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A USEFUL STONE VERSUS A STUMBLING STONE.

– MATT. 16:13-26. – JULY 22. –

"If any man come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow me."

PETER, THE APOSTLE, was a grand character, as this lesson well illustrates; yet, like all strong characters, he had proportionate opportunities and liabilities to misuse his strength for evil. This lesson, relating considerably to him, points a moral respecting the necessity for meekness, humility, and wise direction of those who possess strength of character.

The incidents of this lesson transpired toward the close of our Lord's ministry, probably about six months before his crucifixion. For about three years the Lord had, with his disciples, been proclaiming the Kingdom near at hand and working miracles which testified that he was Jehovah's Anointed One. Meantime, his fame had of course spread in every direction. Herod, who had beheaded John the Baptist, seems to have started the suggestion that Jesus was John risen from the dead – probably having little information respecting Jesus while he had considerable knowledge of John. Others, wishing to properly credit our Lord's wonderful works and mighty acts, claimed that he was the Elijah prophesied to precede Messiah's coming. Others thought of him as Jeremiah or some of the great prophets risen from the dead; but very few seemed to have thought of him as the Messiah, – expecting Messiah, when he would come, to be very kingly, very great, and of very high standing with the nation and the ruling class. They no doubt thought they greatly honored Jesus in crediting him with being the forerunner of the Messiah. And apparently our Lord had not particularly expressed the matter of his Messiahship during these years, leaving it rather to be recognized by those who should obtain the opening of the eyes of their understanding. He [R2656 : page 199] spoke of himself as the Son of God; he spoke of his relationship

to the Father, and testified that his mighty works were done in the Father's name and power, but he said little, if anything, respecting his being the Messiah until now.

Now the proper time had come that the disciples should recognize definitely his office, and his question regarding what people in general said of him was merely to introduce the matter to the disciples, and give the opportunity to ask them, "Whom say ye that I am?" Then it was that Peter displayed not only the strength of his faith in the Lord, but also his own strength of character and his zeal, answering promptly, "Thou art the Christ [Hebrew, the Messiah], the Son of God – the Living." And altho we may safely assume that Peter spoke for all of the apostles, in harmony with our Lord's question, nevertheless, the fact that he was the spokesman would imply that he was the most thoroughly imbued with the sentiment that he expressed. His statement is quite comprehensive, too: not only did he recognize Jesus as the Messiah, but he recognized his divine authority and paternity; and while it is possible that Peter meant to say "the Son of the living God" – the Son of the God who is the author of all life – yet it is probable that he meant more than this. It is probable that he meant, Thou art the Messiah, the Son of God, the Living One, – the one who has a right to life according to the Law, while all others, being imperfect, are under condemnation of the Law and under sentence of death.

Evidently it was a refreshment of heart to our Lord to have this full and frank statement from Peter. One, at least, of his disciples had profited by the lessons of the preceding three years, and had come to the point of full assurance of faith in him: and the others, while less expressive, were probably making progress nevertheless, and would be greatly helped and strengthened and built up by this good confession.

PETER A USEFUL STONE IN GOD'S HOUSE.

Our Lord's response, "Blessed art thou, Simon, son of Jona," does not so much signify, I wish or will grant a blessing upon you because of this confession, but rather, You have been blessed of God greatly in

that you have been enabled to discern this great truth, hidden from so many. Flesh and blood (mankind in general) do not so believe, and could not have so taught you nor convinced you; you have been drawn of my Father in heaven, and through responding to the leadings of his providence the eyes of your understanding have been opened that you are thus able to see and appreciate this great truth.

Then followed a blessing, a prophecy of coming usefulness, partly, at least, the result of this good confession, as it was the result of a proper condition of heart: – "Thou art Peter [*petros*, a stone, a rock] and upon this rock [*petra* – this great stone or rocky mass – the great truth which you have confessed, namely, my Messiahship] will I build my Church."

