all situations.

God, our Creator and Redeemer, thank you for this beautiful world, and for your Word to help us appreciate it even more. Open our eyes and our hearts to see you. Amen.

ROCK, STONE, FORTRESS

Truly he is my rock and my salvation; he is my fortress; I will never be shaken.
—Psalm 62:2

In our family we got into a discussion about the difference between rocks and stones. Is there a difference, or is it just two names for the same thing?

To geologists, who study the earth, as well as to builders and rock collectors, a *rock* is any mass of mineral matter that has not been changed by human hands. So it can be a huge chunk or a tiny pebble. A rock becomes a *stone* when it is cut and shaped to build something or to function in some way, like part of a building or roadway.

Now, we can't impose those definitions on the ancient text of the Bible, but it's interesting that more than 40 times in Scripture, God is referred to as "the Rock" or as "my rock"—often in the Psalms. Jesus Christ is also referred to as a rock, and he is called the capstone and cornerstone in references

to the building of God's church and kingdom.

What comes to mind when you think of a fortress? Something solid, sturdy, powerful, unshakable? God is all of those things. And in God, through the saving work of Jesus, we are secure, protected, safe. The power of God's unfailing love is infinitely greater than any attacks trying to threaten us. We can "trust in him at all times." If we trust in riches, or status, or the ways of this world, our efforts will fail. But "God is our refuge"; in him our destiny is secure. In God our souls find rest and salvation!

God, you alone are our Rock and our salvation. There is no one like you. Help us to trust in you, Lord, that we may never be shaken. In Jesus, Amen.

THE ROCK SUPREME

"A rock was cut out, but not by human hands."

—Daniel 2:34

Sometimes when people see a large, beautifully cut diamond, they will say, "Wow, what a gorgeous rock!" Of course, they are referring to the fact that the gemstone is delicately fashioned, but its size, value, and rarity also make an impact.

There's an interesting story in Daniel 2 about a rock that makes a surprising impact. With God's help, Daniel was able to interpret dreams, and he helped King Nebuchadnezzar understand a troubling dream he had had. Daniel says: "While you were watching, a rock was cut out, but not by human hands. It struck the statue on its feet of iron and clay and smashed them."

The dream was picturing the amazing Rock that is Christ! The vision showed that a series of oppressive regimes that would rule on the earth

would be smashed to pieces by Christ, the Rock of God, the supreme power over all things.

The vision also showed that "the rock that struck the statue became a huge mountain and filled the whole earth." This is a depiction of Jesus Christ as the ruler of the cosmos, as we see in Colossians. We read there that Jesus, the Son of God, is the supreme power and authority over everything, and his presence fills the whole earth.

Do you know this Savior as your Rock?

Lord Jesus, you are infinite in your power. You are the perfect image of God, and your presence fills the universe. Fill us today with confidence in your ultimate goodness and love. In your name we pray. Amen.

CHRIST, THE CORNERSTONE

You are . . . built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone.

—Ephesians 2:19-20

Jesus, the Son of God who came to live among us and save us from the curse of sin and death, is “the chief cornerstone” of the building project that is God’s eternal kingdom. “God so loved the world” that he sent his Son on this mission (John 3:16), and he has become the cornerstone, with a specific purpose.

Nowadays we tend to overlook the importance of a cornerstone on a building because many construction techniques can be used to make sure a building will be level and plumb. But long ago, when builders were planning their projects, the importance of the cornerstone made all the difference. The orientation and angle of the cornerstone determined how the rest of the building would be built. If the building was not aligned with the cornerstone, the walls and

corners and everything else would be askew.

When we read that Christ is the cornerstone, that means Jesus is our right and true foundation—perfect—and whatever is built in alignment with him will be right and true too.

Sometimes we think it is up to us to make sure everything measures up. But the Bible shows that because we are built up in Christ, we can be confident that not only do we belong but we also fit.

God, our Father, our lives are sometimes crooked and uneven, but you build us up in Christ—the most reliable, true, and solid foundation we could ever hope for. Thank you! In his name we pray. Amen.

TO YOU, GOD, I CALL

To you, LORD, I call; you are my Rock. . . .

—Psalm 28:1

Many of the references to God as “my Rock” in the Psalms are prayed in the context of personal lament. That means the prayers are being offered in times of personal suffering and struggle. Somehow the very act of crying out to God is an act of trust, and calling God “my Rock” is a deep affirmation that the God to whom we call out is dependable and responsive.

