

## **1 Peter 2:2-10**

### **Living Stones**

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

One of the things that this whole coronavirus shutdown has done has made us more aware of what it means to be the church. It used to be easy to just equate church with the thing that happened on Sunday morning. But temporarily not gathering for public worship doesn't make us any less Christian. Our identity as Christians is not found in a particular building, but in who God has called us to be.

Throughout the New Testament, this new identity is described in different ways. It's a new birth through water and the spirit. It's a dying and rising again with Christ. We're described as sheep under the care of the good shepherd, or branches growing on the true vine that is Christ. But not here in First Peter. Here we are stones. Compared to some of the other picture language in scripture, calling us stones seems a bit boring. Stones can't really do anything. They can't grow or change or go anywhere on their own. But it's a very deliberate choice on behalf of Peter. This entire passage from his epistle is about how we understand the old covenant in light of Christ Jesus. What does it mean for us as disciples of Jesus now that he has come and established the new covenant?

Firstly, Jesus himself is called the living stone and the cornerstone, but also the rejected stone and the stone to stumble over. He is the basis for this new thing, but not everyone will become part of it. But for those who believe, they are living stones being built into a spiritual house. That is, they are part of a living temple which is the people of God. Under the old covenant, priests would enter the temple in Jerusalem to come into God's presence and make sacrifices and prayers of intercession on behalf of the people. Under the new covenant made in the blood of Christ Jesus, all believers become this point of access to God's presence.

We are the stones that make up a new and living temple. This is part of our identity as Christians. And in calling the people of the church a 'spiritual house' Peter reminds us that God is now present in the world in us, and that together we are to stand as a witness to him. Christ himself is the fulfilment of the old covenant, and because we are in Christ, we are part of that fulfilment.

Then Peter goes on to call believers a 'holy priesthood'. A priesthood that makes spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ. This is because all believers have direct access to God through Christ. And so, Christians offer the sacrifices of prayer, praise, and thanksgiving, and these are acceptable to God because of the great sacrifice of Jesus Christ on the cross for the sins of the world.

If we're in any doubt that Peter is showing us what the old covenant means in the light of Christ, he quotes or paraphrases six Old Testament verses. Then he concludes in verse nine and ten, with a bold statement about our identity:

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.

(1 Peter 2:9-10)

There are three parts here to your identity. You are chosen, royal, and holy. Sometimes this isn't immediately apparent. When you're walking down the street you don't look any different to all the other people. Some of us may have larger houses than others, but there's nothing even approaching the size of a royal palace. And I don't see many halos above your heads showing everyone how holy you are. And yet we are indeed chosen, we are indeed royal, we are indeed holy. Not according to the standards of this world, not according to human wisdom.

Martin Luther puts it this way:

Just as you are not called a Christian because you have a great deal of money and property but because you have been built on the living stone and believe in Christ, so you are not called a priest because you are tonsured or wear a long coat but because you may approach God. In like manner, you are not a king because you wear a golden crown and have many lands and people under you, but because you are a lord over all things, over death, sin, and hell. If you believe in Christ, you are a king just as He is a King. Now He is not a King after the manner of earthly monarchs. He does not wear a golden crown. Nor does He ride along with great pomp and many horses. No, He is a King over all kings—a King who has power over all things and at whose feet everything must lie. Just as He is a Lord, so I, too, am a lord. For what He has, that I, too, have.

As God's own people, who share in everything that Jesus Christ is and does, we have a single purpose, a single ultimate goal in this life:

To declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light.

This is what makes you look different from all the other people down the street. This is the unique thing about your identity as a Christian. You have a God who has saved you, and so you give him praise.

Some of our translations put this as 'proclaim his mighty acts', or 'tell of his virtues'. And we don't even have to go beyond this text to know what those mighty acts are. We who were not a people, who were lost in our own self, so self-absorbed that only the 'me' matters, were turned into a people, where the 'us' matters. That is a miracle of God. You look at how easy it is to be self-centred and God's power at work here becomes very apparent. But since we were lost in our own dark corner of the world, God had to come to us. That is a mighty act in and of itself.

The almighty God, creator of the heavens and the earth became one us, entered into our darkness, and led us out of it into his light. For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him will not perish but have eternal life. Not just eternal life in our own little corner, but together with all the people of God. God is building us into one body, one family, branches on the one vine, living stones in the one holy temple of God. Nothing mightier than that. He builds a spiritual building that spans all time, but also the Christian congregation, in which we are all equal in one faith, one like the other, and are all placed and fitted on one another and joined together through love without malice, guile, hypocrisy, hatred, and slander, as it says one verse before our text from First Peter here today.

But unity does not eliminate diversity. Not all children in a family are alike, nor are all the stones in a building identical. In fact, it is diversity that gives beauty and richness to a family or building. The absence of diversity is not unity; it is uniformity, and uniformity is dull. It is fine when a choir sings in unison, but it sounds amazing when they can sing in harmony. So, Christians can actually differ and still get along. All who believe in the "one faith" and who seek to honour the "one Lord" can love each other and walk together. God may call us into different ministries, or to use different methods, but we can still love each other and seek to present a united witness to the world. After all, one day all of us will be together in heaven, so it might be a good idea if we learned to love each other down here.

All this is possible because God has given us a new birth through water and the spirit. Through our baptism, God has claimed us as his own, set us apart through the washing clean of our sin, and calls us to daily die to our old sinful selves and live in his righteousness. And in this way, we shine God's light into the darkness of this world. And some will stumble when confronted with the light of God, the good news that Jesus Christ died for the sins of the world and rose again that we might have life. But that shouldn't hold us back. God's mighty acts cannot be left untold. He has given us everything, and the world needs to know that. And so, thanks be to God that he did prove his love for us, in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us, washed us clean, and set us apart for his glory. Amen.

May God's peace, which passes all human understanding, keep your hearts and minds safe in the risen Lord Jesus. Amen.