

God Uses Living Stones to Build His Church

1 Peter 2:4-10

⁴ As you come to him, the Living Stone, rejected by men but chosen by God and precious, ⁵ you also, like living stones, are being built as a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood, in order to bring spiritual sacrifices that are acceptable to God through Jesus Christ. ⁶ For it says in Scripture: See, I lay a stone in Zion, a chosen and precious cornerstone, and the one who believes in him will certainly not be put to shame. ⁷ Therefore, for you who believe, this is an honor. But for those who do not believe: The stone which the builders rejected has become the cornerstone (or capstone), ⁸ and, a stone over which they stumble and a rock over which they fall. Because they continue to disobey the word, they stumble over it. And that is the consequence appointed for them. ⁹ But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, the people who are God's own possession, so that you may proclaim the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light. ¹⁰ At one time you were not a people, but now you are the people of God. At one time you were not shown mercy, but now you have been shown mercy.

Having lived in Fountain City for more than six years, there is one thing I've noticed in a town that is built into a bluff. I've noticed the importance of retaining walls. You see them everywhere. And they're not all the same. I particularly like the walls that hold back the bluff around the parsonage. Those walls are made of stones that are mortared together. And what's neat about it is that not every stone is the same. There are different sized rocks with different shapes that are puzzled together to form sturdy as well as attractive walls. The reason for mentioning this is the picture that Peter uses in the Scripture before us. You may recall a few weeks ago Peter used the term "living" to describe the hope of heaven that we have because of Christ's resurrection. Now he applies the word living to describe stones. God uses living stones to build his church. Peter shows us that we living stones are dependent upon the living Stone of Christ. And then Peter shows us that living stones do more than just make up the structure of the building. Living stones are actively involved in serving God's church.

The living stone which Peter's readers have come to is none other than Christ Jesus himself. Peter uses three Old Testament passages to show how Christ serves as the rock for his Church. The first picture is that of a cornerstone. The cornerstone was the first and largest stone used in building. It would determine the straightness of the building's lines—its depth, its width, and its height. If the cornerstone was off a little, the whole building would be crooked. Christ is the cornerstone of God's church. And the living stones that God uses to build his church are totally dependent on Christ as the cornerstone. The Apostle Paul used a similar picture when he told the Ephesians, "*You have been built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the Cornerstone. In him the whole building is joined together and grows into a holy temple in the Lord*" (Ephesians 2:20,21).

The next picture of the living Stone of Christ is that of a capstone. Roman architecture made use of arches in its building. Whether it was for a window or a door, an arch above the space would bear the weight of the structure. The capstone was mortared on top of the arch. If the capstone were removed the whole structure would collapse. You can see how Christ serves

well as a capstone. Our entire existence depends on him. If Christ is removed from us, our lives collapse. But those who keep trusting in him, they are solid. They never are put to shame.

The final picture of a rock is directed at those who do not put their trust in Christ. He still is a rock, but this time it's not for building. This Rock causes stumbling. Those who refuse to turn to him in faith will surely fall because of him. The point that Peter is making with this illustration is that there is no middle ground with Jesus. Either you trust him, or you don't. Before ascending to heaven, Jesus told his faithful followers to preach the gospel to all creation. And then he said, "*Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved. Whoever does not believe will be condemned*" (Mark 16:16). There's no third reaction, no middle ground to Christ. Either you believe in him or you don't. For those who believe in him there awaits endless joy and bliss in the mansions of heaven. Our Lord mentioned that in our Gospel reading. For those who don't believe, eternal death and destruction awaits. And no one will escape.

It is purely by God's grace alone that you and I look to Christ in faith. Peter had it right when he said once you were not a people. We were nobody. Paul told the Ephesians, "*You were dead in your transgressions and sins*" (Ephesians 2:1). When we began this life, we could only stumble over Christ. But then the Holy Spirit came into our life. He did miraculous work on us dead, lifeless stones. Through word and sacrament he made us living stones. In that same chapter, Paul told the Ephesians, "*It is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast*" (Ephesians 2:8,9). As we living stones keep trusting in the living Stone of Christ, we are never put to shame.

Yes, God builds us into his church. Each soul that comes to know Christ the Rock, becomes part of a solid structure. The wind and the waves may beat against it. But it will not fall. It has a solid foundation on Christ the Rock holding everything together. So we living stones know the structure is secure. But Peter shows us that our role is more than just structure. In God's Church we are very much involved in serving.

For anyone questioning their importance to God and his church, please listen to what Peter says next: *But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, the people who are God's own possession, so that you may proclaim the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light. At one time you were not a people, but now you are the people of God. At one time you were not shown mercy, but now you have been shown mercy.* With this verse Peter shows his readers how important they are to God.

They are God's chosen people. The nation of Israel was the people God chose to carry out his saving plan. And they soon learned when God chooses you, you are special to him. God made that clear when they were enslaved in Egypt. After ten plagues the Pharaoh finally sent God's people away. But then he made the worst decision of his life. He sent charioteers to pursue and attack God's people. Big mistake. They were God's chosen. The Lord would fight for them. God made the Red Sea miraculously open. Israel walked safely to the other side. When the

Egyptians pursued, God destroyed them. When the fight was finished, Egyptian dead bodies were washing up on shore. Years later Israel entered the Promised Land. God kept fighting for them. He had them march around the well-fortified city of Jericho for six days. On day 7 they marched around seven times. And then the people shouted. God made those walls come crumbling down. Some years later God had a man named Gideon put together an army that was outnumbered 450 to 1. His men were armed with torches and ram horns. But they didn't need to fight. The Lord fought for them. Scripture tells us how the Lord turned the sword of each Midianite against the person next to him. When you are God's chosen people, you've got a champion on your side. And that's what Peter wanted his readers to know. They were God's chosen people; so they had nothing to fear.

Peter also calls them a royal priesthood. In Old Testament times, priests were important for the people to worship. The priests would represent the people and make sacrifices for their sins. When Christ entered our world, he came as a priest. But he made only one sacrifice. He sacrificed himself on the altar of a cross. Nailed to that cross he represented the entire world and satisfied God completely. Now the sins of everyone are paid. So you are truly holy in God's eyes. No more sacrifices are needed. God made that clear the moment Jesus died. What happened in the temple that Good Friday afternoon? The 4-inch-thick curtain that separated God's most holy room from the rest of the temple tore. Not just a little. It tore from top to bottom. God was completely satisfied. He is now at peace with all mankind.

Living stones don't just make up God's church. They are part of his royal family. They are chosen to be his own. They don't need a priest to get them right with God. They are priests themselves. They are royal priests, a holy nation. So what's left? Simply to declare his praises. No longer in the dark. They see clearly in the light. They know forgiveness is theirs in Christ. As priests, they can offer forgiveness. They have that right. And when trouble comes into their life, as priests they take it to the Lord in prayer. Maybe once they were not a people. But now they are God's people. Once they were miserable, wretched, hopeless. Now they are chosen and special to God. He has shown them mercy.

These last two verses surely would lift Peter's first readers. Life around them was difficult. Persecution against them was on the rise. In just a few short years their beloved temple in Jerusalem would be leveled to the ground. Temple stones would be torn away; that holy structure demolished. But it didn't matter. That temple was no longer serviceable. Several years earlier, the final sacrifice had been made by Christ himself. Now everyone gets to be a priest. They spend their entire lifetime declaring God's praises.

You too are chosen. You are royalty. You're a priest. You are holy. You belong to God. So declare his praises. That way more living stones will be added. That way the priesthood will increase. You are part of a great nation. Let others know. Let others in. That's what living stones do in God's church.