The prayer of Psalm 28 goes on to plead with God not to be silent. This may be a reference to the gods of other nations surrounding David at that time. Those gods were unable to hear, see, or speak. They were deaf and silent, unresponsive and uncaring, represented only by the carved idols they used in worship. So David may well be saying to God, “Don’t be like that! Be who you are! Continue to be the God you

have revealed yourself to be! See what evil people are doing, and intervene! And then, several verses later, he sings with confidence, “Praise be to the LORD, for he has heard my cry for mercy. The LORD is my strength and my shield; my heart trusts in him, and he helps me.”

When we find that our circumstances are overwhelming, or it seems everything is falling to pieces, we can call out to God, our Rock, and find that he hears and protects and helps.

Our hearts are filled with gratitude, O God. We call out to you, and you answer us. Be our shepherd and guide us forever, we pray. Amen.

GOD IS MY ROCK

He shields all who take refuge in him.

—Psalm 18:30

Overlooking the town of Squamish, British Columbia, is a huge rock, an enormous granite monolith called Stawamus Chief. At its tallest point, the Chief is over 700 meters (765 yards) above sea level. If you can handle a rugged hike, you can climb it and take in spectacular views of the valley below. It is also an important place for the Indigenous people who live here because it reminds them of the Creator, even if they don't know him fully.

When we pray with the psalmist, "God is my Rock, in whom I take refuge," we aren't using an image of a small polished rock that we can put in our pocket. We are also not thinking of the rock as cold, hard, and unfeeling.

Instead we are thinking of other characteristics, such as protection, shelter, and solid

reliability. In the Bible, God has revealed himself to be faithful, dependable, and strong. God is the same yesterday, today, and forever. God has unparalleled majesty, power, and endurance. There is no one like him.

This is why, for any reason, we can hide ourselves in the cleft of our chief, our protector, our God—our Rock—and he will provide shelter for us. He will keep us safe from the storm.

O God, our Rock, we turn to you and give you praise because you are strong and powerful. We hide ourselves in you and thank you for surrounding and protecting us. In your perfect name, Amen.

CAN YOU SCALE A WALL?

With my God I can scale a wall.

—Psalm 18:29

Yesterday we talked about Stawamus Chief—the magnificent granite monolith in British Columbia. One of the sides is a sheer cliff, which hikers and climbers refer to as the Grand Wall. When you drive by the Chief, you can sometimes see colorful specks part way up the Grand Wall. If you look closely, you'll see that those are actually people climbing up the face of the mountain!

Rock climbers need special harnesses, ropes, shoes, clips, and helmets. It's time-consuming to set up and challenging to climb, even with all the right equipment.

In today's verse David states, "With my God I can scale a wall." David was a warrior who, with God's help, led many successful battles against local enemies who often raided and harassed God's people. God provided help, resources, and

protection, and David knew he could do nothing without God's constant care. So even while climbing a wall in battle, he could say, "God is with me."

Did you know God is with you wherever you are, in whatever you are doing? Whether we are scaling a giant rock wall or driving along a road, whether we are working, playing, resting, or sleeping, God surrounds us and guides us. When we are aware of all this, we can also sing along with David: "The LORD lives! Praise be to my Rock! Exalted be God my Savior!"

Father, when we are at our weakest, you step in and lift us up to new heights. When we were powerless, you gave us Jesus, our Rescuer. Thank you. In your name we pray. Amen.

“AND THAT ROCK WAS CHRIST”

They all ate the same spiritual food and drank the same spiritual drink; for they drank from the spiritual rock that accompanied them, and that rock was Christ. —1 Corinthians 10:3-4

Paul says it so matter-of-factly: “and that rock was Christ.” But what does he mean by that in this letter to the Corinthians?

The community Paul was writing to in Corinth was struggling; they were complaining and had lost focus in a way like the Israelites had done in the time of Moses (see Exodus 14-17; 32; Numbers 20-21). But that doesn't change the fact that life was actually hard. The Israelites had no water in the desert, and the Corinthians were in the process of starting a whole new way of life. It was undeniably hard.

Yet Paul was retelling this story as kind of a gracious warning, reminding the new Christians in Corinth that even though life was hard, Christ was still in their midst, providing them with the nourishment of the Spirit, in a way like the rock in

the desert quenched the thirst of the Israelites long ago.

This is an invitation for all of us to consider when things make us upset or life becomes incredibly hard or burdensome. Will we complain and grumble? Will we become cynical and resentful? Or will we trust that the one who leads us in every situation will also provide the soul-satisfying water of life through the Holy Spirit? Take time to recognize the ways that Christ, the Rock, follows you through the deserts of your life, and list the ways he quenches your thirst.

Lord God, you never leave us or abandon us, even when our lives seem parched and dry. Soothe us with your Holy Spirit and refresh us with your never-ending love. Amen.

IN THE BEGINNING

The gold of that land is good; aromatic resin and onyx are also there.
—Genesis 2:12

In Genesis 2 we find a little detail that there was onyx in the land of Havilah. Where else does the Bible mention onyx, and what is its significance?

