

The Church is The Temple

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[0 : 00] The readings from 1 Peter 2, starting in verse 4.

As you come to him, the living stone, rejected by humans, but chosen by God and precious to him, you also, like living stones, are being built into a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood, offering spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.

For in Scripture it says, See, I lay a stone in Zion, a chosen and precious cornerstone, and the one who trusts in him will never be put to shame.

Now to you who believe, this stone is precious. But to those who do not believe, the stone the builders rejected has become the cornerstone.

And a stone that causes people to stumble, and a rock that makes them fall. They stumble because they disobey the message, which is also what they were destined for.

[1 : 11] But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's special possession, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light.

Once you were not a people, but now you are the people of God. Once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.

This is the word of the Lord. Thanks, please, God. Thanks, Andy, for reading. You can find an outline on the other side of the notice sheet, if you find that helpful. It's actually wrong, the outline, at point three.

Sorry about that. You can work out where it's wrong as we look at that together. But hopefully it's still helpful. Let's ask for God's help, more importantly, as we turn to his word, that we would hear him speak to us.

Let's pray. We praise you, Heavenly Father, that you have a sovereign plan for the nations. We praise you for the church, that you are bringing together a people all across the world by your power and your love, and that you speak to us as children.

[2 : 26] Be with us, we pray, and would the words of my mouth and the thoughts of all our hearts be pleasing in your sight, O Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

Well, I wonder what's the most amazing building you've ever seen, a building that's really filled you with awe. Maybe you think of a cathedral. When Bill Bryson was touring Britain years ago, he got off the train in Durham, unplanned, he says, and he just fell in love with the cathedral there.

He said, I instantly placed Durham Cathedral at the top of the list of greatest cathedrals on planet Earth. I think of another friend who went to York for the day, and I said, oh, how was York?

And he said, well, I didn't see much of York, because we went in the Minster first, and it was so awesome. We just stayed there the whole day. Maybe you think of a castle, of Edinburgh Castle, of Stirling Castle, or a secular monument.

You might think of the Shard in London, or New York's Empire State Building, if you've been there. Awesome. The Kelvin Grove Museum. I remember an advert for Glasgow that said, when we want a place to store our masterpieces, we build one, meaning the Kelvin Grove Museum.

[3 : 38] A great building can fill us with awe. It can be exhilarating. In the first century, if you were to ask that question to a Christian, especially a Jewish background Christian, what they probably have said was, the greatest building they've ever seen is the temple, the temple in Jerusalem.

By the time Jesus' followers, his disciples are with him in Jerusalem, remember they say to Jesus, look at the building, look at the great stones of the building.

And by the time they said that, they'd been building it for 46 years, and it took another 30 years to finish. It was where you went to worship God. And right at its heart was the sanctuary, the sanctuary, the special place of the presence of God.

But the New Testament says, God says, if you want to find God's temple, don't look for a building today. Look for people who trust Jesus.

We're in a series thinking about what on earth is the church. It's really good that we're thinking about that together because we've had so many restrictions and we've had lockdowns and we've had virtual church.

[4 : 51] Was that church or not? And after those restrictions, we're thinking afresh, what on earth is church? Why do I want to be part of it? And two weeks ago, we heard church is a body.

It's the body of Christ serving together. Last week, we heard church is a family. It's the family of God loving each other. And this week, we're hearing that it's the house of God loving God.

It's a common picture in the New Testament, and we heard it in 1 Peter 2. Let me just read again these key verses, verses 4 and 5. He says, So we're going to think about what the temple is, what the temple does, and what the temple needs.

So our first point this morning, what the temple is, the central thing the temple is. The temple is the dwelling place of God. It's the place where God calls home on earth.

When Jesus was 12 years old, and he went missing, they found him in the temple, and he called it his father's house. And because of that, the more you get thinking about the temple, about it being the dwelling place of God, the more you realize that without a temple, humanity is a lost cause.

[6 : 16] We are in despair. We have no hope, unless there's a temple, unless we can be with God in his presence. So you can see on your sheets, we're going to think about the unfolding story of the temple.

And we're starting not quite at the beginning. When we start with the physical temple that was first built in Jerusalem by King Solomon, and I've called it the pattern of the temple. It's in 1 Kings chapter 6, as Solomon builds the temple in Jerusalem, or has it built.

And it's up on a hill on Mount Zion. If you've been to Jerusalem, you can see that it's on a hill. And it's got three main areas, the temple. It's got the outer courts, where people could come in.

It's got a building, and as you go into the building, there's the holy place. Only the priests could go into the holy place, because it was special for God.

And within the holy place was a cube, a cube-shaped room, the most holy place. And that was the epicenter of the presence of God in the world.

[7 : 21] Now, once we trace that pattern, you start to see, as you read the Bible, other things that look like a temple. So if you go back to the very start of the Bible, we hear about the perished temple.

