

The Gospel of the Cornerstone

The Apostolic Witness and Where We Should Build Our Lives

David Gooding

A Myrtlefield House Transcript



MYRTLEFIELD

HOUSE

www.myrtlefieldhouse.com

David Gooding has asserted his right under the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act, 1988, to be identified as Author of this work.

Copyright © The Myrtlefield Trust, 2020

Unless otherwise indicated, Scripture quotations are from the ESV® Bible (The Holy Bible, English Standard Version®), copyright © 2001 by Crossway, a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved. May not copy or download more than 500 consecutive verses of the ESV Bible or more than one half of any book of the ESV Bible. Quotations marked KJV are from The Authorized (King James) Version. Rights in the Authorized Version in the United Kingdom are vested in the Crown. Reproduced by permission of the Crown's patentee, Cambridge University Press. Other quotations are Dr Gooding's own translations or paraphrases.

This text has been edited from a transcript a talk given by David Gooding.

All rights reserved. Permission is granted to reproduce this document in its entirety, or in unaltered excerpts, for personal and church use only as long as you do not charge a fee. You must not reproduce it on any Internet site. Permission must be obtained if you wish to reproduce it in any other context, translate it, or publish it in any format.

Published by The Myrtlefield Trust

PO Box 2216

Belfast, N Ireland

BT1 9YR

w: www.myrtlefieldhouse.com

e: info@myrtlefieldhouse.com

Myrtlefield catalogue no: act.003/jf

The Gospel of the Cornerstone

Acts 3–4

Now shall we read together in the Scriptures from Acts 3, commencing at verse 11.

While he clung to Peter and John, all the people, utterly astounded, ran together to them in the portico called Solomon's. And when Peter saw it he addressed the people: 'Men of Israel, why do you wonder at this, or why do you stare at us, as though by our own power or piety we have made him walk? The God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, the God of our fathers, glorified his servant Jesus, whom you delivered over and denied in the presence of Pilate, when he had decided to release him. But you denied the Holy and Righteous One, and asked for a murderer to be granted to you, and you killed the Author of life, whom God raised from the dead. To this we are witnesses. And his name — by faith in his name — has made this man strong whom you see and know, and the faith that is through Jesus has given the man this perfect health in the presence of you all. And now, brothers, I know that you acted in ignorance, as did also your rulers. But what God foretold by the mouth of all the prophets, that his Christ would suffer, he thus fulfilled. Repent therefore, and turn again, that your sins may be blotted out, that times of refreshing may come from the presence of the Lord, and that he may send the Christ appointed for you, Jesus, whom heaven must receive until the time for restoring all the things about which God spoke by the mouth of his holy prophets long ago. Moses said, "The Lord God will raise up for you a prophet like me from your brothers. You shall listen to him in whatever he tells you. And it shall be that every soul who does not listen to that prophet shall be destroyed from the people." And all the prophets who have spoken, from Samuel and those who came after him, also proclaimed these days. You are the sons of the prophets and of the covenant that God made with your fathers, saying to Abraham, "And in your offspring shall all the families of the earth be blessed." God, having raised up his servant, sent him to you first, to bless you by turning every one of you from your wickedness.' And as they were speaking to the people, the priests and the captain of the temple and the Sadducees came upon them, greatly annoyed because they were teaching the people and proclaiming in Jesus the resurrection from the dead. And they arrested them and put them in custody until the next day, for it was already evening. But many of those who had heard the word believed, and the number of the men came to about five thousand. On the next day their rulers and elders and scribes gathered together in Jerusalem, with Annas the high priest and Caiaphas and John and Alexander, and all who were of the high-priestly family. And when they had set them in the midst, they enquired, 'By what power or by what name did you do this?' Then Peter, filled with the Holy Spirit, said to them, 'Rulers of the people and elders, if

we are being examined today concerning a good deed done to a crippled man, by what means this man has been healed, let it be known to all of you and to all the people of Israel that by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom you crucified, whom God raised from the dead—by him this man is standing before you well. This Jesus is the stone that was rejected by you, the builders, which has become the cornerstone. And there is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved.’ (3:11–4:12)

I am sure God will bless that lovely portion of his word to all our hearts.

How and where we should build our lives

It is an exceedingly simple observation to make that all of us are builders. In many different ways and with varying success, we build. These young people here present with us this evening are building their physical physique. By God’s help, with their parents care, with food, with exercise, with sleep, they are still engaged in building their bodies that they may enjoy their lives later on. Some of us who are a bit older are engaged in building our careers, teaching ourselves skills, laying in our stores of knowledge, that later on we may pursue successfully the employment we have chosen for ourselves in life. And some of you are building families and homes, and some of us build businesses, and all of us without exception are building character.