The Lord did not propose to build his Church upon Peter, but upon the great truth which the Father had laid as a foundation for his plan and had revealed to Peter and which Peter had so nobly expressed. But Peter, indeed, might be one of the living stones of the spiritual temple erected upon this great foundation-fact. Peter himself gives us this interpretation of the matter in his Epistle (1 Pet. 2:4-7), assuring us that the whole Church as a building of God is growing more and more complete through the addition of each member, who, as a living stone, is built up into and under the headship of Christ, the great chief cornerstone and capstone of the whole – the figure being that of a pyramid. – See MILLENNIAL DAWN, VOL. I., Chap. v.; Vol. III., Chap. x.

The same thought is given in the description of the New Jerusalem, in which Peter is represented by one of the Twelve Foundation Stones, the other apostles being equally foundation stones, and all the faithful in Christ being built upon the foundation of the divine plan, and upon the testimony of these twelve apostles. Rev. 21, see verse 12. [R2657 : page 199]

This was probably the first intimation the Lord had given of his intention to *build* a Church, or that any period of time would elapse between the work he was then doing and the establishment of the

Kingdom. This was a gradual way of bringing great matters to the attention of the apostles, – matters which necessarily would conflict with many of the ideas and hopes that already had taken possession of their hearts.

It cannot be claimed that our Lord referred to any of the Christian sects when thus speaking of his Church: all are forced to admit that these earthly systems are entirely ignored, not only in this statement, but in every other statement which our Lord ever made respecting his Church. He never recognized more than one, nor did the apostles; and both Jesus and the apostles reckoned that every true sheep, every true grain, every wise virgin, and every faithful servant of this Gospel age would belong to the *one* Church of Christ, of which the Apostle says that "their names are written in heaven." (Heb. 12:23.) They need no earthly record, and such of them as are rightly informed will want no sectarian name, but will be thoroughly satisfied with the name of their Lord; and they will want no earthly creed-fences to separate them from each other, but will desire more and more to be one in *fact* and in *theory*.

The Church of Rome, as being the oldest of all human church systems, claims the name of Christ, and [R2657 : page 200] holds that Peter was its founder, but it can produce no evidence to this effect, for there was no Roman Catholic Church in existence until centuries after Peter's day. The primitive Church, authorized by our Lord and built upon the testimony of the apostles and through their ministry, after the day of Pentecost, was a very different institution from any of the present-day man-made, creed-bound and clergy-lorded systems. We understand that the Lord is now calling his true people out of this Babylon or mixed condition of present-day "churchianity" into the light, the liberty, the fellowship, with him and with all who are his, which properly belongs to the one flock, which has but "one Lord, one faith, one baptism."

Our Lord's declaration that "the gates of hell [hades, the death state] shall not prevail against" his Church, is worthy of careful notice; especially in view of his words following this declaration, to the effect that all who would be his disciples must follow him in sacrifice into death. This must have been an astounding thought to the apostles, as they had, so far from expecting death, expected some kind of transformation to glory, honor and immortality. Our Lord's declaration, therefore, that the gates of hell, the gates of the grave, shall not prevail against his Church, signified not that his followers should not enter those portals of death, but that eventually those prison-doors of death would open, – would not be permitted forever to prevail against the faithful. As a matter of fact, the gates of hades did close over our dear Redeemer himself for portions of three days, but they did not prevail. On the contrary, God's power prevailed and he arose from the dead, he left the prison-house, he came forth a victor. And so likewise throughout this Gospel age, the gates of death closed behind the apostles one after another, and after all the faithful of the Lord's people, as well as others, and our Lord's assurance then is still comforting to his followers, that the prisonhouse of death, with its strong bars and gates, the grave, shall not prevail, shall not in the end conquer, but that he who was raised from the dead by the power of the Father will raise us up also, making us also victors over death and over the grave, so that eventually we can say, "O death, where is thy sting? O grave, where is thy victory?" But we cannot say this so long as we are subject to death, nor so long as we are under death's power; but only when the deliverance shall come in the resurrection.

Altho our Lord does not here speak of others than the Church prevailing against the gates and bars of the tomb, he does elsewhere give us the assurance that through his prevailing and our subsequent prevailing through his name and assistance, ultimately the whole world of mankind, or so many of them, at least, as will accept of the favor, will be delivered from the power of death into perfection of life: and then shall be brought to pass, in the fullest, most absolute sense of the word, the prophecy just referred to. (Isa. 61:1-3.) Adamic death and its

victory over the human family will then be completely annulled, through the atonement accomplished by our Lord, and the restitution which he, with his Church, will accomplish as a result. And any who shall fail of eternal life shall not fail because of the present prevalence of so-called Adamic death, but will be the victims of their own wilful sin, and will experience its penalty, the Second Death, whose bars and gates will never open, and against which they can never prevail, for Christ dieth no more and will release none from the Second Death. – Rom. 6:9; 2 Thess. 1:9; Acts 3:23.

