

People of the New Covenant: Temples, Stones and Priests

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Preacher: Darren Jackson

[0 : 00] of the church Bible. 1 Peter chapter 2 and we're starting at 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, the 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. 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.

[1 : 29] 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. Thanks very much, David.

Is that because of where I'm standing? Just keep going. Okay. Thanks, David. My name is Darren. Thanks for coming tonight. So if you're new here, or you've been here for ages, we're continuing through this series looking at the letter of 1 Peter, which was written by one of Jesus' first followers who knew him personally.

And he's writing to a group of these new Jesus communities in what is now modern-day Turkey who found themselves in the midst of a culture that was increasingly hostile to followers of Jesus.

And these communities would have been ethnically diverse and would have found themselves increasingly out of sync with the culture and values of their Greek and Roman neighbors. And they're starting to feel the pinch and the pressure of this.

And so what we're going to look into tonight is not just an encouragement of do better and keep a stiff upper lip and carry on. It is going to get right to the root of some of why they're even facing this challenge, but how they may see beyond it and have new life.

[2 : 45] So I'm going to pray and then we'll get into this together. Father, we thank you that when we read your word, although we are reading about communities from long ago, we are reading about a God who is present in all places, in all times, with all people.

And so I pray that as we look at this community and the words of Peter to them, we don't just look at it through the lens of history, but we look through the lens of your word where you promise to speak life to each one of us.

That's that. In Jesus' name. Amen. So most of these people that Peter was writing to would have been described as Gentiles. So all that means is a person that's become a Christian from a non-Jewish background.

This might sound like an odd detail to acknowledge, but more than likely this early Christian community who are under increasing pressure, who are far away from Israel, which was the center of the Jewish faith, might have started to think quite naturally because of what they're experiencing that they were outcasts, that they were exiles, that they were somehow abandoned by God.

They were not brought up in the faith, so to speak. They were not close to the centers of worship. And they're starting to feel this pressure from the communities round about them that they're increasingly out of line there as well.

[4 : 09] You might have had this double pressure of feeling out of line with the society you're in, but also at the same time potentially fearing, doubting, questioning, are we even part of God's plans in the middle of that as well?

And that's kind of a common experience, I don't know, to you, but definitely to me and for a lot of people I know of, these moments in life where you can feel just out of step with the world round about you. Where you can sometimes feel that even the world might be against you or that you don't quite fit or belong.

That the expectations of the people and the societies and the culture around you means that because of who you know yourself to be, because of how you feel or how you think or how your experiences are, that you don't quite belong.

That maybe you are actually isolated. And that's where these feelings often lead, they lead to places of isolation. And so because of this, this idea that they might fear they're cut off, Peter very deliberately uses a lot of Old Testament language in this letter.

He's deliberately deploying this strategy right through the letter to help these people see that as opposed to being abandoned, they are actually just as much a part of God's story as anybody else.

[5 : 17] They are just as key to God's plan for them as anything else they might read in the Old Testament of the story of God's people. And so he uses this to help them see that they're not forgotten, they are not abandoned.

And he particularly uses a lot of allusions to the Exodus story. This is a story which is the heart of the Old Testament of God coming into Egypt and freeing a persecuted group of slaves and taking them out of slavery and bringing them into a new relationship with him and with one another.

And he gives them a new identity, he gives them a new mission and he gives them a new purpose to be this new people where he lives at the core and he has rescued them and he is transforming them to be a blessing to the nations around them.

And the Exodus story starts with the people of God crying out in their pain. That's how it starts. They cry out in their pain. And crying out is a major theme in the scriptures. People cry out in their misery and pain.

And it's really important as we start here to see that Peter is connecting their story with the Exodus story and the people of God's story. And in the scriptures God always hears the cries of the oppressed.

[6 : 30] He never ignores the pain and the cries of the oppressed. He always hears it and he always says something to it. So these people miles from Jerusalem have this sense of being exiled in their culture to them to be reminded that they are part of something bigger.

