

February 28, 2016

## Sojourners The Precious Cornerstone

1 Peter 2:4 – 10

Last week we followed Peter's flow of thought from chapter one: *'...since you have been born again, not of perishable seed but of imperishable, through the living and abiding word of God...'* then there are two things that need to happen. If this is the case with you, if you have been born again of imperishable seed, the eternal word of God, if you have the imperishable life of God in you, and you are no longer condemned just to live a grass life that fades and withers, then there are two things to do here. Two commands to follow. The first is a command to put away something; the second is a command to desire something. First he says, *So put away all malice and all deceit and hypocrisy and envy and all slander.* 'Put away all those things that quench your desire for God. Put away those things that are incompatible with new birth.'

And then he says, *'Like newborn infants, long for the pure spiritual milk'* Get a desire for the things of God like a baby has a desire for milk.' Develop those desires that come with regeneration. Because you need to grow. You've tasted the goodness of God in the gospel. You need to keep on tasting it. You have to turn it over on the palate of your heart. You have to let it melt your heart. You have to let the truth that comes to you invade your soul and feed on it. Let it lead you to prayer and meditation over it. You have to digest it, and you have to apply it. You have to make it part of your thinking and behavior. This is how you grow up into salvation and it is a lifelong process as our mind, emotions and will are daily transformed and conformed to the image of Christ.

And then Peter shifts metaphors and quits talking about milk and tasting and growing, and starts talking about stones and buildings. Cornerstones, living stones, precious stones, rejected stones, a stone of stumbling, a rock of offense. And I suppose since it's Peter talking, he naturally gravitates toward the stone metaphor. After all, when he met Jesus, one of the first things Jesus does is change his name from Simon to Peter, or Cephas, a stone. And when he gets that great revelation of who Jesus is, Jesus tells him that it is on this rock of revelation that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God that Jesus will build His church. Evidently Peter really got the message. Because one of the first things Peter tells these believers, is that once you've come to Christ, once you've been born again of the living word and tasted that the Lord is good, you have to realize that you've not only come to Christ who is the living stone, you've come to a construction site. He says, *As you come to Him, a living stone rejected by men but in the sight of God chosen and precious, 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.*

You see, simply coming to Christ is not the ultimate purpose in salvation. God is not in the business of just rescuing sinners from the wrath of God, redeeming and restoring their lives, so that He has some good people to bring to heaven. Too often we take the truths of the gospel and apply them so individualistically that we miss the ultimate purpose God intended. Individually we need to be rescued from sin and the wrath of God, so that we could together be brought into God's fuller community of grace, the church. Peter tells us here in this section, that God is in the process of building something. No doubt Peter is reaching back to that moment in Matthew chapter 16 where the revelation of Jesus as the Son of God culminates in the further revelation where Jesus says, 'On this revelation I am going to build My church, and the gates of hell will not prevail against it'. In other words, when you receive and believe the truth that Jesus Christ is your personal Savior, it brings you into the center of God's corporate expression, the church.

I think southerner's have it right. You see, there's no such thing as a singular pronoun in the South. They don't say *you*. They say *y'all* – even if they're talking to one person. "Y'all think Wal-Mart's still open?" "Y'all going to the pig roast tonight?" "Hey Bubba, y'all want some sweet tea?" So in Southern theology, there's no such thing as an individual. Everyone is a stone built into a spiritual house; everyone is an individual in the midst of a community. But they don't use the word community in the south; they just use the plural of "y'all," which is "all y'all." So what Peter is really saying is "Come to Jesus Christ, the living stone, and because y'all are living stones, and all y'all will be built into a spiritual house."

And here in this text, I think Peter gives us three things about the church we need to understand. He gives us the model of the church, the meaning of the church and the mission of the church. He tells us what it looks like; he tells us why it exists; and he tells us what the church is to be about. The model, the meaning and the mission.

First of all he lays out the **model**. The church is God's house, made up of individual living stones, that have come together on the living stone. Peter makes it clear that the living stone to which he refers is Christ Himself. *As you come to Him, a living stone rejected by men but in the sight of God chosen and precious.* The first thing about the model of the church is that it is built on this living stone that God chose. The most important element in this building is this particular stone. And one of the things we learn in this passage is that your response to this living stone determines your relationship to God and ultimately, your destiny. You see there are only two possibilities – you either come to Him, or you reject Him. It is so often true, that God chooses what man rejects, and man rejects what God chooses. God does not do things the same way we would – He took an obscure carpenter from Nazareth, which was a kind of Jewish hickville, and brought him together with an unassuming country girl, and gave them the privilege of raising and caring for the Son of God. And the King of Glory was born, not in a palace, but a barn. And here Peter is making the point that God did not use what man approved – so that He and not us, would get all the glory and honor and praise.

