



The First Stone

**Theme Resource Pack
November 2023
(5 November - 2 December)**

Introduction

This November, as the church year draws to a close, we will be reflecting on the relationship between stone and memory. We will cover geological deep time, ancient standing stones, paperweights, gravestones, precious stones and Jesus — the cornerstone of our faith.

We have entitled the theme *The First Stone*, an English translation of words that came out of Jesus' mouth when religious people were lining up to stone a woman who had sinned big time in their book. Jesus turns the tables on them asking them "Those of you without sin cast the first stone." In recalling this story around a stone we are reminded that stones are used in the Bible to speak of grace and forgiveness, hope and loss, redemption and remembrance.

Overview

In week one we start our week thinking about the enduring nature of stone and how it is used in scripture as a metaphor to talk about the enduring grace and love of God. In week two we move from reflecting on the nature of God to considering how human beings have used stone as a marker in time. We raise memorials of stone to remember, people, events and follies, so that we can learn from history and pass on the common good.

In week three we think of stones as the burdens we bear and the anchors that hold us firm. Finally in week four we recall how stones come in all shapes and sizes and speak to us of faith, hope and love, and our life foundation built on Jesus the cornerstone.

Setting the scene

Each week we offer a visual motif. This is an optional additional focus point for preparing worship services or multimedia inspired by the material.

Seeds to sow

Open-ended prompts to inspire creative responses to the themes. Perhaps a song, some drawing, or creative writing! They are short and sweet, simply a starting off place for you and your imagination. Expand, tailor and develop as suits you. Often they take the form of a question, to encourage reflection.

Format

Each week of this four week theme runs Sunday - Saturday and has its own subtheme title. It contains a series of daily Bible readings and prompts for thought that our Daily Worship writers use to write prayers and reflections. We also produce **Connect Bible Study questions** that adapt the material for small groups or personal study.

The Eternal Rock (Week 1, 5 November)

Introduction: Our readings this week draw us into the heart and character of God. While we can never fully understand the purposes of God, the scriptures teach us that God has created us out of love and he has the capacity to risk creating a creation in which his love becomes the redeeming birth and completion of his creation. He is the God who shelters us, shields us, inspires us and shapes us.

Setting the scene: A cleft in an ancient rock face, providing shelter.

Seeds to sow: What does the word 'shield' mean to you?

- 1. Psalm 61: 1-5 Look to God the Highest Rock of All.** What a wonderful prayer: "lead me to the rock that is higher than I". This is an opportunity to explore the call to intimacy with God. Perhaps write about the God on whom we can depend.
- 2. Isaiah 51: 1-6 Look to God who shaped You.** An opportunity to talk of the generations who have passed on faith. But to go further and explore what it means to be hewn from God the rock of our salvation? A symbol of stability and continuity, made in the image of God.
- 3. Exodus 33: 12-23 Look to the rock who hides you.** Reflect upon what it means to be hidden in Christ (Colossians 3:3) and the compassion of God towards Moses when God is too much for us.
- 4. Psalm 18: 1-6 Look to God the rock who shields You.** We have talked a lot in the past years about shielding. Reflect upon what it means to have God as our shield against the troubles of life. Think upon the shield of his love that protects us.
- 5. Matthew 7: 24-27 Look to God the rock to build upon.** Jesus talked about the importance of building our lives on solid rock. This is an opportunity to revisit this parable and draw out some important lessons around the steadfast nature of God. His love and grace is immovable.
- 6. Psalm 40: 1-3 Look to the rock to stand upon.** Take a moment to reflect upon the power of personal testimony. Our need to share the sheer joy of feeling saved from disaster. This Psalm was often used during the second World War to remind people of God's provision and protection.
- 7. Psalm 27: 1-5 Look to God the rock who shelters You.** When we know God's love — fear has no place in our hearts. This is an opportunity to write about fear and love and the permanence of God's presence through times of great trials. As we reflect on this day of Remembrance and all those still going through times of war and violence we contemplate God's sheltering hope.

Stones have meaning — memories carved in our hearts

(Week 2, 12 Nov)

Introduction: In week two we move from reflecting on the nature of God to considering how human beings have used stone as a marker in time. We raise memorials of stone to remember, people, events and follies, so that we can learn from history and pass on memories for the common good.

Setting the scene: A memorial made of stone.

Seeds to sow: What are the things that really last?