That they are not being abandoned by God but actually they're just as much woven into the tapestry of how God's people have experienced life as to be a direct encouragement to them. It's not to say you're just abandoned and you're just to deal with it by yourself but actually you're following in the patterns and footsteps and therefore you can trust the same God who has walked alongside his people forever.

And so Peter in the previous weeks has told this community that they have a new identity as God's beloved children. They've been holy and set apart. They've been given a new hope of a world to come which is reborn by God's love when Jesus returns.

And they're part of a new family centered around Jesus and his love for them causing to have a deep transformative love for one another and for their neighbors. And these images and pictures start to kind of climax in these verses we're looking at tonight where Peter goes further and tells these people that not only are they being made and remade in terms of their identity with themselves and with their neighbors and communities and with God and with the world around about them but these people who feel exiled are actually the place where God has made his home.

He's actually dwelling among them and he is personally present in their lives as we look into some of this stuff. So our first point tonight is this new community or temples in verses 4 and 5.

[8 : 08] As you come to him the living stone rejected by humans but precious 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.

So again Peter is quite deliberately trying to help them see their experience not through the narrative of disconnection but one of connection of unity. And following the train of thinking that Peter has done throughout this letter the language used here this stone which is alive is Jesus.

When you hear this language of living stone and cornerstone Peter is talking about Jesus and there's loads of mixed imagery in there we don't have time to get into that you know in the Old Testament God described himself as a rock and now we've got this stone that is a rock and Peter's name is even rock Jesus called him that like there's loads of different things going on here but the kind of main point is that there's this stone there's rock which is alive and as they come to him as Warren was saying at the start it implies you come to this living stone as a personal relationship and in the same way they are experiencing rejection Jesus also was rejected Jesus though is risen from the dead and so he is a living stone he's not a stone of the past he's a live stone he's God's chosen one and a precious son so as you come to him this personal relationship believers continue in fellowship with Jesus as they do that it is described there being built into a spiritual house now again the language here for the original community would have heard this this would have been the kind of quite revolutionary mind-blowing language because this is temple language in the language of the Bible now to the Jewish understanding the temple was at the center of their faith it was the place because it was the place where God resided it was in Jerusalem and that was where he was and they looked to that as a source of identity of strength and of purpose it was part of the fulfillment of who he said he was so whether you were a shepherd in the kind of outskirts of Jerusalem or you were a priest that worked right in the middle because of the temple you were always in proximity to God's holy presence and at the center of the temple was this room called the most holy place or the holy of holies which was kind of like a hot spot for God's presence a place so holy and so pure that only certain people could go in at certain times of the year because God's unfiltered presence is so powerful and its purity was so good that it was kind of dangerous to be in the presence of that was one of the messages of the Old Testament and this is because God in his existence is the only one who's full of the goodness and the creativity to be the source of life he is the epitome of love and mercy and justice and truth he's the fullness of all these things it's the equivalent of like you could say in our solar system the sun is holy it is unique it provides life it provides goodness yet the closer you get to it obviously as a human it becomes so intense in its purity that it's dangerous almost it's consuming and in the same way there's a kind of paradox at the heart of God's own holiness not because it's bad but because it's good and pure and powerful and these people are centered around the person of Jesus who when he comes claims to fulfill all these Old Testament prophecies and claim that he is the personal embodiment of God's holiness but instead of being something that destroyed when he went into the world and he touches and meets people who were considered impure whether that because of their health or because of dead bodies or because of moral whatever he transfers life and he gives new words of hope by saying repent and come return to me and he goes out and he changes lives of people through his acts of mercy and justice but also ultimately of the giving of his life