Jesus is not only chosen in the sight of God, He is also the precious cornerstone. Peter elaborates on this when he quotes the prophet Isaiah: *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."* This living stone is the precious cornerstone. A cornerstone is the principle stone in the building. At the time Peter was writing, when you built a building, you didn't pour a concrete foundation, you chose a massive stone, carefully and painstakingly shaped it, and placed it as the first step in construction. Since both the angle of the walls and the level of the subsequent courses of stonework or brickwork were determined by the cornerstone, it was critical that this stone was precisely square and true.

God is at work building something. And the first order of business was to lay the foundation cornerstone. But not just any stone. This stone is Jesus, the living stone by virtue of His resurrection from the dead. And it is this stone that determines everything else in the building. Everything in the building gets its meaning and significance from this cornerstone. Paul points this out in Ephesians 2, telling the believers that they are a building: *built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus Himself being the cornerstone, in whom the whole structure, being joined together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord.* That means that the definition of the church is not left up to us. We don't decide what the church looks like. If you want to know what the church ought to be, look at the cornerstone.

You see, the church, Paul tells us there in Ephesians, is the new temple of God. And God has very specific ideas about how this thing looks. He doesn't leave it up to us. When God gave Moses the blueprint for the tabernacle, that was ultimately realized in the temple construction, He was very specific in how He wanted it to look. Over and over He tells Moses to build it according to the pattern he was shown on the mountain. Don't just build any old building. And when the temple was built, it followed very carefully the pattern God had laid out. But here Peter says God is building something new. Not a brick and mortar building, but a building of God that is a spiritual house. God has a specific design in mind, and it begins with the cornerstone, the resurrected Christ, upon which are laid the individual stones.

Peter says, *you yourselves like living stones are being built up as a spiritual house.* Coming to the living stone, coming to Christ, means coming into relationship with others who have come to Him. The Christian life is not a solitary spiritual experience. I have had people tell me that they are Christians, but they don't go to church. Well, first of all, church is not a place. The Bible never speaks about the church as a brick and mortar experience. We have become sloppy in our language. We cannot go to church because we are the church. That is biblical language and I suppose we need to work harder to align our speaking with the word of God. But that aside, if you tell me that you're a Christian but you don't go to church, that is you don't gather regularly with other Christians in community, then I would have to press you on whether you really know Christ.

This community thing is not my idea. Look at the language here. Coming to Christ as the living stone, *you also as living stones are being built up as a spiritual house.* Doesn't that imply a fairly close relationship?

How many buildings have you seen composed of individual stones scattered out over the building site, unconnected? I don't think we would call that a building by any stretch of the imagination. This imagery that Peter evokes implies that the reality of the church is community, and the significance and purpose of any individual Christian cannot be realized apart from being in community with other Christians. Christianity, particularly in this country has been ill-served by the cultural ideal of rugged individualism that has characterized American ideology. We have, to a large degree, in the American church, infused our ecclesiology and our soteriology with a kind of independent, individualism that focuses on me, rather than on what God has in mind. But Peter says, 'When you come to Christ, you come to the thing that He is building and you fit where He wants you to fit'.

We are meant to be a corporate dwelling of God in the Spirit. While it's true that each of us individually reflects in some small way, the corporate reality of the church, there is more of God to be known and enjoyed than any one person can have in isolation. There is a presence and power and manifestation of the Spirit of God meant to be known in this gathering of stones that we do not know at any other time by ourselves. We are not just solitary living stones. We are being built together into something so much more than we could be individually. The stones are meant to so fit together in this house called Summit Christian Fellowship that something greater and more satisfying and more awesome than separate individuals comes into being—a temple, a dwelling place of God.

And this building process implies modification. When a building is constructed, all of the materials used, need to conform to the image of the building that the architect has drawn. That requires modifications to the raw materials. That means that saws and hammers and chisels and power tools are necessary to cut and shape everything to fit the building, because on their own, they don't naturally conform to the plan. And sometimes that process is hard, and even painful. But God knows exactly what needs to happen to build us into this temple. When you come to Christ, He begins to work in your life, cutting, and chiseling, hammering and chipping away – even when you do not recognize it or understand it – to fit you as a living stone, among other living stones, into His house.

Peter's readers desperately needed this kind of encouragement in the middle of the trouble they were experiencing precisely because they had come to this living stone. They were feeling the hammer blows of persecution for their faith; they felt the tensions and pressures to conform to the culture around them; and they knew the common pain and tragedy that comes to everyone in this life. And they needed to hear that this is okay; God has this under control; He is at work in the middle of it all working to fit you into His house. In fact, you are identifying with the very cornerstone Himself who experienced all the pain of rejection and alienation and betrayal and finally murder. A few verses down in this chapter we even hear Peter saying, 'This in fact is what you were called to. They rejected Him, you will be rejected. They hated Him, you will be hated for His sake. He suffered for your sake, you will suffer for His'.