THE KEYS OF THE KINGDOM OF HEAVEN.

The apostles, of course, could not understand our Lord's words at the time, as they did afterward, and as we now understand them. (John 7:39.) Nevertheless, these various declarations respecting the future immediately followed, our Lord declaring, "I will give thee the keys of the Kingdom of heaven." What a riddle this must have seemed to poor Peter and his associates! They would doubtless conclude that it meant that in view of Peter's confession he would make him grand treasurer of the Kingdom, or something of that kind; and only in the light of their fulfillment in subsequent events can we judge accurately the meaning of these words. But looking through the experiences of Peter and the Church, we find that there were two doors which required to be opened, and that Peter was used of the Lord in opening both of them, and hence that it was properly stated of him that he had the keys, the power, the opportunity, the authority to do the work in both instances; and he did it.

Our Lord himself did not open the door into the Kingdom, in the full sense of the word. He merely called out faithful laborers, who should afterward in his name open wide the doors. Indeed, the doors into the Kingdom could not be opened to any until first of all the great transaction of Calvary had been accomplished. Our Lord came to give himself a *ransom* for mankind, because a ransom was necessary before mankind could be released from the Adamic condemnation, or have

any part either in the Kingdom proper or in the hoped-for blessing promised through the Kingdom to all the families of the earth. Hence the apostles (whom the Father had specially given to Jesus, and of whom none were lost save the son of perdition, whose place was subsequently filled, through the Lord's appointment, by the Apostle Paul – John 17:12; Rom. 1:1), did not and could not receive recognition from the Father until [R2657 : page 201] after our Lord Jesus had finished his sacrifice and had arisen from the dead and had ascended up on high to appear in the presence of God on their behalf, – and on behalf of all men for whom he died. So soon as the sacrifice for man's sin was presented to the Father, the evidence of its acceptance was indicated to mankind by God's acceptance of the faithful apostles and of all who then were in the proper condition of heart, to the plane of sonship and their begetting of the holy spirit to a new nature, – and this was marked or indicated by the outpouring of the holy spirit at Pentecost, accompanied by "gifts" of the spirit.

It was then that Christ's Kingdom was established in those who had received him; and then began the work of declaring the good tidings of great joy, which must eventually be to all people, but which at first was restricted for three and a half years to fleshly Israel, in fulfillment of God's covenant with them, that favor should continue to the full end of seventy weeks mentioned by the prophet. – Dan. 9:24. See MILLENNIAL DAWN, VOL. II., Chap. III.

In this work of *opening the door* of the Kingdom to Israel we find, according to the record, that Peter took the first, most prominent and initiatory part, as we read: "Peter, standing up with [the others of] the eleven, lifted up his voice and said." (Acts 2:14.) Peter was the spokesman, Peter used the "*key*," Peter opened the door, the other apostles cooperating and assisting.

The other of the two "keys" was not used for three and a half years afterward, because not until then could the door of favor be opened to the Gentiles. But when the time came for opening the door, we find

that it was Peter who was specially designated of the Lord to do it, being sent from Joppa to Cornelius, to tell him words which should be to the saving of his house – the opening to him of the privilege of membership in the Kingdom of Christ, he being the first Gentile converted, the first one to whom the Lord authorized the preaching of the high calling of joint-heirship with Christ in his Kingdom. And the Apostle Peter referred to this matter subsequently, saying, "Ye know how that a good while ago God made choice amongst us that the Gentiles by my mouth should hear the word of the gospel." – Acts 10; 15:7.

BINDING AND LOOSING IN HEAVEN AND EARTH.

