

Ecclesiastes 3: 5; "A Time to Cast away and a Time to Gather,
A Mid-Week Bible Study conducted on Wednesday,
October 29th, 2008, at the Rendall home.

Whenever I read this phrase, "A time to cast away stones I think of the many times when I was a young lad when we used to "skip" stones across the water and then count the number of times that the stone touched the water as it skipped. My friends and I would have contests with each other to see who could make them skip the farthest. This was always a joyous time as it was a fun form of harmless entertainment for all of us. There was a time for this but it was not every day. There was a time and a place for it. It would have been inappropriate and possibly even wrong if I would have been skipping stones or throwing stones on the pavement of the schoolyard when my classmates were playing. Someone could easily have gotten hurt. So, as we begin our study, we should consider, that it is always a good thing to think about the why, and the where, and the when of whatever we are considering to do. It is a great part of growing up and learning what is pleasing to God; of becoming mature in our faith. We want to spend a few minutes here thinking about what these words mean; "A time to cast away stones, and a time to gather stones together." Let's look first at what God and people use stones for. And Secondly - What it means for us to cast stones away. And Third - What it means for us to gather stones together.

First of all - What is it that God and people use stones for?

God created stones for men to use to build things with or to remember things by. That is why they are gathered. Strong materials are needed to build a great and magnificent building that will last a long time. You can see an example of this in 1 Kings 5: 15. "Solomon had seventy thousand who carried burdens, and eighty thousand who quarried stone in the mountains, besides three thousand three hundred from the chiefs of Solomon's deputies, who supervised the people who labored in the work." "And the king commanded them to quarry large stones, costly stones, and hewn stones, to lay the foundation of the temple." So Solomon's builders, Hiram's builders, and the Gebalites quarried them; and they prepared timber and stones to build the temple. If Solomon gathered all these great materials to build a temple for God, just think of the kind of stones that God gathers together to build His Church with. There is the foundation stone of Jesus Christ. He is the greatest Stone; the Stone of Israel. 1 Corinthians 3: 11 says, "For no other foundation can anyone lay than that which is laid, which is Jesus Christ." "Now if anyone builds upon this foundation with gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, straw, each one's work will become clear; for the Day will declare it, because it will be revealed with fire; and the fire will test each one's work, of what sort it is." This is very important for each Christian to understand. Are we built upon the foundation of Christ as a gathered living stone? God is gathering men to Christ. God uses Christ and His work to build with, and to build upon. Look at 1

Peter 2: 1. "Therefore, laying aside all malice, all deceit, hypocrisy, envy, and all evil speaking, as newborn babes, desire the pure milk of the word, that you may grow thereby, if indeed you have tasted that the Lord is gracious." "Coming to Him as to a living stone, rejected indeed by men, but chosen by God and precious, you also, as living stones are being built up a spiritual house, a holy priesthood, to offer up spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ."

Have you been gathered to Jesus Christ? Are you building upon the foundation of His finished work on the cross and His grace at work in your life? Then you will want to build with precious and holy attitudes and actions. The best time to begin this great work of gathering with Christ is when you are young. Turn over to Ecclesiastes 12: 1. "Remember your Creator in the days of your youth, before the difficult days come, and the years draws near when you say, 'I have no pleasure in them.'" People are very foolish to think that they can live their lives for themselves and all their worldly pleasures without being gathered to God and without gathering for Christ. The work of gathering and building takes time. Are you building with precious stones of offering yourself and all that you have to God for Him to use in a way that honors and glorifies Him? Does God, as He looks at you, and people as they look at you, know that you are gathering with Christ? Look at Matthew 12: 30. Speaking in the context of those who had said of the Lord Jesus that He cast out demons by the ruler of the demons, Jesus says in verse 29, "Or how can one enter a strong man's house and plunder his goods, unless he first binds the strong man?" "And then he will plunder his house." "He who is not with Me is against Me, and he who does not gather with Me scatters abroad." Let us ask ourselves if we are gathering with Christ or whether we are scattering abroad? If we are not gathering the good things of grace and truth; if we are not living these out in all humility, consciously pursuing bringing every thought captive to Christ, then Satan will still have his influence and control there in our lives. This must be cast out to make progress in holiness and righteousness. Is the Lord Jesus plundering the house which Satan tried to set up in your life so long ago, or is he still in possession of it? Look over at the parallel passage in Luke 11: 21. "When a strong man, fully armed, guards his own palace, his goods are in peace." "But when a stronger than he comes upon him, he takes from him all his armor in which he trusted, and divides his spoils." Or is it only you and the great desires of what you want to accomplish for yourself that they see?