Onyx is a very hard rock that shows beautiful bands in it when polished. It was often used to make jewelry and carvings. Onyx is mentioned about a dozen times in Scripture. Several of those references are in the descriptions of Aaron's priestly garments: "Take two onyx stones and engrave on them the names of the sons of Israel."

These references give us an opportunity to make an interesting connection. These passages mentioning onyx point out what and who is significant. *First*, a tribute is made to the Creator: along with gold, the onyx found in Havilah is considered good—and, indeed, onyx has been valued as a pre-

cious stone throughout history. *Second*, the people whom God has chosen are precious and unforgettable: God wants their names carved into this gem.

In the description of the Holy City in Revelation 21, onyx is one of the stones in the city's foundation, a gleaming echo of God's good creation. And along with the other gemstones representing "the sons of Israel"—that is, all of God's people today—we can see how precious God's people are to him in eternity. Through Christ, our Savior, that includes us too!

Father, thank you that the details in Scripture reveal wonderful insights about you and your care for us. Thank you for reminding us that all you have made is good and precious—including us! Amen.

“WHAT DO THESE STONES MEAN?”

“Tell them to take up twelve stones from the middle of the Jordan. . . .”
—Joshua 4:3

A while back, our church rented out our basement to a group of students. When they arrived, I opened the door for them and showed them the space. Then one of their leaders approached me and whispered that he had been moved by the Holy Spirit to pray for our congregation.

He said he had received an image in his mind while praying: “I saw a picture of a pile of stones, much like the one Joshua and his people set up to remember God’s actions among them.” He went on to say, “You and your congregation are in a time of remembering. Pay attention to what God is doing among you. Not everyone will agree, and that’s okay. God will continue to do wonderful things in your midst.”

What he didn’t know was that our congregation had—*that very week*—reflected on this story of

Joshua and had set up a pile of stones in the sanctuary to help us remember what God had done for us in our 90-year history as a congregation!

God continues to speak powerfully through people who seek him. To those who are listening, God provides words of encouragement and guidance. Joshua set up the pile of stones so that future generations would wonder and ask about what God had done for his people.

Take time to remember what God has done for you, and listen as he reminds you of his work and power in your life through the Holy Spirit.

Lord, you continue to amaze us. Help us to remember and retell the ways you have helped us in the past. In Jesus’ name, Amen.

SPLITTING ROCKS

He split the rocks in the wilderness and gave them water as abundant as the seas.
—Psalm 78:15

Many families have stories they tell again and again when they get together. My family had a great adventure driving up to the Arctic Circle a few years ago, and we like to recall the time we were stranded by a big flood there in the remote north. God helped us by providing a local man who knew how to navigate those waters to bring us to the safe side of the river. We will never forget how we were rescued.

Similarly, the people of Israel never forgot how God provided them water in the desert. It became a defining part of their story, a memory of such great importance that you couldn't really know the story of God's people unless you knew that God provided water for them by splitting rocks in the wilderness.

Here we find two important lessons: our God is a powerful

God who does extraordinary acts of love; and we need to tell each other what God has done in order to build up our faith and have confidence that he will continue to act.

Maybe you feel stuck where you are, perhaps by overwhelming circumstances or a lack of resources—and there seems to be no way out. Ask God today to act powerfully in your life, and open yourself to receive his loving response—maybe even in an unexpected way, as the Israelites received water from a rock.

Lord, you have done so many wonderful things for your people. Help us remember and know that you will keep working and building us up. We praise your name! Amen.

LIKE JEWELS IN A CROWN

They will sparkle in his land like jewels in a crown.

—Zechariah 9:16

There is a place on the Pacific coast that we like to visit. We walk slowly along the beach with our heads down, picking up small rocks, worn smooth after years and years of being rolled back and forth by the waves. When the rocks are wet, they glisten with every color of the rainbow. I often wonder how such a variety of rocks would end up on one beach. Zechariah's words "They will sparkle in his land like jewels in a crown" make me think of that beach.

The prophecy of Zechariah was given to the people of Judah to remind them of God's overarching plans and to encourage them about deliverance in the future. Zechariah painted awe-inspiring word pictures of the salvation and restoration that the Messiah, the promised deliverer, would accomplish. The message speaks of God's

great delight in his people—they will be restored and "will sparkle in his land like jewels in a crown." God will take care of his precious sons and daughters because they are his and he wants to see them fully restored.

In Ephesians 3:10-11, Paul writes that God has revealed his amazing wisdom to the rulers and powers of this world through the church, which is built on the foundation set by the Messiah, Jesus Christ. God's people will shine as they reveal God's wisdom and beauty everywhere.