Our Lord further said to Peter, "Whatsoever thou shalt bind on earth shall be bound in heaven; and whatsoever thou shalt loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven." This statement has given rise to the claim amongst Romanists that Peter was the first pope, and that he had an authority superior to the other apostles; but we find that very nearly the same words were used [R2658 : page 201] to all of the apostles as recorded by the same Evangelist. (Matt. 18:18.) Again, a very similar declaration was made to them all, as recorded by John, saying, "Whosoever sins ye remit they are remitted unto them, and whose soever sins ye retain they are retained." (John 20:23.) We understand these declarations not to be general and applicable to all of the Church, but chiefly to the apostles, on the strength of our Lord's words. (John 6:70; 15:16; Rev. 21:14.) We deny that the popes of Rome, or any other persons, ever have been apostles, or ever have exercised apostolic authority. In a word, we deny the central claim of Romanism and Episcopacy, viz., "Apostolic Succession."

We understand this investment of Peter and the other apostles with special authority to bind and to loose, to remit and to hold, to signify that God would specially control their utterances, so that their decisions and writings might properly be considered authoritative. Not that God bound himself to do and to decide according to the imperfect judgments

of the apostles, but that he has guaranteed us that he would so guide and providentially overrule in the affairs and in the language of these chosen and faithful ones that his people might rely upon it that such things as the apostles fixed had the divine approval. For instance, it is at their mouth that we learn that we are justified from all sin through faith in the redemption; they did not make it so, but under divine direction they were guided in the stating of it so; and we may implicitly rely upon their statements, which, moreover, we find to be in full accord with the principles of righteousness and the various declarations of the divine Word.

They inform us also that certain sins can be remitted or forgiven – sins of weakness and of ignorance, traceable to our fallen nature, which we have received by heredity, and the penalty for which our Lord has already borne. They inform us also that other sins, viz., wilful sins, are not forgivable, and may be indeed sins unto death, unto the Second Death. And we see herein reasonableness also; for we perceive that Christ did not die for any except the Adamic transgression, and those sins which directly or indirectly may be traceable to it; and that wilful, deliberate transgressions cannot therefore be forgiven, but must be expiated – if committed with considerable light, but not full light, the expiating penalty may be "stripes," but if committed with full wilfulness and against full light the penalty could be nothing short of death – the Second Death. – 1 John 5:16; Luke 12:47,48; Heb. 6:4-6; 10:26,27.

CAST NOT PEARLS BEFORE SWINE.

Following this conversation with the disciples, our Lord charged them particularly not to make his Messiahship generally known to the people. This corroborates **[R2658 : page 202]** the thought that neither the disciples nor our Lord had previously been enunciating his Messiahship, but rather preaching that the Kingdom of heaven was at hand, near at the door, without saying precisely who was to be the King. The command not to make the matter known was evidently because the

result of such a program would have been to have aroused at least a party spirit amongst the people, some of whom accepted his miracles, etc., and would have espoused his cause, while others, with the Pharisees, would have opposed, and thus an insurrection would naturally have followed; – besides, it would have interfered considerably with the program which our Lord saw marked out for him in the divine Word, – his death as the sin-offering. He did not need to proclaim his Messiahship, for he already knew, as he had stated, that whomsoever the Father would draw would come, and that those not drawn of the Father, and not disposed to become his disciples, should not be specially drawn by the proclamation of his Messiahship and the prospects of the Kingdom.

PETER A STUMBLING-STONE, AN ADVERSARY.

Having prepared the minds of the disciples, by the foregoing declaration, that *hades*, death, would not be permitted to triumph over his Church, etc., our Lord from that time forward began gradually to break to them information respecting his own decease and his resurrection from the dead. It was then that the same noble Peter forgot himself, as we would say, and undertook to correct the Lord and to outline for him other things. He was moved to this, not merely by selfish motives of prejudice and hopes of sharing in the Kingdom, and avoiding the ignominy, but doubtless also by his love for the Lord and his desire to see him honored and exalted, rather than to be set at nought and killed. But, as on another occasion this noble Apostle said things "not knowing what he said," so now he evidently did not realize the import of his language, and how, if it were followed, it would mean to our Lord the rejection of the Father's plan and the substitution therefor of a plan more agreeable to the flesh.