We hear about how God made the world good. Before anyone had turned from him, the world he made was good. And again, as Genesis 2 gives us a picture of that, you picture three areas.

You picture the world, like the outer courts of the temple. It was good, but it needed to be cultivated. And then you had Eden on a hill. And Eden was a special place.

And within Eden, you had the Garden of Eden. And God put the first people there to be like priests, to work it and guard it and take care of it. And God was there with them.

But it got ruined. And as the first people turned from God, and Adam and Eve turned their backs on him and had to leave the garden, angels guard the entrance. And we've got a children's story Bible that kind of tells that story.

[8 : 23] And it uses this line. It says that God was saying, by having angels guard the entrance, it is wonderful to be with me, but because of your sin, you can't come in. Because of your sin, you can't come in.

Then we move on through the Bible. And God saves a people, Israel, descendants of Abraham. And he brings them out of slavery in Egypt to worship him. And they go to Mount Sinai as this new people of God.

But they can't go up the mountain. And the mountain is like a temple. Because the people have to wait at the bottom of the mountain. And only their elders are allowed to the mountain, because it's special.

And only Moses is allowed on the top of the mountain, because that's where God is. And because of our sin, we can't come into the presence of a holy God. And as the people prepare to leave Mount Sinai, they get given instructions on how to build the tabernacle, which is like a moving temple, so that God can go and be with his people.

But when you think about the tabernacle, and you think about the temple, you've got the presence of God, God dwelling with his people, but you've also got distance. It's great to be with him, but because of your sin, you can't come in.

[9 : 35] There's a thick curtain in the way between the most holy place and the holy place. And there's pictures of angels guarding it, just like there was at the Garden of Eden. And then after the stone temple is built in Jerusalem, in the Promised Land, the people reject God and turn their backs on him.

And they have to go into exile. But as they're going into exile, they still think we're okay because we've got the temple. And God sends a prophet, Ezekiel. And Ezekiel has a terrifying vision, where in his vision, he sees the glory of the Lord leave the temple in Jerusalem.

God's moving out, away from sinful people. And eventually the temple is destroyed by Babylon. But in Ezekiel, God promises that he will dwell among his people again.

So in chapter 36 of Ezekiel, we hear this promise. God says, I will make a covenant of peace with them. It will be an everlasting covenant. I will establish them and increase their numbers.

And I will put my sanctuary among them forever. My dwelling place will be with them. I will be their God. And they will be my people. These promises are the only hope for us as humanity, made to be with God and exiled from him because of our sin.

[10 : 54] And right at the end of the Bible, we hear that promise will be fulfilled as John is given a revelation of the new creation. And God says, God announces to John, look, God's dwelling place is now among the people.

And he will dwell with them. They will be his people. And God himself will be with them and be their God. And John sees this holy city and it's cube shaped like the most holy place, full of people, but God's going to be with them again.

Our future is to be in the temple. It's to be with God forever as his people. So how does God get us out of exile, people who don't deserve and can't be in the presence of a holy God, to be with him forever?

However, it's because of the work of the personal temple that in John chapter one, we hear of Jesus coming and it says, the word became flesh and made his dwelling among us.

Literally that he tabernacled among us. God pitched his tent among us when Jesus came. And as Jesus prepares his disciples for the gap between him rising again and going to heaven and his return, he promises his Holy Spirit will come and be with his people.

[12 : 08] So that when we hear that we now are the temple of God because the Spirit comes to live in you when you put your faith in Christ, what a difference it makes to think about that grand sweeping picture all through history of the temple, of the presence of God and to realize that to be a temple, it's not about some sort of building where there's all these rules and there are people dressed up at the front and you don't know if you're allowed in.

This is about God determined to be close to us. As his people. Wanting us to be his people and wanting to make his home with us.

It's worth thinking about that next time you are awestruck by a building. I remember being in Sydney and I was with friends and I said, let's go to church on a Sunday.

So we went to a church in Sydney and we had no connection with this church. It met in a school hall and we sat at the back. It was very full actually and it was clearly quite a family oriented church, community oriented church.

The people knew each other well like a family and it was quite underwhelming to be there as a visitor on the other side of the world. Then that afternoon we went sightseeing and we saw the Sydney Opera House and then we looked out to the sea and we saw a humpback whale swimming and it kept coming out of the water.

[13 : 30] It was awesome. And one of my friends said, I don't know why you took us to church because I've seen more of God in that building and more of God in nature than I did in that church.

And God says, that's quite wrong. That's not right. Because when we were in church, we had gone to be specially in the presence of God because all around us were people that the Spirit of God lives in.

That's where you go to find God. Not in an ocean view, in a church. That's where the action was, spiritually speaking. We find the presence of God in one another, in the people of God, while we wait to be with Him forever.