We may build carelessly and shoddily, but we build. And none of us can help but see, I trust, the importance of how we build. It matters how I build in my daily studies. It matters how I do the housework at home. If I do my building there shoddily, then the result is unfortunate, but more important still is that I am building a shoddy character with every piece of shoddy work I do. It matters enormously how well we build. But tonight I do not choose to speak on the question of *how* we build. Rather I invite you to consider with me a far more important and fundamental thing: not how we build, but *where* we build and upon what foundation.

That is a very real distinction. Suppose I go to an architect and tell him I have decided to build a house. I say to the architect I plan to build a house worth a certain amount. To the limit of my money I intend to put in the very best materials into this house, and I have chosen such-and-such a site to build it on.

The architect examines his plans and says, ‘My good friend, first of all I want to tell you that the site you have chosen to build on is clay, and because the site is clay, before you start to build your house you must first lay yourself a foundation bed of solid concrete. If you don’t put in that bed of solid concrete, you will find that in the course of years that clay will swell in water and dry in heat; and your house will be wracked and pushed here and pushed there, and presently your house will crack. And it could be its downfall. It is not enough that you build your house well as houses are built; but it is all important that before you consider how well you are going to build, that you make certain that you build on a proper foundation.’

I want to remind us all that the architect of this universe has told us plainly that while it is important how we build our lives, it is vastly more important where we build our lives and upon what foundation. ‘No one can lay a foundation other than that which is laid,’ says the divine architect (if he wishes to have a successful life and build a character that will last this

life and last eternally), 'no one can lay a foundation other than that which is laid, which is Jesus Christ' (1 Cor 3:11).

It matters on what we build; it matters around what we build our lives. And God has likened Jesus Christ to a cornerstone, that stone around which the building is built, that is the key to the building. It gives character to it all and the whole building rests its weight upon that cornerstone. 'Jesus Christ is that cornerstone,' says God. And every life that is built around him will last eternally. But every life that is not built around him, however well that life is built, will eventually perish.

We do well to get that distinction. So very often people have it in their minds that Christianity is concerned solely about how well we build. People will argue, 'But you see, I can build my life without Christianity just as well as I could build it with Christianity. I'm as honest without Christianity as you are with Christianity. I'm as diligent in my life, in my studies, in my profession. I'm as diligent there and as successful without Christianity as you are with Christianity.'

And for the moment I would not dispute the point, but the question is not merely *how well* we build, but *on what* we build and *around what* we build. Our Lord said that the situation was likened to two men. One man built a very good house, but he built it on sand. The other man also built a house, and I do not read that he built a better house, but he built it on rock. And when the storm came the deciding factor was not how well the houses were built, but solely *where* those houses were built (Luke 6:46–49).

My good friend, the Bible reminds each one of us that in the last analysis it is not merely the quality of our building that will decide the issue. It is altogether whether our lives are built on Christ and around Christ, or whether we have built on some unsatisfactory foundation. May I ask us all then to look within for a moment, and ask ourselves honestly, around what is our life built? What is the cornerstone of your life? Has it a cornerstone?

There are some folk that have no better cornerstones than their gardens and their hobbies. Their life is built around that. If you took that away, they'd have nothing. And others who are more seriously inclined are building their life around their family life. To some the cornerstone of life is their business; to others success; to others fame; to others knowledge. These are the things around which their lives are built. I want to remind us all that the Bible says that, noble as those things are, they are useless as cornerstones. One day, they shall be gone, and then if we have no cornerstone left that is worthy, our building will disintegrate and perish.

The builders and the cornerstone

This is a challenging thing, and for our help I have read that story in the Bible where men more famous than we are, were challenged with this same kind of situation. I wonder if you would allow me to remind you about them, about that tremendous question that they had to consider, about the colossal emotional conflict that went on within them as they faced the issue. The men I refer to were the Sadducees who crucified Christ.

The Sadducees

These men were respectable, as men go; they were not particularly vicious according to the standards of their age. They were men with very definite ideas. The Sadducees, we are told, believed that there is no resurrection (Acts 23:8). Their view was that when we die we are done for; we die like animals. This life is all there is, there is nothing beyond. They held that there were no angels. They weren't prepared to believe that there could be beings in this universe that you couldn't touch or see. They pooh-poohed the idea of a heaven with angels flying around. They said that was fairy talk, fables fit to be put away with their childish books. 'There's not such a place,' they said. They believed that there was no spirit. That is, if you would ask them, 'What is man?' they would have said to you, 'Man? Why, man is what you can feel and touch, that's all. There is no such thing as spirit, and in consequence, there is no such thing as spiritual experience. The idea that man is spirit and can get in touch with God's spirit? Nonsense! All life is, is what you see it to be, what you can touch, what you can taste, what you can handle, and that is all.'

