

First Christian Church (Lawrence, KS)
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Living Stones in a Holy Temple

1 Peter 2:4-10 (ESV)

4 As you come to him, a living stone rejected by men but in the sight of God chosen and precious, 5 you yourselves like living stones are being built up as a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ. 6 For it stands in Scripture:

*“Behold, I am laying in Zion a stone,
a cornerstone chosen and precious,
and whoever believes in him will not be put to shame.”*

*7 So the honor is for you who believe, but for those who do not believe,
“The stone that the builders rejected
has become the cornerstone,”*

8 and

*“A stone of stumbling,
and a rock of offense.”*

They stumble because they disobey the word, as they were destined to do.

9 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 into his marvelous light. 10 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.

[Slide 1 (start on me, wait for signal to begin movie, then go to slide)]

Opening

Good morning church! Before I begin this morning, here's another short reminder of life under quarantine for some of us, sort of an *amuse-bouche* for your eyes and mind. Take a look. **(start movie)**

[Slide 2] *Review*

That little snippet actually serves as a decent segue to my message today. We've been looking at what it means to have a living hope because of the resurrection of Jesus from the dead—a “*resurrection hope*,” and what it looks like to live as people who are formed by that hope and are living in *resurrection life*.

I don't ever want to forget—and I don't want you to forget, either—that the things of God, the truths in the Bible, and the teachings of Jesus and the apostles, are always intended to be lived out in the world in which you and I find ourselves. Right now, we find ourselves dealing with a pandemic, mostly staying home in the middle of a lot of confusion, stress, and anxieties about health risks, financial stability, economic recovery, personal freedoms, and so on. The word of God speaks into our situation, into our hearts, with absolute precision and power. So our study of 1 Peter is not only good in a general sense; it is also quite timely for us as we ask questions about what it means to be the church today, when we're scattered in our homes, and what it will look like for us when we're able to resume worshiping in the sanctuary.

[Slide 3] *Introduction*

What have we learned so far in the first chapter of 1 Peter? There's a lot, of course, but let's focus on some of the key big ideas.

First, Peter emphasizes the importance of being born again. Jesus said that unless you are born again, born spiritually, you can't even recognize the kingdom of God. The only way to enter God's kingdom is through the new birth, which happens when you repent of your sinful, self-centered way of living, turn to Jesus Christ, recognize him as king and savior, and surrender your life to him. Then the Spirit of God comes to live inside you, that imperishable seed of the word of God takes root in your heart, and you begin to grow into salvation.

Second, because you've been born again, you are now part of God's family. You have an eternal inheritance waiting for you in heaven. That is our hope as Christians—our confident expectation of future good—that is coming to us when Jesus Christ returns.

Third, that hope provides motivation and encouragement for us to live differently, to walk in accordance with the ways of God, who is holy, so that our lives are transformed and we start to look like we belong to heaven long before we ever get there.

[Slide 4]

What is crucial for us to understand as we think about what 1 Peter is teaching is this: *Neither Peter nor his audience were thinking simply about themselves as individuals.* Of course it is true that each of us must make the personal decision to follow Christ—and the same was true for the people who read this in the first century. But Christian faith was never intended to be something that was strictly a matter for the individual, as we tend to think in the West today. Christianity was never meant to be a solo act; it was always designed to be an

ensemble experience. We were created as social creatures, designed to live in relationship. Even introverts, who enjoy time alone, still want and need time with others.

That is what has made these weeks of sheltering-in-place so difficult. You might not have kids who are bouncing off the walls in your house. So you might not feel quite as stressed as the dad in that mini-movie. But each of us craves the chances to be with other people, especially with our family. We need to connect emotionally and personally (even physically!) with others. And it is hard to be shut off from contact with people—it's hard mentally, emotionally, and spiritually.