Father, we know your love for us is vast, and it touches us deeply to know how much you delight in us. Let our lives shine for your glory. In Jesus' name, Amen.

THE STONES WILL CRY OUT

"I tell you," he replied, "if they keep quiet, the stones will cry out."
—Luke 19:40

This month we have been discovering that there are many ways the Bible uses word pictures about rocks and stones. Rocks are symbolic of God's character *and* of our character. In our reading from Luke today, Jesus talks about stones that will cry out. But it's worth asking, "Which stones—and what are they saying?"

If we read this passage carefully, we'll see that Jesus was riding a colt on a road coming down the Mount of Olives. It's possible that Jesus pointed to stones along the road while he was talking, emphasizing how all of creation points to his power and authority. If the religious leaders would not let Jesus' followers praise him, then even the creation itself would cry out. And in its own way, it already does! (See Psalm 19.)

Jesus may also be referring to the stones of the walls of

Jerusalem. For as he approaches the city, he weeps over it and predicts that enemies will tear its walls down. This may be an echo of Habakkuk 2:11-12, which says, "The stones of the wall will cry out. . . . Woe to him who builds a city with bloodshed and establishes a town by injustice."

Jesus defended people who were powerless and oppressed, and he was declaring that one day his authority will be made known and the structures of oppressive societies will come crashing down. Then all of creation will join together to proclaim Jesus as Lord of all.

Lord and Savior, all power and authority belong to you. Bring down evil, and let justice prevail. We praise your name. Amen.

BE MY ROCK OF REFUGE

Be my rock of refuge, to which I can always go; give the command to save me, for you are my rock and my fortress.

—Psalm 71:3

While writing these devotions, I was hospitalized for almost two weeks in connection with a surgery. It was a time of uncertainty for me and our family, and I was often afraid of what might happen. But the surgeon reassured us confidently that things would be okay. Though he made us aware of risks, he was hopeful about the outcome.

Psalm 71 seems to be written by someone who was growing frail; the psalmist asks God not to let him “be put to shame” or to forsake him when his strength is gone. At the same time the psalmist also expresses deep confidence and trust in God.

Many people journeyed alongside our family as I regained my strength. Like the psalmist, I felt that my life was a sign to many witnesses, demonstrating

God’s goodness and provision. We were continually amazed at all the ways we were being cared for.

We know that my health situation could have unfolded in a very different way, but what never changes is that God is our rock and fortress. Though our bodies may grow frail, our confidence can become more sturdy: “Be my rock of refuge, to which I can always go.” We can trust that when we cry out and ask the Lord for healing, he always hears our prayers.

Lord, to whom can we go but you? Be our rock of refuge so that we can confidently turn to you in times of strength or weakness, for you are our rock and our fortress. In Jesus, Amen.

I WILL NOT BE SHAKEN

Truly he is my rock and my salvation; he is my fortress, I will not be shaken.
—Psalm 62:6

Receiving an unexpected prognosis or bad news can be very unsettling. Suddenly all sense of normalcy goes out the window, plans are put on hold, and life becomes about managing one day at a time. This can happen for all sorts of reasons, and we can have feelings of disorientation, confusion, and uncertainty.

Those experiences are a normal part of dealing with a crisis. So why does the psalmist say, “I will never be shaken”? Does that mean he never felt bewildered by life’s circumstances?

No. We see clearly that the psalmist feels like a “leaning wall” and a “tottering fence.” He feels hurt and vulnerable, and yet he repeats that his rest and hope are in God. We don’t have to cover up our feelings when we’re going through tough times; we can be honest about feeling like a tottering

fence and yet somehow not be shaken.

The song of Psalm 62 gives us a beautiful invitation: “Trust in him at all times, you people; pour out your hearts to him, for God is our refuge.” In a mysterious way, being vulnerable and pouring out our hearts opens us up to receive the rock-solid foundation that God’s loving character provides us. We may not be able to control what happens in our lives, but we always have the invitation to rely fully on God. No matter what happens, even if we feel as if we could be toppled, we will not be shaken.

Lord, you alone are our rock and fortress. All power and steadfast love are yours, and we trust in you. In Jesus’ name, Amen.

SET HIGH ON A ROCK

In the day of trouble he will keep me safe in his dwelling; he will hide me in the shelter of his sacred tent and set me high upon a rock.
—Psalm 27:5

Today's image of a rock describes the life we live when we align with God. The psalmist finds himself in a life-threatening situation. Terrible things are happening around him, and yet his request is simply to dwell with God and to enjoy the beauty of the Lord. Imagine!

Then, after expressing that desire, the psalm resounds with the conviction that God will provide the best protection: shelter, safety, and a vantage point for viewing the surrounding area.