Oh but they were religious. They had a temple in their city and every now and again they went and joined in the services. They held it was a decent thing that kept men within bounds; it stopped people from kicking over the traces and becoming rather nasty and vicious. They thought it was a good social custom to meet together and sing some psalms and read a code of ethics, but they held it fundamentally that when that was done, when life was finished here, that was the end. No judgment: no heaven, no hell.

Then they met Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ said, bluntly, that there is a heaven. And Jesus Christ said, bluntly, that there is a hell. And the Sadducees brought their reason and they said, 'Nonsense, rabbi!' They brought up their objections to the resurrection and said, 'What on earth would happen? Consider this case. There was a woman once and she had seven husbands one after another.' (It was a silly story but they made it up to suit their theory.) 'She had seven husbands one after another, and then they all died. If there were a resurrection, rabbi, look what a muddle that would be in heaven!' (see Matt 22:23–28).

Silly argument. And the Lord exposed their folly and again asserted, 'There is a heaven. There is a hell. There is a resurrection, and this life does not finish things.' And there is a God, and man has a spirit. And if we would enter the kingdom of God we must go through that spiritual experience that is being born again (see vv. 29–32). 'Truly, truly I say to you,' said Christ, 'you must be born again' (see John 3:3).

Life is not just the bread and butter we eat, the physical things we can touch, the gardens we dig and the homes we build; there is a spiritual side to life that is life indeed. And if we would enter God's heaven, we must be born again.

It became obvious that the Sadducees and our Lord Jesus Christ were at opposite extremes and, in the end, the Sadducees put him on the cross. They weren't quite so refined as moderns. They demonstrated what their hearts felt. They got rid of him, not by a polite turning on the heel, but by putting him on a cross.

Imagine, can you, their consternation when fifty days later there stood up in their city certain men, uneducated for the most part, who dared to assert before the ears of all and sundry that this Jesus whom they had crucified was risen from the dead! 'It can't be!' said the Sadducees. 'There is no such a thing as a resurrection. We won't have it!'

But the evidence wasn't to be got rid of like that. Here were otherwise uneducated men, but boldly preaching the gospel in the centre of the city. Here was a lame man, lame from birth, risen and walking, dancing, and leaping! The evidence wasn't to be got rid of, and it was a very solemn meeting of the Sadducees' council that met to decide what they should do with the preachers that preached that Jesus Christ was risen from the dead.

Deciding what to do with the evidence

The issue was plain. If Jesus Christ was really risen from the dead, the Sadducees were wrong, and it wasn't being wrong about a little thing in life; they were wrong from the foundation up! If Jesus Christ was risen from the dead, then these Sadducees, in killing him, had killed the very fountain of life. They were at cross purposes with the very architect of the universe. They were wrong with God. They were living in direct contradiction of the very fundamental principles of life.

It is a shattering thing to face that alternative. You must excuse those Sadducees if they felt violently about it, for if Jesus Christ were risen from the dead, there was no alternative. If they would be saved, they would have to surrender to him. They would have to start again, to go down to the foundation once more, to unwrap their minds from the cornerstones around which they had been built and receive Jesus Christ as Lord and Saviour and build on him. It was nothing short of what the Saviour had always said. 'Gentlemen, it's not a matter of improving a brick here, or cutting out a habit there. It is a matter of starting from the foundation again. You must be *born* again. Nothing less than that.'

I would like us all to see that the same issue confronts us.

Jesus says we must be saved

I may speak freely, for many of you I do not know. Maybe I speak to somebody here and you have always believed that when you die you are going to be done for and there is nothing for you to face. You would like it that way. You have tried to convince yourself that there is no heaven and there is no hell. You have tried to convince yourself that salvation, about which Christians speak, is a mere fanciful imagination. I want to remind you that I am not here to exhort you to build with better bricks. I am here to challenge you that you are building on the wrong foundation, and before we can start to consider how we shall improve the building, we must come to this vital issue. We must face Jesus Christ. We must be prepared to surrender to him and receive him as chief cornerstone.

'What would receiving Jesus Christ as cornerstone involve?' you say. 'What do you mean when you say it isn't a question of how well I build but something else?'