Secondly - What does it mean for us to cast away stones?

God also knows that stones must be cast away from a field before anything lasting can be built upon it, or grown on it. Turn with me to Isaiah 5: 1 for an example of this. "Now let me sing to my Well-beloved a song of my Beloved regarding His vineyard: My Well-beloved has a vineyard on a very fruitful hill." "He dug it up and cleared out its stones, and planted it with the choicest vine." "He built a tower in its midst, and also made a winepress in it; so He expected it to bring forth good grapes, but it brought forth wild grapes." "And now, O inhabitants of Jerusalem and men of Judah, judge please, between Me and My

vineyard." "What more could have been done to My vineyard that I have not done in it?" "Why then, when I expected it to bring forth good grapes, did it bring forth wild grapes?" So the casting away of stones here, by the Lord, who is the "Well-beloved", was to remove the obstacles to fruit-bearing in the His vineyard. The Lord's vineyard is the Old Testament people of Israel and their inheritance. Turn over to Psalm 80 and verse 8 and you will see, in the context, what the stones represent which were cleared away, or cast out of the Lord's vineyard. "You have brought a vine out of Egypt; You have cast out the nations, and planted it." So the stones being cast out are the Gentile nations that lived in the land of Canaan; those worshipers of idols, those worshipers of false gods whom the Lord "cast out" so that Israel would have a lasting inheritance. The time to cast away the stones for the Lord was when He wanted to clear the land of Israel of idols, so that He could plant Israel in it. Now these things are given to us for a picture, also of what God also wants to do to clear our sinful hearts of sin. We need to see first, what the heart of man is like. It is like a stone in its resistance to what God would have it to do. But He comes to the heart and changes this so that we can "cast away the stones" from our hearts.

Turn with me to Ezekiel 36 and verse 24. "For I will take you from among the nations, gather you out of all countries, and bring you into your own land." "Then I will sprinkle clean water on you and you shall be clean; I will cleanse you from all your filthiness and from all your idols." "I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit within you; I will take the heart of stone out of your flesh." This is the sovereign act of God in relation to salvation. It is his work of grace in the heart which is called regeneration or the circumcision of the heart. But now turn over to Ezekiel 18 and you will see what the responsibility is, of everyone who receives that grace. Sometimes we do not know whether we or others are a righteous person or unrighteous. Here we have God's mind on the matter. Verse 26 says, When a righteous man turns away from his righteousness, commits iniquity, and dies in it, it is because of the iniquity which he done that he dies." "Again, when a wicked man turns away from the wickedness which he committed, and does what is lawful and right, he preserves himself alive." "Because he considers and turns away from all the transgressions which he committed, he shall surely live; he shall not die." "Yet the house of Israel says, 'The way of the Lord is not fair.'" "O house of Israel, is it not My ways which are fair, and your ways which are not fair?" "Therefore I will judge you, O house of Israel, everyone according to his ways," says the Lord God." "Repent, and turn from all your transgressions which you have committed, and get yourselves a new heart, and a new spirit." "For why should you die, O house of Israel?" Here we see the responsibility of man to respond to the gospel as though by his own works he could save himself. "Cast away your transgressions". "Get yourself a new heart." All the idols, those things of this world that are more important to him than doing the will of God; these must fall, and they must be cleared out of his life if he would truly glorify God. Can a man really do this? Not without the grace of Jesus Christ. But this is what he must

strive to do by faith as soon as he comes to know what God expects of him in the gospel, and in his Christian life. He must strive to repent, to "cast away all of his transgressions." The time to repent and seek the Lord is when you realize that the stones of sin are there in the field of your heart and life. They must be dug up and cast away. Now is the time break up the stony ground of your heart. Now is the time to cast away all of your sins. They are stones in the field of your heart. You say, "Is there ever a time when we should not cast them away?" No, whenever we see that there are sins in the field of our heart and life, we should take steps to remove them. It is God's Preceptive will and purpose that we do so. If we want to grow good things there by God's grace, if we want to see good things built into our heart and life, then we need to cast the stones of sin away.