To conceal and *to set high on a rock* seem like opposites. Wouldn't being high on a rock expose a person to danger? Not necessarily. In this situation, God gives the gift of perspective. From the position of being high on a rock, the psalmist can see approaching

danger and won't be caught off guard. It's a strategic advantage to be in that place of security. God also provides shelter to make the psalmist less vulnerable to attack.

While our circumstances may not change, it is possible for God to put our feet on solid ground so that even while we can see danger around us, our perspective is grounded and firm. In that place, we can "be strong and take heart and wait for the LORD."

Lord our God, you do all things well. Set us high on a rock and enable us to be strong and take heart and wait for you. In your name we pray. Amen.

A HEART OF STONE

I will give them an undivided heart and put a new spirit in them; I will remove from them their heart of stone and give them a heart of flesh.
—Ezekiel 11:19

Today's image of a stone has a negative connotation. In Ezekiel's prophecy, God is not pleased with the people's character or behavior. He compares their rebellion to having a "heart of stone."

A "heart of stone" is cold, impenetrable, stubborn, and unrepentant. God sent Ezekiel to speak to the people about changing their ways, about examining their attitudes and priorities. Yet, right in the middle of a harsh judgment toward the people, Ezekiel shares this promise that God wants to change their hearts. It's something God will do, but it also requires some action from the one whose heart is cold and hard. It's a both/and scenario: God does something, and we do something. The warning is that people whose hearts are still divided and devoted to

other things won't be transformed.

Having a stone-cold heart is a miserable thing. It makes life harder than it has to be. Turning back to God can be a huge, courageous step, especially if it means leaving old habits and attitudes behind. But the promise of having an undivided heart and God's Spirit in a heart of flesh is definitely the better way. It's what God desires for our lives. It makes a radical change in life worth every effort, and we can do it in God's strength.

Lord Jesus, we want to be changed from the inside out. We turn to you and are grateful that you promise a new start. Give us undivided hearts filled with your Spirit so that we may praise you. Amen.

IS THERE ANY OTHER ROCK?

"Is there any God besides me? No, there is no other Rock; I know not one."
—Isaiah 44:8

I live in a large city with many people from all over the world. Just a short walk from our church there is a Russian Orthodox church, a mosque, a small Jewish synagogue, and a large Buddhist temple. These are all different places with different ways of worship. Different expressions like these make up the world's religions.

But in Isaiah God makes a very strong point, contrasting himself to the idols of Israel's neighbors. The sophisticated practices of idol worshipers are exposed as foolish. This is a harsh mockery of idolatry that leaves no room for two-timing. God demands pure allegiance—not because he's being arbitrary, but because he's the *only* Rock, the only dependable God. All others are imitations, or are merely shadows of God the Rock.

God is speaking here to Israel, but there are hints that "others" will join in and call themselves "the Lord's" as well, because they have also been created for worship. God reveals how he will pour out his Spirit of blessing on all peoples. As bewildering as it can be to live alongside neighbors who worship other gods, we ultimately put our trust in God as he has revealed himself to us. We believe that his purposes are greater and more expansive than we can imagine.

Lord, you are our Rock eternal. There is no one besides you. We call on the name of Jesus to lead and guide us forever, and to invite people of all nations and backgrounds to worship you. In his name we pray. Amen.

FIRE AND STONES

The fire of the LORD fell and burned up the sacrifice, the wood, the stones and the soil, and also licked up the water in the trench.

—1 Kings 18:38

When our oldest son was in grade two, every student was given a topic to study in depth for the whole school year. His teacher assigned him the topic “rocks and gems.” Immediately he began collecting rocks. Soon there were little piles of rocks everywhere. Whenever I tried to thin out the collection, he noticed right away! Today there are still little collections of rocks all over our house. Our son’s fascination with rocks was partly that they were indestructible and invincible. They weren’t like other toys that could be broken. Rocks were permanent.

This is why stones are used for many purposes; they are durable and can be used to build structures that will last a long time.

So you can imagine the astonishment of all the witnesses

when Elijah called out to the living God, and the God of heaven and earth responded by sending down fire that didn’t just burn up the sacrifice on the altar, but also consumed the wood, the stones, the soil, and the water! What extraordinary power God demonstrated! That’s why the people cried out, “The LORD—he is God!” Without a doubt, the one who created the creatures, wood, stones, soil, and water can also show that there is nothing he cannot do. And whatever God chooses to do ultimately points to his authority over all things.

God, you are the Lord of heaven and earth. We are in awe of your power. May your kingdom continue to come here on earth and open our eyes to see you. In Jesus, Amen.

WIND, ROCK, AND WHISPERS

A great and powerful wind tore the mountains apart and shattered the rocks before the LORD. —1 Kings 19:11

Soon after Elijah's great success that we reflected on yesterday, Elijah escapes to the wilderness to avoid being hunted down by his enemies. He is exhausted and so discouraged that he wants to die.

