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## Sermons In Stones

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## Sermons In Stones

### Abstract

In lieu of an abstract, below is the essay's first paragraph.

"There was once a man who bought a farm in Scotland. The farm was located in a region of poor soil and severe weather. Scattered all over the fields of oats and barley were stones of various sizes. It appeared as if the stones had been set in their places purposely. The new owner first removed the stones, then seeded and manured his fields. The yield was scanty, so the following year he scattered the stones about the fields again. The yield was adequate. He repeated the experiment, with the same results. He concluded that either the stones acted as a wind-break for the grain, or the stones contributed some fertile element to the soil, or else the sun's genial heat (reflected from the stones) raised the soil temperature a few critical degrees. In all probability, the three acted in concert. and the stony field perversely proved superior to the smooth."

### Cover Page Footnote

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"By their fruits ye shall know them."

MATT. 7, 20

There was once a man who bought a farm in Scotland. The farm was located in a region of poor soil and severe weather. Scattered all over the fields of oats and barley were stones of various sizes. It appeared as if the stones had been set in their places purposely. The new owner first removed the stones, then seeded and manured his fields. The yield was scanty, so the following year he scattered the stones about the fields again. The yield was adequate. He repeated the experiment, with the same results. He concluded that either the stones acted as a wind-break for the grain, or the stones contributed some fertile element to the soil, or else the sun's genial heat (reflected from the stones) raised the soil temperature a few critical degrees. In all probability, the three acted in concert, and the stony field perversely proved superior to the smooth.

There was once a man who wanted to live a perfect life, free not only of sin, but from temptation as well. So he took a knife, and with a swift surgical movement he relieved his body of its "stones." His wish was granted—and then some. All lust was gone, but so were the benefits that the stones provide. Soon his body became flabby, his hair lost its strength and lustre, his voice piped shrilly where once it had boomed vigorously, and the world no longer took him seriously (there is no place in the world for a eunuch, it seems.) His work began to suffer, he quarreled with his colleagues, he found fault with his church's doctrine, and he died embittered and rejected.

There was once a religion, some of whose adherents noted too closely how many stones were strewn in the church's structure. There were bad priests, sales of things sacred, superstition, levity in the churches during the liturgy, casual additions to the liturgy itself, too many saints and angels, and indeed too many gods. The church and the people, they concluded, needed to be purified and made perfect, in conformity with their ideals. So they began to gather up the stones and form neat fences (which they called logic), and soon the clergy and the people lost their smiles, exchanging their frivolous garments for decent black. The churches were stripped to the bare walls. The liturgy was reduced to some prayers and hymns, and an extremely dull and lengthy sermon. The Trinity was purged. Even the Christ who loved sinners was transformed into a Christ who hated all mankind. Indeed, Christ was no longer Christ, the instrument of God's mercy; he was metamorphosed into Satan, the instrument of God's justice. With all the stones removed, the church should have been perfect; and perhaps it was. Outward sin certainly disappeared in this joyless church, and when sin did rear its ugly head, the sinner was punished ferociously. The church founded on a Stone had become thoroughly petrified. Freedom became a forgotten word; there was no longer free will, freedom of conscience, free speech, free anything. The totally repressed Saints began to turn uglier and uglier. One day the first innocent old hag was stoned to death by a mob returning from a longer-than-usual sermon. . . .

There was once a teacher who was extremely well educated. He was revered by many, in fact, as a great philosopher. One day while philosophizing, he glanced back over the path he had trod in life and saw it had been studded with stones (and a constant uphill climb, at that.) He also began to recall the bruises he'd received, and wept afresh at the memory. His father had sternly demanded he read and study when his childish body yearned for play. His tutors had beaten him, often unmercifully, and most of his teachers had been harsh and demanding. True, he had become one of the world's best-educated men; but had it been worth it, after all? He began on the instant to devise a system of his own that would remove the stones, and all would be sweetness, light, and freedom of the human spirit. His would, of course, be the perfect system. First he attacked the teachers; all were unfeeling brutes, he preached; and he reserved his harshest anathemas for the teachers who opposed him (many did at first.) He attacked the entire educational system as outmoded and old fashioned, with petrified notions and ideas; as indeed it was. He outlined his plan to others who had suffered, and soon schools of education were rising everywhere, and in each he was saint and savior. He and his disciples began to prune the schools' curricula of any subject matter that was not clearly practical: what need of classics, languages, sciences? who ever used them, really. "Useless" courses were eliminated and replaced with others (some envious detractors said basket-weaving and "Here we go Looby Loo.") Of course a rousing slogan went along with the system: "We teach the student, not the subject." The educational jargon was limited and unoriginal, but it sufficed, and was very, very quotable. The system was called "progressive" to contrast it with the old,

