



KnoWhy #659, February 21, 2023

“The Rock and the Sand” by Jorge Cocco Santángelo

HOW CAN WE BUILD OUR FOUNDATIONS ON A ROCK?

“Whosoever cometh to me, and heareth my sayings, and doeth them, I will shew you to whom he is like: he is like a man which built an house, and digged deep, and laid the foundation on [the] rock.”

Luke 6:47–48; cf. Matthew 7:24–25

THE KNOW

On one occasion, Jesus poignantly asked His disciples, “Can the blind lead the blind?” (Luke 6:39). To illustrate this point, Jesus employed various parables. Among these was the parable of a wise man who built his house on a solid foundation.

“Whosoever cometh to me, and heareth my sayings, and doeth them,” Jesus taught, would be “like a man which built an house, and digged deep, and laid the foundation on [the] rock” (Luke 6:47–48; cf. Matthew 7:24–25). Importantly, what the King James Version translates as “a rock” is better rendered from the Greek text as the definite “*the* rock.”

In contrast to the wise man in the parable are those who heard Jesus’s instructions but did nothing, and they would find themselves on shaky ground: “But he that heareth, and doeth not, is like a man that without a foundation built an house upon the earth; against which the stream did beat vehemently, and immediately it fell; and the ruin of

that house was great” (Luke 6:49; cf. Matthew 7:26–27). Matthew gives another version of this parable, in which the wise man does not dig down to the bedrock but builds directly upon the rock, and in this version he also draws a dramatic contrast between the wise man and a foolish man who simply builds upon the sand.

Jesus’s words were recorded by Matthew and Luke in two separate sermons, the first often called the Sermon on the Mount and the second called the Sermon on the Plain. While Luke 6 shares many similarities with Matthew 5–7, these parables may well derive from two separate sermons delivered by Jesus on different occasions to varying audiences, in different locations, and for different purposes.¹

Regarding the account in Matthew, John W. Welch and Jeannie S. Welch have noted that “a few followers of Jesus had gone up with Him into the mountain (see Matthew 5:1). There, Jesus taught the laws of the gospel and ... sublimely made elevated allusions to the Psalms and to

the temple.” On the other hand, in Luke “a multitude of people were out on the plain” that “probably included all kinds of people—the rich and the poor, the believers and the merely curious, all types of Jews as well as Greeks or Phoenicians.”² To this more diverse and less intimate audience, Jesus offered simpler remarks designed to build a more basic foundation of faith and practical wisdom.

As part of His masterful catering to these audiences, Jesus used terms that were useful to each group, playing on their immediate surroundings. “In the mountains, one tends to look upward, noticing templed places of refuge perched on high places of protection. There one looks up to find God. In the valleys, one looks outward . . . there one removes the soil to find divine bedrock on which to build.”³

Thus, those on the mountain and those on the plain had different paths that they might take to escape or withstand the torrential rains and flash floods that were common in ancient Israel and its surrounding regions. Symbolically speaking, some audience members would first need to dig down to learn more, while others would simply need to look up to the rock of protection they had been provided.

In the version of this parable in Matthew 7, the man who builds his house on a rock is called wise and the man who builds on a sandy foundation is called foolish (see Matthew 7:24–27). The Welch has noted that this imagery comes from Psalm 94, which asks, “Fools, when will ye be wise?” (Psalm 94:8). The psalm also describes the coming judgments of the Lord. For the righteous and wise, blessings are promised: “God is praised as one who rewards the righteous, corrects the heathen, and is the rock, refuge, and defense of those who work righteousness.”⁴ This imagery is effective in Matthew 7, which likewise focuses on the judgments of God for both the wise and the foolish.

To the audience gathered out on the level plain, however, this contrasting dichotomy is missing. As S. Kent Brown has observed, “unlike his teaching in Matthew 7:26–27, Jesus does not call the unresponsive person ‘foolish’ but lets the parable carry its own penetrating force to his hearers.”⁵ In other words, “Jesus extends an opening invitation to all the world to ‘come unto me’ (Luke 6:47)” while ensuring that His “words and the resultant consequences are the same.”⁶ Jesus appears to be less focused on the coming judgment in this invitation, as He welcomes the varied multitude to ponder on His message.

One shared element in both sermons may be the most important. Both Matthew and Luke describe the righteous as building on “*the* rock,” using the definite article in the Greek text.⁷ Although this meaning is hidden in the King

James Version, it becomes clear that Jesus has a specific rock in mind that He desires the people to build upon.