Then the Lord appears to Elijah. God gives some amazing demonstrations of his power over nature: a great and powerful wind, an earthquake, and a fire. It's like an echo of the showdown that brought dramatic fire from heaven (1 Kings 18:30-39).

Wind, fire, and earthquakes were all recognized as signs of divine revelation in ancient times, so it makes sense that God chose to reveal himself in connection with those things. But God shows here that he is not in the wind, or the fire, or the earthquake itself. Instead, God speaks to Elijah in a gentle whisper. So Elijah experiences

the presence of God by means of a gentle, whispering voice in the midst of silence. And Elijah covers his face, knowing he is in the presence of almighty God.

In this tender way God shows just as powerfully that the Lord who speaks gently with a whisper is the same God who can tear mountains apart and break down evil. And when he asks, "What are you doing here?" he shows that he has plans to keep bringing his kingdom into this world, and he calls us to work on this with him.

God of all creation, you keep working in our midst, and by your Spirit you are powerfully present in our lives. Move us to hear your voice, your gentle whispering, and assure us of your purposes each day. Amen.

TURN THESE STONES INTO BREAD

"If you are the Son of God, tell these stones to become bread."

—Matthew 4:3

Jesus performed lots of amazing miracles during his ministry, including multiplying food for thousands of people. So why didn't he do something that would have helped to sustain him in the desert? Why would Jesus have refused to turn the stones into bread?

Well, Jesus' mission as he lived among us was to glorify God in all that he did. So that would not include giving in to a temptation from the devil. Jesus refused to be manipulated to use his power or his position as the Son of God to his own advantage. Instead, he was obedient in every way, showing us how to live by God's will. And as he was tempted, he drew on his close relationship with the Father and leaned on the teachings of Scripture to live in obedience.

There may be times in our lives when we are tempted to

use our personal advantage to serve our own interests, and sometimes it might even seem a harmless thing to do. But if doing so would involve dishonoring God, it would be a sin—and we know that.

Jesus demonstrates how to resist temptation. By dwelling in Scripture and listening to the Father's voice, we can receive power to turn away from self-serving, self-destructive actions. We will be able to recognize the ways in which the devil twists the truth, and we will be able to resist temptation, following in Jesus' steps.

Lord, so often we are tempted. Fill us with your Spirit and help us to dwell in your Word so that we may be equipped with your truth. In the name of Jesus we pray. Amen.

THE ROCKS SPLIT

*The curtain of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom.
The earth shook, the rocks split and the tombs broke open.*

—Matthew 27:51-52

God, who split the mountains and rocks in the story of Elijah (1 Kings 19:12), also caused the rocks to split when Jesus died on the cross. And Jesus' death changed history—not only for human beings but also for the world God made. Through his life and death, Jesus broke the stranglehold that sin and death had over us as well as God's creation (see Genesis 3; John 3:16). Jesus opened a new way for us to live—with God and for God—so that we can have life to the full, as God intended from the beginning. What a great reason for giving thanks!

The curtain in the temple had separated the people of God from the inner sanctuary, where God's powerful presence came to dwell in Old Testament times. So the tearing of the curtain meant that God's presence was no longer

separate from his people, and God's Spirit would now come to live in the people's hearts.

In this splitting open there's a death and new birth all at once. It's something like breaking open a geode: a gnarly looking rock that, when broken open, reveals beautiful crystals inside. Only by breaking the geode can the stunning creation on the inside be revealed.

In Christ, God reveals the beautiful life he intended for us all along. The Lord breaks through, showing his good and powerful love for us all.

Lord Jesus, thank you for opening this new way for us to be your people, God's people. In your name and by your power, Amen.

THE STONE WAS ROLLED BACK

There was a violent earthquake, for an angel of the Lord came down from heaven and, going to the tomb, rolled back the stone and sat on it.
—Matthew 28:2

In Matthew's account of Jesus' crucifixion and resurrection, there are several references to the tomb that was cut out of rock and the stone that was rolled away. The story of Jesus' death, burial, and resurrection is not complete without this incredible detail about the stone being rolled away. This wasn't just any stone. It was a big wheel chiseled from rock and rolled into a groove in front of the tomb. It would have taken several people to roll it into place and move it out of the way again.

On this topic Charles Spurgeon preached a triumphant sermon called "The Stone Rolled Away." He reminds us to picture the women walking up to the tomb, bringing spices with them, and wondering who could move the stone for them (Mark 16:1-3). In some ways their wondering sums up

many of our questions: How will we ever get past the biggest obstacles in our lives? In all of our paths are huge barriers, immovable stones. Who can move them for us? And yet, when the women arrive, they find the stone moved and an angel sitting on it! There is divine humor here: not only is the big stone no longer an obstacle; it's a resting place, a sign of triumph, and a foundation of all the best stories to come. The stone has been rolled away!