So that's our first point. The central thing the temple is. So how do we respond to that? What are the implications for us? We're going to think secondly about the crucial things the temple does. And I've got two things for us to think about there. The first is to think about how we gather. We gather as living stones. When the New Testament uses this picture of us as the temple, Christians as the temple, sometimes it means the church when we gather.

[14:43] Now a natural question to ask then is, hang on a minute, how does that work? Because isn't God always with me wherever I go? He's with me in the valley of the shadow of death.

I'll never get away from His presence. And that is true. I think it helps to think about the presence of God in at least three ways. First, that God is everywhere all the time. He's everywhere.

There is nowhere that God is not. A second way to think about the presence of God is that when you become a Christian, you put your faith in Jesus, God comes to dwell in you by His Spirit.

And He's always with you, especially with you in every believer. So when we hear commands in the Bible urging us to draw near to God and He'll draw near to us, you can do that anywhere, anytime.

You can draw near to God and approach Him. We certainly don't have to be in a church building and we don't even have to be with anyone else. But there seems to be a third way to think about the presence of God.

[15:45] I think He does seem to be present in a special way when we as His people gather, when we gather to worship Him and to encourage each other.

So some of the references in the Bible to being the temple are about us as individuals. Your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit. Live differently wherever you are.

But others, like 2 Corinthians 6, seem to be spoken to the local church as we come together. And in 1 Corinthians 14, Paul gives instructions for the church as it gathers and how what we do needs to be ordered and intelligible so that an outsider can come in and see what's going on.

And he says, His hope for a visitor to church who doesn't know Jesus is this. They will fall down and worship God, exclaiming, God is really among you. When we gather to listen obediently to the Word of Christ and to pray and to praise God and receive at the Lord's table, there seems to be something special about the presence of God as each of us, indwelt by the Spirit, is brought together.

That doesn't mean that we have to kind of summon God down when we gather. You do get songs sometimes written for churches that sound as though we think that, well, if we sing these words, maybe God will show up and bless us.

[17:05] It's not like that because God is a generous Father and by His Spirit, He's drawn us together already. He was with us as we gathered. But He's specially here. And I take it that's true whether we feel that way or not when we gather.

So we might come to church and not really feel that we've engaged. You might be thinking about the mountains or you might be thinking, did I leave the hair straighteners on? But whatever's going through your mind, God is specially here because we've gathered in His name to hear the Word of Christ and to praise and worship Him.

That's something we've missed out on through having to have church online, having to be at home, that special presence of God among His people as He's at work in one another and at work in us through one another.

So we gather in the presence of God. The next crucial thing the temple does is we offer spiritual sacrifices. And I think in 1 Peter 2 here, as He talks about us being living stones, that's one picture of us, that we're living stones in the temple.

And then He talks about us being a holy priesthood, verse 5, offering spiritual sacrifices. That's about the whole of our lives, wherever we are.

[18:23] Whatever we do. That we're called to be a holy priesthood, living stones of His temple, wherever we go. And to offer ourselves as spiritual sacrifices.

When we think about the Old Testament temple, people went to offer sacrifices in the temple. And some of those were sin offerings. If you needed to make atonement, to find forgiveness from God, and there was a system of sacrifices.

And they don't apply to us anymore as Christians. But there were other offerings people went to make, fellowship offerings. They went into the temple. If you'd had a good harvest, you might take the first fruits of your grain as a fellowship offering, to say to God, thank you for what you've given me.

And Peter takes up that language of making a sacrifice for God and says, we're to live our lives obediently for God. This image of being a priesthood and a temple, it has profound implications for how we live.

I don't know whether you've ever been on holiday somewhere and visited a sacred building, you know, gone into a church. Jerusalem's like this. I went to Jerusalem. And you go into these churches that people see as particularly special because they're identified with places Jesus went. [19 : 36] But you go in some of them and they're quite heavily policed. You know, if you're wearing shorts, you're not allowed in because this is a special building. You're not allowed to talk in certain bits of the building.

And, you know, you find that the priests are like bouncers, making sure that you don't break the rules in their special place. And it smells different because they're pumping it with incense to smell different.

Well, in the New Testament, it doesn't matter where the people meet. We could be meeting in someone's home. We could be meeting in a school. There's nothing special about the building in that sense. But how about we think about that specialness, that sacredness, about how we choose to live our lives because we're the temple and we're to be clean, pure, holy for God, set apart for him.

Consecratedness is not about a building. It's about how we as God's people live. So we see that through the New Testament. In Romans 12, it talks about offering our bodies as living sacrifices in view of God's mercy.

And he gives examples about loving each other and about serving each other with the gifts we've got, how we treat people whose conscience is pricked by how we live, different implications.

[20 : 52] In chapter 15 of Romans, he talks about his priestly duty of sharing Christ with others, speaking about him to others. The offering language gets used in Philippians about giving our money to support gospel work as the Philippians gave to support Paul.