In the Old Testament, both the Lord and the temple are described using the imagery of the rock, as seen in various titles given to the Lord in the Psalms: “Unto thee will I cry, O Lord *my rock*”; “Be thou *my strong rock*, for an house of defence to save me”; “He only is *my rock* and my salvation.”⁸ Such language is also used in the Book of Mormon and the book of Moses. Helaman taught his sons that “it is upon the *rock* of our Redeemer, who is Christ, the Son of God, that ye must build your foundation” to avoid the tempests of Satan (Helaman 5:12; emphasis added). And to Enoch the Lord declared, “I am Messiah, the King of Zion, the *Rock of Heaven*, which is broad as eternity; whoso cometh in at the gate and climbeth up by me shall never fall” (Moses 7:53).

As for the temple connection, Psalm 27:5 immediately associates the rock with the Lord’s tabernacle, and in Judges 13:19, Manoah offers sacrifices “upon a *rock* unto the Lord” (emphasis added). Early Jewish tradition likewise connects the Holy of Holies with the rock on which the temple was built. This rock was associated with the ineffable name of the Lord and “fixed . . . over the Deep in order to keep down its waters” at the creation of the world, as described in Genesis 1.⁹

By telling the people to build their house upon a rock, Jesus may have had a twofold meaning in mind: in order to find true and lasting protection in life, we must (1) ensure our foundations are built on the Lord Jesus Christ, which foundation can (2) be built through covenants made in the holy temple.¹⁰

THE WHY

Most people have experienced torrential storms and seen the effects of flooding or erosion. Thus, almost everyone can understand why it is important to build our lives on a sure foundation. In one of His most memorable parables, Jesus uses this backdrop to invite people of all walks of life turn to Him for spiritual strength and stability.

In both the Sermon on the Mount and the Sermon on the Plain, the promise of this parable shows that “when the chaos of life hits and the trials result, we can still feel peace and safety through our knowledge of the plan of salvation, our covenants, and our relationship with God.”¹¹ But we must let the gospel change us to secure this blessing.

As Jesus spoke to two audiences, He presented two means of obtaining security. Those already on the covenant path must look up to the mountain of the Lord’s house and

remain true to the covenants made in His holy temple. In this context, it is by looking *up* that we find lasting peace and safety throughout our lives. Yet those who are new to the path or seeking to get back on it must dig *down*, working to establish a strong foundation of basic gospel knowledge and preliminary gospel covenants centered in Christ. In either scenario, the need for faith in Jesus Christ and for doing all we can to repent and come unto Him is essential for our own salvation.

We must always remember that Jesus Christ is the “sure foundation, a foundation whereon if men build they cannot fall” (Helaman 5:12). Through His infinite and eternal sacrifice, He provides the ultimate peace and joy and healing available to all humankind. No matter where you are on your journey, if you heed and follow the teachings of Jesus and remain true to your covenants, you will receive peace in this life and in the world to come.

FURTHER READING

John W. Welch and Jeanie S. Welch, *The Parables of Jesus: Revealing the Plan of Salvation* (American Fork, UT: Covenant Communications, 2019), 82–89.

S. Kent Brown, “Luke Chapter 6,” in *The Testimony of Luke* (Provo, UT: BYU Studies, 2014), 305–354.

© Scripture Central, 2023

NOTES

1. See John W. Welch and Jeannie S. Welch, *The Parables of Jesus: Revealing the Plan of Salvation* (American Fork, UT: Covenant Communications, 2019), 83; S. Kent Brown, “Luke Chapter 6,” in *The Testimony of Luke* (Provo, UT: BYU Studies, 2014), 307.
2. Welch and Welch, *Parables of Jesus*, 83.
3. Welch and Welch, *Parables of Jesus*, 84.
4. Welch and Welch, *Parables of Jesus*, 85.
5. Brown, “Luke Chapter 6,” 346.
6. Welch and Welch, *Parables of Jesus*, 85.
7. Welch and Welch, *Parables of Jesus*, 83–86.
8. Psalm 28:1; 31:2; 62:6; emphasis added.
9. Raphael Patai, *Man and Temple in Ancient Jewish Myth and Ritual* (New York, NY: Thomas Nelson and Sons, 1947), 57; see also Margaret Barker, *The Gate of Heaven* (London, UK: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 1991), 18–20.
10. See Welch and Welch, *Parables of Jesus*, 88.
11. Welch and Welch, *Parables of Jesus*, 83.