Then 3rdly and finally - What does it mean for us to "gather stones together"?

There is also a time for gathering stones together. Turn with me to Joshua Chapter 4. "And it came to pass, when all the people had completely crossed over the Jordan, that the Lord spoke to Joshua, saying: 'Take for yourselves twelve men from the people, one man from every tribe, and command them, saying 'Take for yourselves twelve stones from her, out of the midst of the Jordan, from the place where the priest's feet stood firm.' 'You shall carry them over with you and leave them in the lodging place where you lodge tonight.'" "Then Joshua called the twelve men whom he had appointed from the children of Israel, one man from every tribe; and Joshua said to them: 'Cross over before the ark of the Lord your God in to the midst of the Jordan, and each one of you take up a stone on his shoulder according to the number of tribes of the children of Israel, that this may be a sign among you when your children ask in time to come, saying, 'What do these stones mean to you?' 'Then you shall answer them that the waters of the Jordan were cut off before the ark of the covenant of the Lord; when it crossed over Jordan, the waters of the Jordan were cut off.'" "And these stones shall be for a memorial to the children of Israel forever." "And the children of Israel did so, just as Joshua commanded, and took up twelve stones from the midst of Jordan, as the Lord had spoken to Joshua, according to the number of the tribes of the children of Israel, and carried them over with them to the place where they lodged, and laid them down there." "Then Joshua set up twelve stones in the midst of the Jordan, in the place where the feet of the priests who bore the ark of the covenant stood; and they are there to this day."

Now what is this meant to teach us about gathering stones together? I believe that it is meant to teach us that we are to remember that once God has begun a good work in us, that He will complete it until the Day of Christ. Once He has come to our soul and changed our fallen sinful hearts, and taken away the heart of stone, that He will not fail to help us to cast out all the stones of sin from our lives. He will not fail to help us to tear down every idol in our hearts and drive out every sin. If you look over at Joshua 3 and verse 9 you can see this. "So Joshua said to the children of Israel, 'Come here, and hear the words of the Lord your God.'" "And

Joshua said, 'By this you shall know that the living God is among you, and that He will without fail drive out from before you the Canaanites and the Hittites and the Hivites and the Perizzites and the Girgashites and the Amorites and the Jebusites: "Behold, the ark of the covenant of the Lord is crossing over before you into the Jordan." "Now therefore, take for yourselves twelve men from the tribes of Israel, one man from every tribe." "And it shall come to pass, as soon as the soles of the feet of the priests who bear the ark of the Lord, the Lord of all the earth, shall rest in the waters of the Jordan, that the waters of the Jordan shall be cut off, the waters that come down from upstream, and they shall stand as a heap." This is exactly what happened. Verse 17 says, "Then the priests who bore the ark of the covenant of the Lord stood firm on dry ground, until all the people crossed completely over the Jordan." It was after this great miraculous event that God gave them command to gather the stones. And this is how we should apply this to ourselves. When we see that God has undertaken to do great and miraculous things in our hearts, in salvation and deliverance, we ought to remember them and take them to heart. It is by faith that we are saved and it is by faith that we stand. And it is by faith that we make progress in holiness and righteousness as we move towards our settlement in the land of promise, our eternal inheritance. Will you not seek to forever remember the way that God led you, delivering you from your idols and your sins, every one of them? Will you not be thankful and show your thankfulness by rendering to your God a sincere obedience? You did not deserve His help, but He has been faithful to give it. I cannot think that any one of us is much of a Christian if we will not do this. Set up memorial stones in your hearts. Gather them together there, for the living God is among you and He will without fail drive out from before you all hindrances and obstacles to your becoming holy if you will look to Christ by faith. May it be so for each of us.