I can do no better than quote the words of Scripture. What does it mean to build on Christ as foundation, as cornerstone? It means this, that 'there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved' (Acts 4:12). Do we notice the terms? Jesus Christ comes into our life and he says, 'My good man, you *must* be *saved*.' This is the foundation.

Forgive my labouring the point, for many folk have got the idea that Christianity comes to us and says, 'Look here, you must be kinder to your aunt than you have been hitherto, and you must be a little bit more charitable and public spirited, and you must cut out some of the

bad language that at times you indulge in, and be sober more frequently than is your custom.' And that, if we patch up the buildings of our lives like that, then God will be satisfied. It is not so. Jesus Christ said that there is something more fundamentally wrong with us than that. There is a need that goes deeper. It is this: not that we must try and be good, but that we must be *saved*!

And what are we saved from? We are saved from the guilt of our sin. For you see, sin matters. It matters deeply that as natural men and women we have lived in contradiction of God's law. We are guilty before God, says Jesus Christ. It is not merely that we don't always make a good job of living; it is that sin has brought in a great barrier between us and God and we have offended our creator. We need to be reconciled to God and made right with him; that is what we need. We need to be saved. We need to receive God's Holy Spirit. We need a new power and a new life. We need to be born again. 'You must be saved,' says Christ.

No other name than the name of Jesus

Then the Bible adds, 'there is *no other name* under heaven given among men by which we must be saved' (Acts 4:12). How this does challenge the human heart. We like to think that there are many roads to heaven. And some will argue, 'Well, you live your life according to your system of ethics and I will live mine as I think, and surely if we are sincere we shall end up at the right end.'

'Not so,' says Christ. If it were merely a matter of a system of ethics, then you might have yours and I might have mine, and it mightn't make all that great of an amount of difference. But it isn't a question of a system of ethics and following a golden rule; it is a question of being *saved*. 'Without the shedding of blood,' says the Bible, 'there is no forgiveness' (Heb 9:22). What mankind needs is a Saviour that can come between him and God and take away the guilt of a man's sin by the sacrifice of himself. What a man needs is someone to come between him and the God he has sinned against, someone that can die for him and bear away his sins. And there has only been one who could ever do that. Unashamedly the Lord claimed it: it wasn't religious pride gone astray; it was in the very nature of the case. There can only be one Saviour and one way of being saved.

And you say, 'How may I know that that is true? How may I know that it's true that I need to be saved? And how may I be sure that Jesus Christ is this Saviour?'

I think the Bible is one of the easiest books to prove true. If we'd like to be convinced that we need to be saved, then I submit that we spend a week or two deliberately in the company of Jesus Christ. Have you ever tried sincerely to carry out his instructions that he gave us in the Sermon on the Mount? Have you ever made the experiment of really trying to love your neighbour as yourself? You try it, and you will begin to find that what Jesus Christ said is utterly true. We can't. I challenge us one and all; we just can't love our neighbour as ourselves!

There is something radically wrong with us. You come and tell me if you dispute it, if you think you have succeeded. The Bible says that we are lame, lame from birth. I wonder what man would dispute the fact? For we need not be like that young man in Acts 3 whose ankles were weak and he'd never walked from birth, whom they laid as a beggar on the steps of the temple, but all of us by nature are lame like that. When we try we fail again to worship God

and live a decent life and walk straight. Have we not all found it, that there is a curious lameness within us? We don't go straight. And the reason is not always that we don't want to walk straight, the reason is that we just can't walk straight.

The gospel comes, in all its realism, not giving us advice that we ought to walk better than we do. It comes to men and women who can't walk straight, and gently it tells them that they must be saved, and then very gladly it tells them that they can be saved! Gladly it tells them that there is only one who can save them.

Oh, my friend, there is many a one that will give you advice. There has been many a prophet throughout this world that has told his fellow men that they ought to live a little bit better; but there is only one man in all of history that has ever come near us to tell us that we need to be saved and that he has come to save us. Right now, by God's grace and help, I want to introduce you to him again, to the only one in the long, long history of the world that has dared to face us personally and say, 'My friends, you need to be saved. You must be saved, and I have died to save you.'

We must turn around and face a man that talks like that. We must make our decision about him. We must turn around and say, 'But I don't need to be saved.' But what one of us will say that? What one of us, in front of our fellows, will say that we walk perfectly and that we are sinless and holy? What one of us would claim that from now on, if we determined to do so, we could live sinlessly? We just can't.

Jesus Christ says, 'Look, I love you in spite of that, and I've come to die for you, and I've come to save you.'

When a man talks like that, we must make our reply. We can turn around and say, 'Look here. I don't want you to save me. Get out! It's none of your business. I don't want your love. This is an outrageous intrusion on my privacy. I won't have you invade my personality. I don't want anybody to love me and die for me! I'll build my own building!'

