

STONES THAT ARE SHATTERED AND SCATTERED AND GATHERED



**“There is a time for everything,
and a season for every activity
under the heavens:**

**... a time to scatter stones and a
time to gather them.”**

Ecclesiastes 3:1,5

The sun was baking hot the day we trudged through an olive grove on the outskirts of Sparta in Greece. Even though the heat was oppressive, my friend Fiona and I were determined to find the ruins of an ancient Spartan amphitheatre. Dry grass crackled beneath our feet while cicadas chorused a never-ending song.

There seemed to be no sign of any ruins, but as we continued through the olive grove, we discovered a few stone blocks and pillars broken and scattered through the grass.

As we went further, more and more stones appeared. Some were enormous, and many were engraved with ancient Greek writing. There were places where stones still stood in partial rows, but all were crumbled and weathered.

The remains of the amphitheatre testified to a time of great splendour. Long ago, crowds of thousands would have thronged through this place. Those people wouldn't have been much different to us. How cacophonous the sound must have been as audiences chatted and laughed, waiting for their entertainment to begin. Now, there was nothing but stillness. Except for two Aussie travellers and a multitude of cicadas, not another soul could be seen or heard. The site had become a dry and barren place, and the only memory that now remained of those splendid ancient days was a remnant of shattered stones.

King Solomon once wrote about stones. He said that there is a time to gather stones and a time to scatter them. Why would anyone need to gather stones, let alone scatter them? A friend asked me that question a while ago. That morning she had read the passage about times and seasons in the book of Ecclesiastes. She was perplexed.

At first, I was perplexed too. Although I had read the passage numerous times, I had never stopped to ponder why anyone would need to gather or scatter stones. The best commentary on the Bible is the Bible itself, so I began to dig into the Scriptures.

Various people, including Jacob and Joshua, gathered stones throughout the Old Testament. With them, they built monuments to God where they offered sacrifices to him. They weren't worshipping the lifeless stones themselves; they were making memorials to the Lord. In thankfulness, they were remembering his powerful intervention in their lives. In gathering stones, these people were worshipping the one true Living God who is unseen.

Stones were also gathered for another reason: to make a dwelling place for God's presence. At a place called Bethel, God revealed himself to Jacob in a dream. Overcome with awe, Jacob placed a single stone in response to his powerful encounter and declared that it would be "God's house" – a place for the Lord to dwell. This single stone foreshadowed the grand temple that King Solomon would later build. At the beginning of his reign, huge and valuable stones were quarried, cut and laid with care to create that first temple. Solomon built such a magnificent house for God that people came from far and wide to see it for themselves.

Throughout the Old Testament, not only do we see times when people gathered stones, but there were also times when stones were scattered. In the book 2 Kings, the Israelites found themselves in a desperate situation. The Moabite army stood before them as an impenetrable force, and the Israelites had run out of water to drink. They sought help from God, who spoke to them through the prophet Elisha. The Lord said: "You will overthrow every fortified city and every major town. You will cut down every good tree, stop up all the springs, and ruin every good field with stones (2 Kings 3:19)."

God performed a miracle and provided his people with a water-filled valley. As the early morning sunlight shone across the water, the Moabites thought it was blood, which sent them into a confused frenzy. The Israelites defeated their enemy and did exactly as God had instructed them: they destroyed the Moabite towns, and each man threw a stone on every good field until it was covered (2 Kings 3:25). The scattered stones, the felling of trees and

the stopping-up of springs were God's judgments against the pagan Moabite people. Barrenness and unfruitfulness would have followed. This meant that their hunger could not be satisfied, and their thirst could not be quenched.

The Moabites were a people who followed after idols, as all the nations surrounding Israel did. The worship of false gods was and still is a serious matter to the one true Living God. Repeatedly, throughout the Scriptures, he commands his people not to bow down to pagan gods or worship them or adopt any of their practices (Ex 23:24). God tells them to never erect stone images, for he detests them (Deut 16:22). He describes foreign gods as "useless" and "worthless."¹ He even says they are good for nothing except to be thrown away like rubbish.²

Strong words. Powerful emotions. Why does God feel so intensely about idols?

The answer is a simple one. God loves his children and wants them to have a relationship with him. Paganism is the worship of creation rather than the Creator himself. Those who cling to worthless idols actually choose to turn away from God's love for them (Jonah 2:8). When people turn away from him or have a divided heart, they choose to disconnect themselves from the only source of life, truth and blessing.

An idol has no eyes to see human needs.

An idol has no ears to hear human prayers.