[Slide 5]

Our need for relational connection, and God's answer for that need, is precisely where Peter brings us in today's passage. Remember last week that I mentioned that everyone in the ancient world thought of themselves as being part of a people. They were members of a family, a clan, and a people. When you asked someone in the first century who he or she was, the answer would not be "*I am so-and-so*," but "*I am so-and-so of the family of so-and-so, of this people*." (E.g., "Levi, the son of Alphaeus, an Israelite from Galilee.") Their identity was not solely based on being an individual, but on being part of a people. So in chapter two, Peter begins to address our corporate identity as the people of God. We who have responded to God's invitation in the gospel, who have received that imperishable seed and believed it, are joined together with others who share that same new birth, who have that same new hope, and who now live new lives as a consequence of the Spirit's indwelling and his empowering work in us.

[Slide 6] *Coming to him*

4 As you come to him, a living stone rejected by men but in the sight of God chosen and precious, 5 you yourselves like living stones are being built up as a spiritual house, . . .

Peter's opening words in this paragraph may seem like passing tones, unessential notes in a melody that we can simply breeze through—but they are not. *As you come to him* . . . Our life as Christians always begins with this—we come to Jesus. Not to a club. Not to a cause. Not to the "cool" place. We come to Jesus, the living one, the resurrected one, our savior and God.

[Slide 7]

Jesus is "*the living stone*," the one of whom the prophecies in Psalm 118:22 and Isaiah 8:14 spoke. He was rejected by men, by the Jewish leaders, but was actually God's chosen, precious Son. As his followers, Peter says that we are now also "*living stones*." We are in him through our faith, united with him by the

Spirit, and so we share in his likeness. We are stones that have been made alive by the power of the Holy Spirit.

The two Old Testament passages I just mentioned pointed to a figure, the Messiah, who would be rejected by those who were “the builders,” those who were charged with building the people of God, only to be revealed as God’s chosen foundation stone. This image of the Messiah as a stone was not only a part of the Old Testament prophecies, but was apparently a common and well-known image in the early church, for it is referenced several times in the New Testament. So it’s not a surprise to see it included in Peter’s letter. But I think there may be another reason why it was so important for Peter, something that made this particular imagery so personal for him.

[Slide 8] *Little rocks, big rock*

You may recall that Peter was first introduced in the gospels by his Hebrew name, Simon. He was the disciple who answered Jesus when he asked them who they thought he was. “*You are the Messiah, the Son of God,*” was Simon’s response. Jesus was pleased; that recognition required a revelation from God. Simon understood. So Jesus changed his name, signaling a new status before God. And he did so with a play on words: “*You are Peter (petros, a small rock), and on this rock (petra, a large boulder), I will build my church.*”

Jesus wasn’t saying that he would build his church on Peter. How do we know that? Peter tells us so in this passage. Jesus was saying that he would build his church, made up of little rocks like Peter, that were laid on the big rock that was himself. Jesus was the choice stone, the foundation stone, and on him would be laid all of the other small stones—beginning with Peter and the rest of the Twelve, and continuing on to you and me and to those who will follow after us.

[Slide 9] *Built on him*

So Peter made sure that these young Gentile believers understood something important. The church—this group of believers who had received the gospel and begun to follow Christ—wasn’t built on anything derived from mere human experience. They were not simply a random collection of people. Nor were they a club of like-minded individuals from similar backgrounds who happened to enjoy the same activities. They were not a convention of people who shared a hobby or a profession. They weren’t bound by ties of family or blood or ethnicity.

No, the church wasn’t built like other human organizations. It was built on the foundation of the person of Jesus Christ. Each of them had come to faith in Jesus, and each one must follow him for themselves. Each of them was a unique “*living stone,*” a person who had experienced the new birth, who had the hope of

heaven, and was beginning to live a new life. But each individual person was now connected to the others in a new way. Because they were united with Jesus Christ, they were also united with one another, based on their shared experience of being born again through receiving the gospel. They were connected by their faith—both to Jesus and to one another.

[Slide 10] *Fitted together*

When you think of “living stones,” don’t think of a bunch of rocks scattered around in a river bed or a culvert or a pasture. Scattered stones are not what Peter has in mind. Oh, that may describe our origin—we have come from a lot of different river beds or culverts or pastures. We were just scattered stones—like these Gentile believers, who were “scattered” among the various nations where they lived—“*exiles who were dispersed in Pontus, Galatia, [and so on]*” (1:1). But as Robert Mounce put it, “*Scattered bricks do not constitute a building. Scattered believers do not make a church.*” (1982, 26).