God's holiness through Jesus moves out into the world healing forgiving and restoring so what Peter is saying here so that's a lot of introduction but to get what Peter is saying here is that they and by extension me and you are now the place where God's spirit resides that holy of holy place that God is building a people on top of a living stone to make a new temple so as opposed to this idea the temple is far away and they have no access to it he is saying that it's here it is now it inhabits his people this sacred powerful spiritual reality is no longer far off it is in their very midst it is the presence and power of the holy spirit present in these new people this was back then and still is today a very radical understanding of who God is and what he is like he is not over in some special buildings that you can only go to at certain times of the year if you've done the right set of things he has come into the world and is now making himself present among the people who in their reality feel like outcasts and exiles and this this is present tense language it says being built up it is this is ongoing collective language this has got pictures of like a thick web of interdependent relationships where we share decisions together we share struggles emotions money practical help everything it is the whole of life is built on

Jesus and as it is being built together you are being built together as something new and that new thing is similar to the temple the place where God's holy presence dwelled I don't believe you but like for me increasingly the more I try to walk in my faith I realize that is increasingly counter cultural because most of us live with a kind of prevailing social narrative that you need to be happy and the main way you to do that is to create your own rules and create your own identity and follow your own dreams while you know being the ever elusive yourself without being too much of yourself that you become a social outcast but you know purely you at the same time and at its core it is a message of ultimately it is you do you and it is a it is a message of individual hyper individuality and more often than not it's for most people while it's got a lot of good ideas in it and it's got a good heart behind it sometimes it usually increasingly leads to isolation and disconnection that's been my experience as a person that's been my experience as a therapist the more that pursue this idea of just do life by yourself and make up all the rules by yourself it leads to fracturedness this instead is a vision for community where our lives are so built into the lives of believers round about us it's like a temple it is held together but it's only held together because of the living stone underneath and as opposed to God being far off and dangerous to get close to they are now being built up together to be this new temple a new community and as they grow together the power of the spirit and the reality of God increasingly comes into their lives as both individuals and as a community it's a radical different picture of what it means for them to have been connected as a group but connected to a bigger story at the same time and how is this possible how is this any different from any other community in the world well that's because of the foundation so that's our next point stones a new foundation so verses 6 to 8 say for in the scripture it says see I lay a stone in Zion a chosen people and a precious cornerstone and the ones who trust 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 the people to stumble has become and the stone that causes the 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 so Peter continues this building metaphor and he quotes

[16 : 41] Isaiah 28:16 all these are quotes from the Old Testament Isaiah and the Psalms and he is saying that God has given a cornerstone now again in a previous life people are surprised when I say this I used to be a structural engineer and the cornerstone is the foundation it's the thing that holds the whole building up other translations might say capstone it's a similar idea because of old buildings you would use stones in a certain type of way so you need this big weighty stone to hold the whole thing together regardless which way it's the main structural component and if the cornerstone is unstable in any way well the whole building would be unstable Jesus is this cornerstone that's what Peter is at length to say it's a living stone he's a cornerstone he's the foundation he holds the whole thing together it's the only way this actually works and some look at Jesus and his message and they see life this is about resurrection and new hope but Peter also quotes Psalm 118 and Isaiah 8 to show that others however will see Jesus as offensive and reject because ultimately it's about building your life on someone as opposed to ultimately yourself it's one of the heart of when we talk about sin in the New Testament it's not just we do bad things every now and then it's about the battle for autonomy who's in charge is it me or is it Jesus and some will reject they reject the source of life and ultimately it becomes their undoing it causes them to stumble and fall some will build and some will reject

Peter says if you don't build on Jesus you're still building on something but you notice in verse 7 it's builders who reject the stone I think one of the things this passage is saying is everybody's building on something which is a pretty basic concept when you think about it everybody has their own version of a cornerstone a set of values or beliefs or presumptions about how life will work and I guess one of the ways we know what our cornerstones are is when life is hard or frustrating and doesn't work the way it wants what do we look to to give us validation is it that I'm a good person is it that I've got a good career is it that I'm a good parent because when those things start to shake it feels like the whole world is shaking because it's your foundation it's your cornerstone and when that happens the whole thing feels like it's falling apart I think you see this quite a lot in athletes who live really high careers and then retire and it's like they don't know what to do with their lives or you know people who kind of find themselves moving from one toxic relationship to the next because they're desperate longing to be needed and wanted don't mishear me