In Hebrews 13, it talks about giving to God sacrifices and the examples are doing good to others and praising God to others, speaking about him to others.

So we go out to live our lives offering ourselves day by day in God's service. And that might sound like a painful thing. You might be thinking, well, I don't really want to sacrifice myself for Jesus.

But just think about how we all make sacrifices all the time, where there's something we think is worth it. If there's something we think will really give us joy and really be good for us, we sacrifice other things for it, don't we?

And even in the Old Testament, this idea of sacrificing for God was never to be done begrudgingly, never to take from us what would really make us happy. It's because we see from God that true joy lies on the other side of giving up things for him.

[22 : 07] As we live his way, sacrificially, we find real joy in that. And we realize that as we give to God, we're just expressing our thanks for his generosity to us.

It's only what he's given us that we can give back to him anyway. So we've thought about the central thing the temple is and the crucial things the temple does.

Thirdly, let's think about the vital thing the temple needs. To build a temple, you need a cornerstone, a stone you set down first and through that stone, it dictates the direction and shape of every other stone that follows it.

It's the plumb line. And Peter wants his first hearers to have confidence that God is building his temple rightly because he's building it on Jesus.

They need to hear that because all around them, people were rejecting Jesus. And it felt weird to be a Christian for the people Peter wrote to. But Peter says that's exactly what God promised.

[23 : 08] So have a look at verse 10. He says, Now to you who believe, this stone is precious. But to those who do not believe, the stone the builders rejected has become the cornerstone and a stone that causes people to stumble and a rock that makes them fall.

And then he explains the two sides to people rejecting Jesus in verse 8. He says, So the very people in these verses who were meant to be the builders, you see that in verse 7, the religious leaders, the very people who were meant to be the builders of God's dwelling on earth, the Jewish leaders, they gave up on this stone, Jesus.

He was discarded. He didn't fit the bill for them. And God uses him, that stone, to build his whole temple, made up of people from every nation.

And we see that in the Gospels as you read about Jesus. And you hear that the priests start rejecting him and the religious leaders and judging him. And he gets on with his mission to the outcasts, to the unclean.

He calls a tax collector from his booth to follow him. He even gets on a boat and goes across the Sea of Galilee to foreign lands, a Gentile territory, the Decapolis. And he finds a man of the tombs who is demon-possessed and rejected even by the people there.

[24 : 42] And he puts him in his right mind and liberates him. And then he gets back in the boat and goes back. And Peter assures us here, God is not set back when people reject his cornerstone.

It was true then and it's true today. It doesn't trash his building project. And for those who do come to him, he's the one we get life from in verse 5.

In verse 4, he is the living stone from whom we get life. And God makes the great promise of verse 6. Have a look. For in Scripture it says, See, I lay a stone in Zion, a chosen and precious cornerstone, and the one who trusts in him will never be put to shame.

It's important because when your leader looks defeated, you wonder if you'll be put to shame. And we're seeing that in Afghanistan, aren't we, at the moment? As people who rejected the Taliban and helped the Americans and NATO and the allies, now as the Taliban get power, are panicking that they will be put to shame.

That the leaders they backed have left and left them in a difficult situation. It's a terrible thing. What Peter's showing us here is that we might feel like that sometimes as Christians.

[26 : 03] As we see people around us, maybe the people in your school, maybe the people in your workplace, and you think, no one here follows Jesus. You might think, am I going to be put to shame for trusting him?

How can we be sure? And Peter assures us that whatever people think of Jesus, to God he is chosen and precious, verse 6, and you will never be put to shame if you follow him.

How can he be sure? Well, when he takes that promise in verse 7, he takes it from Psalm 118. He says, the stone the builders rejected has become the cornerstone.

In Psalm 118, it goes on to say, the Lord has done this and it is marvelous in our eyes. Why is it marvelous? What's the marvelous thing?

Well, it's not just that as people reject Jesus, the cornerstone, other people trust him and they're not put to shame. It's that by people rejecting him, he became the cornerstone.

[27 : 08] Do you see that? It's as people rejected him and discarded him that he became the cornerstone of the temple. Because as he went to the cross to die in our place and bear our shame, the curtain in the temple tore in two from top to bottom in Jerusalem.

And God said, now, because of what Jesus has borne on the cross, you can come in. So that now, as we stand with Jesus and face shame from people for standing with him, we know that because of what he has done, the glory of the Lord will always be with us and we find it in him.

Let's pray together. Heavenly Father, we thank you that in Jesus Christ you have sent us our Emmanuel, God with us.

help us as living stones, your temple today, to conform more and more to your chief cornerstone, living lives in this world that reflect this holy calling, that we would be a holy priesthood, offering spiritual sacrifices with thankfulness and joy in our hearts.

We ask for Jesus' name's sake. Amen. Amen.