Lord, roll away the stones of doubt, confusion, and darkness in our lives. Remove whatever stands in the way between us and everlasting life. For yours is the glory forever. Amen.

THE WOMAN CAUGHT IN ADULTERY

“Let any one of you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her.”
—John 8:7

When my husband, Trevor, was a young boy, he was wading in a flooded section of a field near his school. A few other boys were standing some distance away, trying to skip rocks on the newly formed, temporary pond. One of the rocks flew wildly off course and sailed into the back of Trevor's head, causing an instant gash and commotion as he was brought to get stitches. He still has a scar from that accident.

Now picture the guilty woman brought before a group of smart, angry men. According to the law, they had the right to stone her to death. There would have been nothing accidental about their aim, and each throw would be intended to kill.

Then picture Jesus, who had just sat down to teach the people. What would he do about this woman? Was he angry

too? Everyone waited to see what would happen.

Jesus showed no sign of being angry. All we know is that he wrote something on the ground, and then stood and said, “Let any one of you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone.” One by one, the accusers left. Eventually only the woman remained there with Jesus. And he told her to leave her life of sin behind.

What does Jesus say about your life?

Lord, we know we have done wrong, and yet, beyond our wildest expectations, you defend us. Thank you for being our shield. Defend us from the harmful aim of the enemy, and help us to follow you. In your name, Amen.

THE STONING OF STEPHEN

*While they were stoning him, Stephen prayed, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit."
—Acts 7:59*

In our story today we face the grim reality that people with evil intentions can commit terrible crimes. The stoning of Stephen was the first recorded murder of someone in the early church of Christ.

Stephen's speech to the religious leaders of his day was a powerful summary of God's loving-kindness toward his people, but it was also a clever way of turning the accusers' charges against them. Stephen passionately drew his listeners' attention to the history of Abraham, Joseph, and Moses, and as he did that he showed how the accusers incriminated themselves as they repeatedly resisted the work of the Holy Spirit.

Then, furiously, these religious leaders exposed their bias against Christ and murdered Stephen. How could the high priest and the other leaders be

so blind and so cruel? Their hearts of stone led them to cast stones.

Though his stoning was undeserved, Stephen showed that he had a heart filled with the Spirit of God. Nothing—not even stoning—could stamp out the Spirit-filled, Christlike trust that Stephen demonstrated.

If a moment like that ever comes for us, we can do the same—in God's strength.

Lord, deliver us from whatever might harm us in body, mind, and soul. Forgive us when we unwittingly resist your Holy Spirit. Fill our hearts so that in every circumstance we will reflect the love of Jesus and stand firm in faith, by your power. Amen.

LIVING STONES

You also, like living stones, are being built into a spiritual house.

—1 Peter 2:5

In the early 1970s, my parents had an opportunity to buy some land in Alberta. It was rugged and thick with trees. They could see it would take a lot of work to make it suitable for farming. They bought the land and worked hard together to clear it and make a living. When we kids were old enough to join in, we'd head out to the field in springtime to help pick up rocks pushed up by the winter frost. We dumped the rocks in a big pile along the treeline.

After all that rock picking, the idea of being living stones was not very compelling to me. I just pictured a big pile of unwanted rocks.

But that is not what Peter has in mind. By calling us living stones, he is saying we have been selected and crafted for a purpose: to become part of a beautiful structure in which

each shaped stone is set deliberately in line with Christ, the cornerstone—and made alive by the Spirit of God. Peter reminds us that Christ, the cornerstone, is chosen by God and precious, and, like Christ, we are being built up to become a community of people serving the Lord.

Stones are often described as dead, or without life. But in Christ we have been born again through the imperishable, living, enduring Word of God. We are like *living* stones—lasting, precious, and permanent because of Christ.

Lord Jesus, thank you for picking us to be your living stones, and for building us into a beautiful spiritual house. May the meditations of our hearts be pleasing to you, our Rock and Redeemer. Amen.

A STUMBLING STONE

“A stone that causes people to stumble and a rock that makes them fall.” They stumble because they disobey. . . .

—1 Peter 2:8

Sometimes people can have totally different reactions to similar circumstances or events.

We used to know two elderly women who had similar experiences: both had suffered a significant decline in their health. But one was persistently joyful, while the other was chronically negative. Both were Christians, but only one was vibrant with life in Christ. The contrast between their perspectives has been so instructive to me that I have earnestly pleaded with God to keep me from stumbling and falling into immature cynicism.