I'm not saying careers and relationships are bad things but to make them your cornerstone which is described as disobedience here and to build your life on that it cannot sustain you it's the opposite of the cornerstone of life which doesn't put you to shame they will put you to shame and in contrast Jesus the cornerstone here is described as both living and precious the stone isn't simply a set of beliefs or just something for the head it's the living person of Christ someone we're encouraged to behold as precious so how does Jesus become precious to us is it kind of just you obsess and kind of think about Jesus a lot we actually just look to who Jesus is described here he is described as the rejected one that's how Jesus is often described as somebody is rejected and in that rejection we see the reasons of why he is precious Jesus comes to his own people and they don't know him his family reject him his friends reject him towards the end of his life on the cross his father rejects him and he is not forced to do any of that in fact he chooses to

Jesus is quoted in John's gospel as saying no one takes it from me as in his life but I lay it down of my own accord why was Jesus rejected and why did he choose this rejection I mean this is the heart of the Christian faith isn't it it's ultimately because we me and you the whole world are precious to him he is precious to us because we are precious to him he gives his life he sees it expendable in order to absorb and take the consequences of sin and brokenness in the world on himself and goes further than that and invites us into new life gives us a new identity you begin to realize that Jesus chose to walk that life not for because he was forced to he chose to you start to see the preciousness of who Jesus is to each and every single one of us it becomes something we value and we live our lives beyond because it is the source of life itself and another thing the cornerstone did again a little bit of engineering here ancient in ancient world building the cornerstone was the first stone it went down not just because of its strength but it gave direction and so once you put that down if that was slightly out of alignment the whole building would be out of alignment

I once worked on a project it's just fine to tell you on Sainsbury's and I was trying to be very clever and I was like trying to make up essentially trying to cut down my work to make me work faster and I did this little formula thinking right if I just put this little point here I can extrapolate and then I sent it off went on a week's holiday and my boss was raging at me paying back so I just got the little detail wrong and was trying to charge Sainsbury's millions of pounds for this extension to a supermarket in Hamilton and I justified it all off the back of a slight error in my kind of calculations about where your starting point was and it's a similar picture here of the cornerstone it's not just the foundation it provides direction and the building itself will be strong so if the cornerstone was off the stones were off the cornerstone is strong the stones are strong cornerstone is shaky stones are shaky I'm sure you get the idea so if the cornerstone is living you are living if the cornerstone is honoured you are honoured if the cornerstone has nothing to be ashamed of you have nothing to be ashamed of because you're built on this foundation and that's what it means it's part of the life of what it means to be a follower of Christ the moment I unite with God through Jesus because he lived the life I should have lived he died the death

[23 : 15] I should have died then what becomes true of Jesus becomes true of us if he is accepted you are accepted if he is beautiful to the father we are beautiful to the father we are to live in a way where we more and more align ourselves with Jesus the cornerstone who is alive this has already been made possible through the resurrection and we are called to live in that reality they are called to live in that reality knowing that that new identity is secure which leads us on to our final point priests I couldn't think of I couldn't find a proper icon for priests that wasn't completely weird so I've gone with one of connection a new people so Peter goes on to tell us some pretty amazing things about what it means to be people who have Jesus as their cornerstone and he says in verse 9 and 10 but you are a chosen race a royal priesthood a holy nation a people for his own possession that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness and into his marvelous light once you were not a people but now you are