The text says that "Peter took him," and this we may understand to signify that Peter took him apart from the others – it was a private interview and exhortation, and no doubt Peter intended to bring in various supporting arguments; for instance, that the disciples would be

discouraged with such talk, etc. However, he only "began," and did not get to finish his argument, the Master being so full of the spirit of loyalty to the Father and his plan that he could not even endure a suggestion to the contrary, and must needs hasten to repudiate such a disloyal suggestion. His answer was a severe rebuke to Peter, yet doubtless was a blessing to him so long as he lived, and probably helped him afterward to be much more modest in the matter of opposing his plan to that of the Lord.

When our Lord said, "Get thee behind me, Satan," he did not mean that he considered Peter possessed by the Adversary: rather, the word Satan in the original is "adversary," and was properly used in respect to any person taking a position adverse or in opposition to another. *The* Adversary is called Satan, that word being used for him as a proper name. Our Lord turned from Peter at this time, and addressed his words so that all the apostles might hear him, that the matter might be the more impressive and all the more a valuable lesson to them: that they might all know that their Master never compromised his Father's will in any sense or degree. "Get behind me, Adversary; thou savorest [partakest] not the things that be of God, but the things that be of men" – you are viewing matters not from God's standpoint, but from the standpoint of fallible, fallen men.

So it is to-day, and ever has been with the Church, the body of Christ; if they are intent upon following the footsteps of the Lord they must expect adversaries to arise who will seek to turn them away from the path of sacrifice and duty: to make it seem too difficult, or to attract their attention to other plans or methods less costly – more in harmony with the fleshly mind. We should remember the Master's course and take a similar one, and point out to these, if they be friends, and in the truth (and such they frequently are, as was Peter), that their influence is being exercised in a wrong direction, against the truth, against our best interests, against the divine plan, and hence that they are not only adversaries to us, but also adversaries to the Lord. We should thus seek to reclaim them and to help them to walk in the same way with us, –

instead of leaving the narrow way to follow their kindly meant but pernicious influence.

The word here rendered "offence" would more properly be translated, as in the Revised Version, "a stumbling block," or a stone of stumbling. Thus we see that it was the same Peter whose noble confession had so refreshed the Lord and blessed the disciples and himself, and who on this account was designated a stone, indicative of strong character, that was now, by reason of the same strength of character, strong-mindedness, strong will, in danger of becoming, not a stone in the Lord's Temple, but a Stumbling Stone. And should some of the Lord's people, strong in character, become stumbling stones to us, we have here our Lord's illustration of our proper course – to turn from them, refusing to be stumbled, refusing to be lead away from the consecration which we have made.

Our Lord took this occasion to lay pointedly before [R2658 : page 203] his disciples the fact that if they loved the present life, with its advantages, etc., more than the future one, with its present disadvantages, they had no business amongst his disciples: that anyone who would be his disciple should reckon self-denial, self-negation, absolutely necessary to discipleship; and should be prepared, with no uncertainty of mind or purpose, to follow after Jesus with a cross, – not a literal cross, but the crossing of human self-will with the divine will.

Then come the terms of discipleship very clearly stated. All who become disciples, and who hope for life in the Kingdom, must expect to sacrifice the present life, and whoever does not sacrifice the present life shall not find that glorious eternal life which God has in reservation only for the overcomers. But, our Lord reasons, what would a man be advantaged were he to gain all of this world, all of its advantages and riches (which none could hope to do) if thereby he should lose his own being, his own soul, his life, his existence; or what would a man not be willing to give in exchange for the perpetuation of his life eternally. (The word *soul*, in this verse, is *psuche*, the same Greek word

rendered *life* in the preceding verse.) Surely anyone possessed of a sound mind and able, therefore, to rightly weigh the advantages and disadvantages of the present life, as compared with the eternal life in God's Kingdom [R2659 : page 203] of righteousness, must confess that it would be a bad bargain to gain the whole world in every sense and to lose his own being.

It is in view of the logic of this argument that our Lord and the apostles urge all true followers of Christ to present their bodies living sacrifices, holy, acceptable to God, and their reasonable service; – to lay down their lives for the brethren, that by these means they may attest their devotion to the Lord and attain to his Kingdom and life everlasting. – Rom. 12:1; 1 John 3:16; 2 Cor. 5:14,15; Phil. 3:10,11.