In *The Message*, Eugene Peterson paraphrases 1 Peter 2:8 this way: “They trip and fall because they refuse to obey, just as predicted.” Later the text says we are chosen to be “God’s instruments to do his work and speak out for him, to

tell others of the night-and-day difference he made for you—from nothing to something, from rejected to accepted.”

Sometimes we meet people who worry that they are not chosen to be part of God’s spiritual house. They are afraid that they do not have salvation. This can be heartbreaking. But Peter urges people to grow up in God so that they can flourish and be completely confident of God’s goodness and love. We are all given this wonderful invitation to identify with Christ and his purpose. This invitation is to receive the Word and let Christ be our firm foundation.

Lord, protect us from stumbling and falling; keep us securely on the path to full, vibrant life in you. For Jesus’ sake, Amen.

BUILD YOUR HOUSE ON THE ROCK

“Everyone who . . . puts [these words] into practice is like a wise man who built his house on the rock. The rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew. . . .” —Matthew 7:24-25

In this parable Jesus describes the storms of life as a matter of fact. He does not say “If” those storms come. Twice he says, “The rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house.”

So we can be sure that our life’s foundation will be tested. There’s no getting around it. The question is whether the foundation will stand up to the test. Have we chosen to build on a firm foundation, or not?

Interestingly, many of the houses in our Vancouver neighborhood do not have a firm foundation. While some areas in the city have solid rock to build on, our neighborhood is built on a peat bog near a lake! You can just imagine some of the slanting floors and leaning walls in older homes that are not built on deep pilings.

If our spiritual houses, which are being built in our hearts and minds, are solidly based on Jesus and his Word, we can have complete confidence that no matter what happens, our souls are secure. This means grounding ourselves in Christ every day and making wise choices through the guidance of his Spirit before the storms of life come. Only in him can we be assured that our foundation is rock-solid.

Lord Jesus, we rely on you completely to survive the storms of life. Because of you, we are confident that our foundation will remain secure even when the rain, rising waters, and winds come to test us. In your name we pray. Amen.

DECISIONS TO MAKE

“Put the Urim and the Thummim in the breastpiece. . . . Thus Aaron will always bear the means of making decisions . . . over his heart before the LORD.”
—Exodus 28:29-30

As a girl, I had a small book called *Precious Rocks and Gems*. All of the jewels described on its pages seemed luxurious. The stones in Aaron’s breastpiece of decision remind me of that book. It’s intriguing that God had his people make something out of beautiful earthly objects for Aaron to wear when he went into God’s presence.

Tucked into the breastpiece were also “the Urim and the Thummim.” We don’t know exactly what these were or how they functioned, but they were probably two other stones. And somehow they were used in asking God about his will when decisions had to be made. The Urim and Thummim were a wonderful gift for a time, but they could only be used by the high priest of Israel.

At the transfiguration, Jesus was with his closest disciples

when they heard God’s voice: “This is my Son, whom I love. Listen to him!” The disciples had a dazzling vision of Jesus that day, showing that he is the Son of God. They didn’t understand this event till later, after Jesus rose from the dead, but they remembered what God said: “Listen to him!”

Today we can trust that our ultimate High Priest, Jesus, reveals God’s Word and will to us. Through his Spirit, he is our guide in all our decision making. He is our Rock and Cornerstone, in whom everything finds its place and has meaning. So let’s listen to him!

Lord, we need to know your will each day. Teach us the way of wisdom as we learn to hear and follow your voice. Amen.

THE FOUNDATIONS OF THE CITY OF HEAVEN

The foundations of the city walls were decorated with every kind of precious stone.
—Revelation 21:19

As we come to the end of November, our search for rocks and stones in the Bible is drawing to a close, but we can all keep looking for these images and remembering God's love and care for us. We can find comfort in knowing that most of the references are intended to open up meaning about who God is and what it means to live united with Christ.

Today's reading provides a spectacular image filled with precious gems. In Revelation 21 we find a vision about the holy city "coming down out of heaven from God." This amazing scene is part of the promise that God will come to live with us in a new heaven and new earth. We see the new Jerusalem radiating with all that is needed for perfect unity and harmony with God. All who live in this city with God will see clearly, and all will be filled

with wisdom and understanding and perfect peace. We will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of God, and there will be beauty, perfection, glory, fulfillment, and flourishing for all to enjoy.


As we begin the journey of Advent in December, may this longing for the new heaven and earth carry us forward. Though we may have to wait a while, and some of us may have to suffer, all of us can join together singing, "Soon and very soon, we are going to see the King"!

Come, Lord Jesus. Give us a vision of hope and peace in our hearts. Sustain us in our everyday lives, and fill us with gratitude and wonder, for you are our Rock and our Salvation, in whom we trust. Amen.



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