An idol has no mouth to speak truth to seeking hearts.

An idol has no feet to walk beside human beings.

An idol has no arms to hold humans close.

An idol has no heart to love any person.

A false god cannot have a relationship with people.

Idol worship will produce spiritual barrenness. God tells us through his Word that those who honour other gods will become like them (Ps 115:8). An idol is lifeless; those who worship them will also be lifeless. Their spiritual hunger will never be satisfied, and their spiritual thirst will never be quenched.

More than this, when people worship other gods, Scripture warns us that their worship is actually being offered up to demons.³ Satan and his minions seek to steal, kill and destroy human beings. They can appear as angels of light, and the spiritual experiences they invoke may "feel" authentic, but this is deceptive. Nothing good can ever come from worshipping false gods, and eventually, it will lead to spiritual destruction. There is a way that seems right to a human, but its end is the way of death (Prov 12:15). This is not what God desires for any person. He invites ALL to know HIM so they might have life, and life to abundance!

He says: "Oh, that their hearts would be inclined to fear me and keep all my commands always, so that it might go well with them and their children forever! (Deut 5:29)." Can you hear the depths of God's heart for his children as he speaks these words? He knows the best way for humans to thrive. His intentions are good, and his commands are permeated with love!

In those Old Testament days, did the Israelites listen to him?

Sadly, more often than not, they did not hearken to his voice. We are told that God's people ascribed things to the Lord their God which were not true (2 Kings 17:9). Their idolatry began by adopting the philosophies and practices of false religion to worship the one true God. The next step was erecting lifeless images, which they then bowed down to and worshipped. When their hearts had turned towards idolatry, the Israelites lost their fear of God. The result was twofold: immorality and injustice.

God sent prophets to warn them to turn away from their sin and to return to him. Through the prophet Isaiah, the Lord declared that when the stones of the pagan altars were crushed and scattered, he would forgive their iniquity (Is 27:9). He is gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and abounding in love. He wants to forgive. The Lord's unfailing love motivated him to send those prophets and call his people to repentance. There are three recorded instances when God's words were heeded. Kings Josiah, Hezekiah and Asa all tore down stone idols and scattered the pieces. By doing this, they turned away from sin and returned to the one true God.

Most of the Israelites, however, refused to listen to God's warnings, and judgement eventually came. The Babylonian army invaded the land and ravaged Jerusalem. They tore down the protective wall around the city. They tore down palaces and homes. They also tore down King Solomon's magnificent temple. All the physical stones of the city were shattered and scattered across the ground. None were left standing. But just as the physical stones were dispersed, so were God's people. The judgement meant that they were torn away and scattered into foreign lands.

As strange as it may sound, the judgement that came was also ultimately motivated by God's love. When people become stiff-necked, utterly determined to go their own evil way, sometimes the Lord will allow affliction. He allows it because it may be the only way his people will ever come back to him. As humans, we tend to think merely in temporal terms. Our mortal lives flourish like flowers in a field, only to quickly fade and fall away. Our focus is

generally towards our own well-being throughout this fleeting existence. God's thoughts and ways are far higher than our minds can ever comprehend. God thinks not merely in temporal terms but in light of all eternity. Our eternal well-being is of supreme importance. Momentary afflictions in this temporal life are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs any suffering we might experience now. If that suffering comes in the form of judgement in order to bring us back onto the path of holiness, then every pain it brings will be worthwhile.

Although he may allow judgement, God takes no pleasure in it. That is why he sends warning after warning through his prophets. Judgement can be avoided if people choose to heed his words. If they decide to return to him, they will return to life, truth and blessing. There is always a freewill choice involved.

A time came when the Israelites made that choice, and once they had, the Lord gathered them back into their land. After their return, they picked up the physical stones from the heaps of dust and rubbish, even the ones that had been burned. Stone by stone, under the watchful gaze of the Lord, his people rebuilt the city wall, their homes and the temple with diligence and care. God revived both the city and his people.

All that happened to the Israelites in the Old Testament was written down as examples and warnings for us (1 Cor 10:11). How can these examples apply to our lives now?

There is something beautiful we can learn. But there is also something sobering.

The beautiful truth is that Jesus Christ is described as the Living Stone (1 Peter 2:4). The Father has made his Son Jesus the Cornerstone of a new spiritual house they are in the process of building together. With the Holy Spirit's help, they are gathering multitudes of living stones and putting them in place.

Who are these other living stones?