fossilized system. They started with the children, naturally, who were taught only the barest minimum, but in bright, cheerful surroundings where the children could do or not, as they pleased. When the elementary grades had been thoroughly liberated, the secondary schools were de-stoned, de-mythologized, and de-emphasized. Even the parochial schools finally buckled under as more and more of their teachers saw the light in sunny schools of education. Finally, the colleges and universities gave in, and in no time at all the students, free at last of their shackles, roamed the campuses at will, expanding their minds as they roamed. Success was so complete, in fact, that even the sharpest-eyed observer couldn't tell a student from a non-student. And of course everyone from K through 16 was very, very happy. Oh, there are still a few stray stones lying around, and a slight hill mars the view from time to time, but eventually all the valleys will be filled and all the ways made smooth, and all will be universal happiness and dullness.

There was once a thriving civilization that began to chafe under the restrictions imposed by prosperity. The laws were much too harsh: criminals, for example, were being imprisoned; murderers were being eliminated; burglars were finding it extremely difficult to make a dishonest living; things like that. Little by little, reformers changed all that. Soon things were suitably rearranged: criminals were tearfully blessed and told to go sin some more; ill-advised good samaritans who went to the aid of their neighbors being attacked openly in the streets were arrested, prosecuted, and beggared; cheats were fully protected in the law courts, and their victims were deprived of the fruits of their honest toil (the law, for a fee, even collected for the cheats); lawyers knew no law, but had all the loopholes memorized, or could punch one out at need; things like that. Tax collectors were empowered to harass and bully taxpayers and strip them of everything. Traitors were given triumphal processions; patriotism became an obscene word; deserters held their heads high and even formed unions; the country's enemies were given aid and encouragement to kill her soldiers; things like that. Education was all but eliminated though the forms were piously retained; honest labor was demeaned; children were neither supervised nor corrected; honesty became a vice; things like that. The pursuit of normal pleasures had palled, and perverse pleasures were sought avidly: drugs were all the rage; male coupled with male, female with female—and why not? males dressed and acted like females, women dressed and acted like men; where once one could find rugged warriors and athletes, there were now sourly discontented, heavily scented fops; atrocities made people drool; gangs of children and young adults roamed the countryside to beat and gouge and stomp and terrify; things like that. Protest became fashionable; riots were "in;" burning and looting were the normal order of the day; hatred was beatified; things like that. People were no longer content with threescore and ten years of life and began to yearn for physical immortality, though they hadn't the humor to note the irony of immortality to filth, corruption, pollution, degradation, and constant fear of sudden annihilation from a hundred directions—immortality in a world filled with crazed, hysterical sub-humanity who hated their neighbors and slaughtered their brethren; things like that. To make a tedious story brief, there were no stones in this highly civilized society—all had been cast at someone or otherwise eliminated. The civilization was soft and effeminate, and inevitably a tough, barbarous people appeared on the scene, each with a stone grasped in either hand "like a stone-age savage armed," and the civilization perished. One thinks of Jane Austen who looked stonily at her own foppish, effeminate times and summed up the Regency Period: "No stones," said she—or something to that effect.

Stones have many virtues, and are the most magical single element on earth. In a sense, then, they are marvels *per se*. The stones of life are the faults and hardships we suffer as we progress through that life. The stones bruise us, true, but they radiate a genial warmth as well; and the colder life threatens to be, the more necessary their warmth. Like a man's own "atones," their presence exerts a reassuring (rather than an extreme) pressure, reminding us that we are still vital and potent and whole. When the stones are gone, all is smoothness and coldness and sterility. When life becomes smooth, cold, and sterile, then it is truly absurd. We absolutely require a few faults to balance our fatal urge to perfection.

The ultimate in irony, however, is a certain cathedral that has taken forever to build, may never be completed, and was intended to last forever. It is constructed almost entirely of stone, and embedded in the walls are stones from every corner of the globe. In this case, there are altogether too many stones: the builders sought a perfection of stone and they may have succeeded. There is a lack of warmth, a chill in that pile. There hasn't been a scandal in that cathedral since the first stone was put in place, and there it stands: fashionable, and cold, and empty. So very, very empty.