[Slide 11]

No, the image that Peter wants us to see is of stones being brought together, fitted together in order to form something greater. Each one is unique, and each one fits in a particular place, contributes something essential to the whole.

There’s something else going on here as well. Peter doesn’t refer to this directly, but there’s another reference in the Old Testament to stones being brought together to build something—and it’s pretty significant.

Before the Israelites crossed the Jordan to begin taking possession of the promised land, Moses gave them very specific instructions. You can read about this in Deuteronomy chapter 27:5-6.

5 And there you shall build an altar to the Lord your God, an altar of stones. You shall wield no iron tool on them; 6 you shall build an altar to the Lord your God of uncut stones.

When they crossed over, they were to build an altar to the Lord, an altar made from “uncut stones”—stones that had not been shaped or cut by any tools. Rough stones, just as you would find them laying around. These were the stones that God wanted for his altar.

[Slide 12]

God is not opposed to using tools. And he’s not opposed to fashioning things for use in his service that are artistic, that are elegant, even that are opulent. When it came time to build the Tabernacle, and later the Temple, there was a lot of high quality craftsmanship employed in the project, and a lot of expensive

materials used to make it look glorious. The stonework for that building was exquisitely and carefully fashioned.

But God has always liked using rough stones. Peter was a rough stone. But God took him and shaped him and placed him on the foundation of Christ, connected to other rough stones, like James and John, and later, Paul.

God doesn't mass-produce anything. He doesn't do cookie-cutter discipleship or build cookie-cutter churches. He doesn't manufacture his people as if we were all widgets. He's an artist and a craftsman. He takes rough stones, unique individuals like you, like me, and he shapes us himself, and then places us where we fit. And he does the same with the people around us—because he is not just trying to fix you, he's building a spiritual house, a temple, a place where he can dwell. And he likes to dwell in a building made of rough stones.

[Slide 13]

I understand church shopping. We've moved several times in our lives, including times when we had to find a new church. So we looked around to find the right place for our family to worship. And I also understand that in the life of a congregation, things can change that might lead a person or a family to say, "*I don't think we fit here anymore. Maybe God has a new assignment for us.*" Mary and I have had to make that decision—and it's neither fun nor easy.

But what I don't understand—and what I think is damaging to the church at large and to people in general—is what we see in a lot of churches in the US, and even around the globe. That is a different kind of church shopping, where I'm treating my spiritual life and church involvement as a commodity, another part of my life as a consumer. I'm looking for the church that will meet my needs, that will allow me to consume religious services for a price I am willing to pay. That kind of church shopping has no connection whatsoever to the church that Peter describes in this passage.

You see, the real questions we should be asking about our church connection are not, "*Does this church have what I want? Do I like the music? Do I feel comfortable there? Does this church have people like me there?*" Sure, those questions matter . . . a little. But the questions that are more important, the questions that we should be asking are these: "*Is this where God has placed me? Is this the place he has shaped me for, and where he wants me to fit? Is this the place where he wants me to contribute to make this place his temple, where he can show that he lives here through what he does in and through me?*" Those questions really ought to be what we're asking when we think about where to worship, and what church I should join.

[Slide 14] *A new people*

The people that Peter addressed in this letter were young in their faith. They were somewhat familiar with the Old Testament, and they had heard the gospel clearly explained. They were starting to understand what it meant to follow Jesus. Probably they were excited by the reminders in the first chapter about their eternal inheritance, the promise of God that was reserved in heaven for them. But they shared a common nagging sense of malaise—a little anxiety stuck back in the corner of their heart, something that ate away at their joy and eroded their confidence, particularly when they were away from the rest of their fellow believers, out in the marketplace, or when they encountered the familiar faces of their former friends and associates.