Jesus once alluded to stones as being a metaphor for God's children. He said, "...from these stones God is able to raise up children for Abraham (Matt 3:9)." Any person who puts their trust in Jesus and accepts the free gift of salvation becomes a living stone.

God has been gathering his children throughout all ages since time began. What's more, this gathering has not ceased. It continues to this day and will continue until the end of the age. Only with Jesus Christ as the foundation stone are the other living stones able to be set in place.

The curse of sin has so tainted the core of our beings that it has severed our connection to the only source of life. All of us are damaged and scattered on the rubbish heap of this world. All of us are spiritually hungry and thirsty, but so often, we turn to worldly broken cisterns that can never satisfy our needs. The beautiful truth of the gospel is that Jesus lifts people from the heaps of dust and rubbish — even the ones who have been burned — and he transforms them into vibrant living stones. He gathers them and washes them clean with his blood, so each one can be presented unblemished in the Father's presence. Connected to the Cornerstone, their spiritual hunger will be eternally satisfied with the Bread of Heaven, and their spiritual thirst will be quenched by Living Water that never runs dry.

However, the sobering truth we learn from the Old Testament is that God's people sometimes turn away from him. It may not begin as an intentional turning away, but the seductions of this world can lead any one of us astray little step by little step. The Living God is the same yesterday and today and forever, and the worship of false gods remains a serious matter to him. Because of his unfailing love, he still commands his children not to bow down to pagan gods, worship them or adopt any of their practices. He wills for all to go well with us. If our hearts turn towards idolatry, we will lose our fear of God and no longer shun evil. Immorality and injustice will inevitably follow.

It is necessary that we examine our own hearts and make sure there are no stony places within.

Have we ascribed things to the Lord our God which are not true?

Have we adopted pagan philosophies or practices, dressed them up in Christian clothing and declared them as acceptable worship to God?

Have we put our Lord on the same level as other gods?

Have we declared that all paths lead to the one true God and that Jesus Christ is not the only way?

Have we turned ourselves into idols by placing our own human reason and human emotion as the foundation of truth?

If we have done any of these things, then we need to remember what God himself says. Idols are detestable to him, whether they are physical stones carved into an image or spiritual stones formed inside our hearts. But, oh, how deep is his love! He is calling his children to listen to his voice so we will worship him in Spirit and Truth. The Lord speaks to us through his Word and through the Holy Spirit. Both will always be in harmony, and both will always place Jesus as the foundation stone. When we listen, we will hear him asking us to crush and scatter the stony idols inside our hearts. When we are obedient, his Holy Spirit will blow those pieces away. God is gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and abounding in love. He wants to forgive. When we choose to return to him with an undivided heart, he will gather us in his everlasting arms.

The Word of God testifies to a future time of great splendour. The house of God will one day be complete, and countless crowds will throng through that place. How incredible the sound will be as God's children talk, laugh and sing as they fellowship with one another and worship the Living God, who is above all other gods. Filled with the presence of the Holy Spirit and cemented in place by the Blood of the Lamb, the gathered living stones will pulsate with life.

*The Living God has eyes to see human needs.
The Living God has ears to hear human prayers.
The Living God has a mouth to speak truth to seeking hearts.
The Living God has feet to walk beside human beings.
The Living God has arms to hold humans close.
The Living God has a heart to love everyone.
The Living God invites ALL people to become his children.*

There is a time to scatter stones and a time to gather them. If any person chooses to reject the Son, they will be like the stones I once saw in Greece. Long ago, those stones knew splendour, but now they lie shattered and scattered in a desolate place. They will always remain lifeless. People, too, may have a moment of glory in this temporal world, but it will fizzle out in the end. Judgement will come.

But if we choose to accept the Son, we will become living stones in God's glorious house. Forevermore.

Choose this day whom you will serve.

¹ (Deut 32:21, 1 Sam 12:21, 1 Kings 16:13, 1 Kings 16:26, 2 Kings 17:15, Ps 31:6, 1s 44:9, Jer 2:5, Jer 2:11, Jer 8:19, Jer 10:3, 8, 15, Jer 15:19, Jer 16:19, Jer 18:15, Jer 51:18, Ezek 11:21, Acts 14:15)

² (Josh 24:14,23; Is 2:20, Is 30:22)

³ (Deut 32:16-17, Lev 17:7, 1 Cor 10:20, Rev 9:20)

Dear Heavenly Father,

Today, I choose to serve you and only you. I will not go after other gods or bow my knee to them. You alone are God, and besides you, there is no other. I choose to trust in Jesus Christ who is the Cornerstone. He is the one who brings life.

In Jesus' Name, Amen.