- 1. Joshua 4: 1-7 Stones that hold a nation's memory.** Today's stones are digital files, be they text, film or some other medium. What's interesting is stone may outlive the digital. What is it that lasts forever — Love.
- 2. Psalm 78: 12-16 Stones that hold water for survival.** When the church is in despair we need to raise our eyes to the higher rock and tell the stories of deliverance.
- 3. John 15: 12-17 Memories that hold love as eternal.** This is a classic passage that connects with the sacrifice of the few who give their lives for the many. It opens the conversation up into understanding the cross of Christ.
- 4. 2 Samuel 18: 16-18 Monuments that speak of a life of folly.** A sad story about a prince who had everything but wanted more. He raised a monument to his own folly. How many people have done likewise? It's not our place to seek to be remembered.
- 5. Isaiah 49: 14-16 A memory that can't forget to love.** This is an interesting text which opens the door to consider those who suffer from memory loss. God will always remember us even if we forget who we once were.
- 6. Psalm 90 A memory where 1,000 years is short term.** Because our time on earth is short, this psalm reminds us that we shouldn't waste time but apply our days to doing good.
- 7. 1 Samuel 17: 48-50 A stone that can kill a giant.** When we go in the strength of the Lord and use the resources to hand God can enable us to slay the giants that seem impossible to overcome.

Rocks, anchors, and burdens (Week 3, 19 Nov)

Introduction: In week three we think of stones as the burdens we bear and the anchors that hold us firm and the hurt we hurl at each other.

Setting the scene: Rocks, dropping harmlessly to the ground.

Seeds to sow: There's an interesting tension and interplay between the light yoke (Day 2) and the strong anchor (Day 3). Reflect on the role of strength but also lightness in our faith.

- 1. John 8: 3-11 Casting the first stone.** Perhaps describe the scene and the aftermath. Before you cast a stone look into your heart. It's not enough to walk away, we also need forgiveness.
- 2. Matthew 23: 1-12 Weighty burdens.** Be careful you don't give others rules and regulations that you fail to keep yourself.
- 3. Matthew 11: 28-30 Relieving heavy burdens.** Jesus the joiner makes good fitting yokes. He makes burdens lighter.
- 4. Hebrews 6: 13-20 Taking the strain — sure and steadfast.** We can trust the promises of God. They are sure and steadfast. This of course is the motto of the Boys Brigade.
- 5. Galatians 6: 1-15 Bearing each others' burdens.** Worry is like a weight, a stone, pulling us down. When we talk about our worries we share the load. Prayer is a great lifter of burdens.
- 6. 1 Peter 5: 7 He has borne our grief and our burdens.** You're not to carry the grief you bear alone. Jesus walks with us.
- 7. Ecclesiastes 3: 5 A time to gather stones.** There is a time for building up a community and a time to let things go.

Stones that become precious (Week 4, 26 Nov)

Introduction: Finally in week four we recall how stones come in all shapes and sizes and speak to us of faith, hope and love, and our life foundation built on Jesus the cornerstone.

Setting the scene: The first cornerstone laid in construction.

Seeds to sow: What is truly precious in life?

- 1. Psalm 118: 22-25 The Cornerstone.** Explore the story of the rejected Cornerstone when building the second temple. It was initially rejected but then used to hold up the south west corner of the outer wall to keep the whole building from sliding down the valley into the rubbish dump known as Gehenna. It was used as a metaphor of God's choice over human choice when building the temple.
- 2. Luke 19: 36-40 Worship goes beyond human telling.** Here is an insight into the importance and value Jesus placed on worship that is whole hearted. If we try to silence it — the stones would shout out his glory. Some might say they do it already as we look to the hills.
- 3. 1 Peter 2: 1-8 We are worship stones.** We are like worship stones being built into a living temple of praise.
- 4. 1 Corinthians 3: 10-15 Precious stones.** What we build for the Kingdom is not about volume or size. Its about endurance and value . Our structures will be tested with fire. Only the precious metals remain for they can withstand the fiery furnace.
- 5. Revelation 21: 9-14 The city built with precious stones.** Stones continue to play a part in the eternal plans of God. What we learn from these readings is that beauty, design and light are all part of our future habitat of hope.
- 6. Matthew 16: 13-19 The small stone becomes a rock.** Jesus' play on words to Peter. His name means small stone. So Jesus said you may be a small stone but you will be a rock on which the church will stand. Or was the point to Peter you are a wee stone, then pointing to himself on this rock, I will build my church. Discuss.
- 7. Matthew 21: 42-44 Jesus the Cornerstone.** When all is said and done Jesus reminds us that he is the Cornerstone, the one who holds the building together. The one who makes the building secure, preventing us from sliding into rubble.