God's people once you had not received mercy but now you have received mercy again this is loaded with Old Testament language about where God's people were supposed to go and what they were supposed to be Peter is going at length to be like all of this you know if you take nothing else away from tonight I'd encourage you to go and dwell on what this says about a present and future reality for people who know Jesus as their base everything that God's people were to be Peter is saying is now true in the fullest sense of this group of believers who are under pressure of Greek culture and Roman rule and neither of which were particularly pleasant if you were an outsider I know there's kind of it feels very in at the moment to reassess Greek and Roman cultures like some sort of utopia that they got everything right and you need to go back there actually if you were an outsider in those cultures you were not exactly welcomed and just briefly I'm just going to go through five key characteristics of who these people are when they're found there they are there so there are chosen people which means they are completely accepted there are no accidental people in the kingdom of God acceptance is freely and completely given to us by God

I used to be something I used to think quite a lot when I first became a Christian in my 20s because I wasn't brought up as one I used to think well you know there's grade A Christians and grade B Christians and the grade A ones kind of were Christians out of the womb and have never done anything wrong in their lives and God loved them but the rest you know you'll kind of follow in he has to tolerate you and you know make the best of what you can that is not the way the gospel speaks it speaks to all people in all places in all times there's no such thing as a way you could bring your identity or your behavior before him he was like oh yeah you're better than this person because it's a free gift on the living cornerstone he says they are a royal priesthood that means they are completely connected again like the high priest could only go in at certain times of the year and now he's saying you're all royal priests you're completely connected the priests were to talk to God about the people and talk to the people about God and he's like God's in your midst you can read about him and talk to him and do it with one another as you build community you're a holy nation this means you're extremely valuable so being accepted is great isn't it but we all want to be more than accepted and these people are told they're holy they're something sacred they're something precious they have more than basic value they are priceless to God in fact they are God's special possession this means we're eternally loved this idea of once you had no identity but now you're

God's people that God is not ashamed of and we don't we can't as humans experience love like that we can on our best days be great towards one another but this kind of love is God's love is like never unpredictable we never need to ask the question is God going to love me today if your cornerstone is Jesus what does the father say to Jesus about his love for his son it's constant it's present you can never make God stop loving you Jesus is not ashamed to call his brothers and sisters regardless of our past regardless of our actions regardless of our thoughts he invites us fully into new life as members of the family of God you have received mercy meaning you are totally forgiven this means we are completely forgiven received total mercy for all our sins all our past all our struggles all our thoughts and Peter applies all these amazing images to these persecuted

Gentile Christians placing their suffering and their experience and reframing it in a brand new story they are not abandoned they are not disconnected in fact their experience of rejection echoes their rejected savior who is among them living present because he is the living stone and as they do unity together as they band together around these truths they won't just be strong because they've got one another's back but actually they're the new temple as they live this way exiled Jews in the Old Testament had no access to the temple which is still true today and this was something they really grieved you see it in the prophets and you see it in the Old Testament writing yet these non-Jewish heritage Christians feeling the weight of persecution are being told that they are the temple it dwells in their hearts and in their midst they are built on the foundation of Jesus himself who like them was rejected isolated and out of sync with those around him but did it to claim a people for himself out of darkness into light they're a new kingdom of priests who are serving as God's representatives in the world and at the end of the Bible in the book of Revelation another one of Jesus' followers

[29 : 36] John has this picture of God's holiness where you see the whole world is being made new and the whole earth has become God's temple and from there there's this picture of a river that flows out of God's presence immersing all of creation removing all the impurity and bringing everything back to life and Jesus said that he and his followers are now God's new temple so that through them God's holy presence would go out into the world bringing life and healing and hope and forgiveness for everyone that's what it means to be the new people of God it's not that just come to a certain place on a Sunday and try better at life it's a complete revamp of humanity and to people who feel on the outskirts and say well because I look at my context and think I cannot be part of that these radical words to this first century community are the same words to us today your story is caught up in a bigger story because of the foundation of who you build your life on you can choose to build it on this or you can reject it and build on something but nothing will give you this stuff unlike the life death and resurrection of Jesus

I'm going to pray and then the band will come up Father we thank you for our rejected saviour help us to be people who hold him as precious because we are precious to you that you gave your life and that you continue to therefore in your resurrected nature call us to live and build our lives upon you I ask that in Jesus name Amen