Most of these young Christians were Gentiles. They had grown up in a culture that valued honor above all else. And they derived their sense of honor from their family and their people/tribe or their social position or their wealth or all three. Now they were a part of a novel religious group (in a culture and a time that frowned on novel religious groups!). Belonging to that group had brought them into conflict with their family and tribe, put their social position and wealth at risk, and invited the scorn of the public, particularly from those who were highly honored already, the powerful patrons and rulers of their communities.

The few Jews from the synagogue who had acknowledged Jesus as Messiah were similarly scorned by their own people, regarded as traitors, and accused of abandoning God and God's people to follow after a criminal, a false prophet.

The Gentile God-fearers from the synagogue who had followed Christ got it from both sides. The Jews dismissed them and reviled them for being insincere, foolish, unstable. *We should have known they would defect. You can't trust a Gentile, even if they convert.* Turn and spit on the ground to show their disapproval. And their former friends from the community? The same, twice over. *First you go chasing after this god those Jews say they worship—but with no idols, so how do you even do that?! Then you go chasing after a crucified Jew you say is a god? You're nuts! You bring shame to your family! Maybe you ought to be crucified too.*

[Slide 15]

All of these young believers shared this same malaise: they had lost their sense of belonging to a people. And with it, they had lost their sense of value, of honor, and of identity, of self. If they no longer belonged to their people, who were they?

Peter has an answer for them. *“Once you were not a people. But now you are God’s people!”* Once you were just a bunch of scattered stones. You didn’t really belong anywhere, because you didn’t belong to God. Once you were ignorant, deriving your sense of honor from things that could never fulfill your need to be acknowledged, because they weren’t lasting. They came from fallible, fickle, flawed human beings invested in fallible, fickle, and flawed human systems.

But now! Now you are being built into a glorious people, a people built upon the stone that is the most precious and honorable of all, the stone that was rejected by the builders (who should have known better, but persisted in their blindness)—just as you were rejected—but which was chosen by God—just as you have been chosen. You are precious and to be valued above all other peoples, Peter says. For you belong to God, all of you who are scattered among the nations of this world, but whom God is bringing into his house, building you into his house, by connecting you to Christ—and to one another.

[Slide 16]

Then Peter does something remarkable. And it is the primary reason why I consider this passage one of the most important passages in all of the New Testament. In verses 9-10, Peter quotes from several passages in the Old Testament, especially Exodus 19 and Isaiah 43. He takes key phrases and titles that are specifically applied in those passages to Israel as God’s chosen people, and turns and says, by divine inspiration and in accordance with what Jesus taught, that these titles now refer to the church. The church is the true people of God, for they are the ones built upon the chosen foundation stone of Christ.

Peter says to them, this is the cure for that sense of anxiety, that loss of belonging that you feel. You may have been rejected by your people; you may feel that you’ve lost your identity and your basis for honor. But you’ve lost nothing that was worth anything at all! And you’ve gained the glory, the honor, the special status of being the people whom God has declared to be his chosen ones, his special treasure, the most valuable people in all the world!

[Slide 17]

How do you think of yourself? Do you think of yourself as honorable, as valuable, as treasured? If you do, what is the basis for your belief?

Do you think of yourself as just a rough stone, just a rock in a random gravel pit? Or do you think of yourself as a precious gem? A carefully polished stone that is being fitted for a particular spot where you can shine in just the way that the master artist needs to finish his masterpiece?

Do you think of yourself as scattered? Not belonging anywhere, not really? Or do you think of yourself as being selected, with potential and purpose, because you can be connected to the foundation stone in a way that will maximize your beauty and your capacity to shine?

And what about the people around you? Do you think of them as rough stones? Just in your way? Better if they were ground up and spread around somewhere else for others to walk on to stay out of the mud? Just gravel for someone's path? Or are they the people God has given to you, to be joined to, to belong to, so that you can be of help to them, can strengthen them, can encourage them? Are they important to you because they are a part of the temple that God is building? Or only important to you if they can help you achieve what it is that you want to get done?

[Slide 18] *New purpose*

There's one more point I'd like to make in closing. I won't drag it out unduly, since I've spoken about it before when we were talking about God building us into a temple. I mean, I could, because there's still plenty of meat left in this passage—my goodness, whole books have been written about these last two verses! But let me just point out this small but very important part of the conclusion of this passage—and that has to do with the purpose of the building.