Or else we must turn around and say, 'Yes, Lord. At our very hearts we haven't a cornerstone that's worth relying on. We do need a Saviour to die for our sins, a Saviour who rose again to give us power to overcome sin.'

Jesus Christ says, 'You must be saved.'

Knowing the truth of Christ's claims

How can I know these claims are true? There is nobody else who ever made them. We don't need to be worried about making the decision scores of times. There is only one man in all of history that ever claimed that he died for you. We shall only have to make the decision once. His apostles said it, as Jesus Christ himself said it: this Bible that we handle, starting in Genesis and going through its pages, compiled down the years and centuries of history, has in reality been, all of it, about *him* (Luke 24:27). Have you ever thought about that? Have you ever considered how unique this is in all earth's history?

I say again that there have been many books that have told us to behave, but only one book in all this world that has dared to say for centuries upon century that God was going to send a Saviour, that God was going to send that Saviour through a particular nation, the Jewish nation. Only one book has dared to say that, and it dared to say it centuries before

Christ came; and it kept on saying it all the way through, that the Jews had a special place in history to bring in God's Saviour. One day, according to the long string of ancient prophecy, he came. It is open to anybody to test it.

'Pooh,' you say. 'That's no proof. Did not the Jews write the Old Testament, and was not Jesus a Jew? You see what happened: the Jews, first of all, wrote it and said the Saviour was coming, and then they produced the man and they put the two together. They knocked their heads together and they made one fulfil the other!'

But it wasn't so, was it? For the Jews decided that Jesus was *not* the Christ, and as Peter very forcefully put it to the Sadducees who crucified him, 'Gentlemen, you didn't believe that Jesus was the Christ, did you? Then the last thing on earth you ought to have done was to have crucified him! Gentlemen, can you not see that in crucifying Jesus of Nazareth you have gone and fulfilled exactly what that Old Testament said would happen?'

You say, 'Where does it say it?'

It says it in a multitude of places, and explicitly the prophet Isaiah said that God's Son and Servant should come. He would be 'wounded for our transgressions, bruised for our iniquities. The chastisement of our peace would be on him, and by his stripes we should be healed' (see Isaiah 53:5).

Oh, my friend, there is evidence enough. This great man offering to build a cornerstone of our lives, this man is the cornerstone of God's history! This is the meaning of life. This is *the* cornerstone.

May I ask us in the closing moments of our meeting here now, that we face him. This Christ of history, this Jesus of Nazareth, yes, this Christ of Calvary, the Lord Jesus Christ that is risen from the dead, stands beside each one of us now saying, 'My friend, you must be saved, and I am the only one that can save you. My friend, you need a cornerstone, else your life on earth will be a mess and in eternity to come, without a cornerstone, you will disintegrate and perish.' This is the Christ that comes and says, 'I've done it all. You can be saved. I am not asking you to try and live now, henceforward, a little bit better to improve the rooms, to add on another storey, to build with better bricks. I'm asking you to receive me in and start from the beginning, to receive me as a foundation. Thereafter you will do your best to build, no doubt. Whether you build well or not so well, the main thing will have been secured. You have a foundation that is sufficient for life here, for life eternal.'

Then have I made it clear? And as presently we turn to prayer and make our response to God, it isn't a question whether we shall promise God to try and do better, it is a question that we shall answer: 'What shall I do with this Jesus Christ who confronts me with his love? He is insistent that I need to be saved; I need to be born again; I need a new foundation; I need him as a cornerstone! What shall I do with this Jesus that is called the Christ?'

Thank God that those of us who have already received him may praise God the more and seek God's grace the better to build upon this foundation. God grant the grace to any who have not yet been born again and have not yet received him, to face his challenge. And may we see the issue so clearly that we shall stop trying to sit on the fence about it all. May we see the issue so clearly that we receive him into our hearts gladly, or else it will be gone. The Bible says that he that believes in him shall never be let down.

About the Author

DAVID W. GOODING (1925-2019) was Professor of Old Testament Greek at Queen's University, Belfast and a member of the Royal Irish Academy. He taught the Bible internationally and lectured on both its authenticity and its relevance to philosophy, world religions and daily life. He published scholarly articles on the Septuagint and Old Testament narratives, as well as expositions of Luke, John, Acts, Hebrews, the New Testament's Use of the Old Testament, and several books addressing arguments against the Bible and the Christian faith. His analysis of the Bible and our world continues to shape the thinking of scholars, teachers and students alike.