Form and function are related. That's true whether you're talking about the architecture of a building or the architecture of the cell of a living organism or the architecture of a speech. The form of something is directly connected to its function, to the purpose for which it was designed.

The church has a form. It consists of people who are gathered together because they share a common experience—they've been born again. They come from different backgrounds but have a common direction and future. These disparate parts, these scattered stones, are brought by God to a place—so that they can fulfill the purpose for their existence.

[Slide 19]

Do you know what your purpose for living is? Do you know why God brought you to Lawrence, Kansas, or wherever it is you live if you're watching from somewhere else? Do you know, more importantly, why he brought you to the foundation stone of Christ? It is this—you were created to worship him, and to serve him. You were made to be a temple of God, a dwelling place for God to live, where he could show through you what it looks like to know the living God. And he put you together with some other people so that when you got together, he could show himself with even greater clarity and depth as you learned how to love

each other and how to tell others about him. You were brought here because God wanted a home. He wanted to live in you. And for you to live in him—which happens as you live together with his people, in whom he also lives.

That's it. That's the purpose. And here's the fantastic thing that comes along with fulfilling the purpose for which you were created and redeemed and brought into place and fitted together with others so that you are a complement to them and they to you!

[Slide 20]

You become a temple—a place where God lives—so that *you can offer praise* to God. That's what you were made to do, to give God praise, to declare to all the world (and to remind yourself!) all the wonderful things God has done. *And* to be a temple, a place where God lives—so that *you will be a praise*. So that you will be a glorious expression of the goodness of God, the truth of God, the power of God, the beauty of God, the majesty of God, the love of God. Your very existence, your changed life, becomes a testimony of praise to God as who he is and what he has done in you becomes evident as you follow Christ.

And the fantastic thing that comes along? (The other fantastic thing, I guess I should say.) Not only are you part of God's people who offer praise, whose lives are themselves a praise to God—but *you will be praised*. That's what the last part of verse 6 means: "*whoever believes in him will not be put to shame.*" This quote from Isaiah is using honor-shame language, something that everyone in the first century would have immediately understood, but which we have to work at a little. Some translations say, "*won't be disappointed,*" which is close to the meaning, if we think about it properly, but can be misleading. The idea is this—if you trust in Jesus, if you build your life on that rock—when judgment comes, and the final evaluation of the inspector comes, you won't be ashamed. You won't find yourself cringing in shame for having rejected God's chosen and precious Son. You'll be honored instead. Your faith will be displayed as full and mature, able to pass the test. You'll be praised as a glorious example of what the grace of God has done in a faithful servant of Christ.

[Slide 21]

Transition to communion

[*Worship team, if you would begin making your way to the platform . . .*]

We are about to take communion, the reminder of the price that was paid for us to become part of the people of God. If you have a piece of bread and some grape juice, or something that can stand in for them, go ahead and get them now, and set them aside for a moment.

On this Memorial Day Sunday, there are many celebrations happening that rightly honor those who have given their lives in order to preserve our nation and the freedoms we enjoy here. And there will be many who are honoring family members who have died, remembering their lives and what they gave to us. I encourage you to do so as well. But there is no better way to celebrate Memorial Day than to recall the death of Jesus Christ, who defeated Satan and death and the grave, in order to bring you your freedom and welcome you into God's family. Even better—to choose to surrender to him, to lay down your arms, admit your need of a savior, and give your heart and your life to him, pledge your allegiance to him. So as we prepare to receive communion, let me encourage you that this would be an excellent opportunity for you to make or reaffirm your commitment to Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. Let the words of an old, but still powerful, hymn help you to make that surrender and that commitment today.

For those of you who might be making your commitment for the first time, the promise of God is this: if you sincerely repent of your sins and invite Jesus to be your Lord; if you confess that he is the Son of God who died in your place, to pay the price for your sins, then he will come in to your heart and live in you through his Spirit. You'll be born again. You'll have a new hope, a living hope. So use this time to offer your heart to God. After we've sung this hymn, we'll take the elements together.

[END]