That's the **model**. A spiritual house. And now Peter moves the metaphor along to what it **means**. Why the church? What does this mean? Why does the church exist? And the text here points out the reason the church exists is worship. Listen to Peter: *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*. That's worship. Peter still has the image of the temple of God in view and the temple was meant to be inhabited by priests whose job it was to worship God. That's what they did. Their whole life centered around the worship of God. They lived to offer sacrifices to God. This is the picture Peter is drawing for us. Worship is not an hour and a half on Sunday morning. Or even worse, the 20 or thirty minutes before the sermon. In fact we do a disservice to the church in general to designate people as 'worship leaders', implying that before they do that thing, or after they're finished, no worship of God goes on.

You see, the Bible reveals that all of life should be viewed in the arena of the sacred. That is, as those who have come to the living stone, we should not compartmentalize our lives into two camps, the sacred and the secular. Our whole lives are now bound up in being priests who offer spiritual sacrifices to God through Jesus Christ. It's not a part-time job. You don't put the collar on and go to church, then come home and take it off. In fact, everything we do must be considered in terms of our priesthood. Paul says this covers all your life: *appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship*. (Romans 12:1)

Let me ask you, 'Is there ever a point during the day when you are out of your body?' Paul says your body, your entire living, is to be a holy and acceptable offering to God – and that is your spiritual worship. Worshipping God is to use your body for God. It is to employ your mind, emotion, and will for His pleasure and purposes. Don't be tempted to limit worship to a few songs on Sunday morning. The word itself evokes the image of falling on your knees in adoration. You are bowing down before God and submitting to God. In the ancient courts of kings, people would come before his throne and bow down, with their knees and hands and foreheads to the ground. What they were saying was 'All I am is yours to do with what you will'. Without thinking, we do this all the time. Some of us really worship ourselves because we are always bowing down and surrendering to our own feelings, our own desires, and our own pleasures. Some of us worship money that way, or sex, or recognition or popularity. Whatever it is you find yourself bowing down to, that is what you are worshipping.

William Temple, the Archbishop of Canterbury a long time ago, said that "*Worship is the submission of all of our nature to God. It is the quickening of the conscience by His holiness; the nourishment of mind with His truth; the purifying of imagination by His beauty; the opening of the heart to His love; the surrender of will to His purpose—all this gathered up in adoration, the most selfless emotion of which our nature is capable.*" Can you say that you worship God on Sunday and then just do whatever you want on Monday? You may have sung some songs, listened to a sermon, even prayed a little prayer, but you haven't worshipped God. Are you worshipping God with your body throughout the week? That is, are you submitting to Him at work, at home, on the commute, when you're shopping, whatever you're doing?

Paul sums this up in his first letter to the Corinthians: *So, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God.* In other words, all of life is meant to be lived to the glory of God. Is God glorified in your body? Do you make much of Him in all you do? Directly after this Peter points his readers to Christ and says: "*Behold, I am laying in Zion a stone, a cornerstone chosen and precious, and whoever believes in Him will not be put to shame.*" *So the honor is for you who believe.* Literally he says, 'the preciousness is for you who believe'. What is he talking about? For you who believe, this rock Christ, is precious. He is the living stone, choice and precious in the sight of God. He is precious because He is the initiator and the perfecter and the sustainer of our faith. He is precious because believing in Him we can't lose. It is His precious blood, as of a Lamb unblemished and spotless that bought our redemption. He chose us and called us when we had no thought of Him and were on our merry way to the unimaginable terrors of hell. One day, in His kindness, He showed us the extent of our desperate predicament, and offered us a way of escape – without any regard to our worthiness – and He became precious to us.

Few knew the preciousness of Christ more than that old slaver, John Newton, writer of Amazing Grace. When he was well past his "retirement" age, he had to have an assistant stand in the pulpit with him on Sundays. He was nearly blind and spoke in whispers, but nothing could keep him from preaching while he still had breath. One Sunday, while delivering his message he repeated the sentence: "*Jesus Christ is precious.*" His helper whispered to him: "*But you have already said that twice.*" Newton turned to his helper and said loudly, "*Yes, I've said it twice, and I'm going to say it again.*" And the stones in the ancient sanctuary fairly shook as the grand old preacher said again: "*Jesus Christ is precious!*"

The distinguishing mark of a believer is the preciousness of Christ. If you are a believer, a follower of Christ, **then for you Christ is precious.** If you trust Him, if you are banking your eternal future on Him – then He is precious because He will never disappoint or cause you to be ashamed. Others will fail you, others will disappoint you, others will give you cause to be ashamed – but Christ never will. But if you do not hold Him precious, if you do not desire Him like a baby desires milk, you need to look at the faith you say you have, and see if you are drinking from the precious promises of God, and the precious blood of Christ, or if you are instead simply sucking up the dry dust of habit or tradition or custom or form. Is He truly precious? To you who **believe** He is precious." And that is the foundation of worship.

To those who believe He is a precious cornerstone, but to those who choose to disbelieve He is a different kind of stone – a stone to stumble over and a stone that offends. Peter says, *but for those who do not believe, "The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone," and "A stone of stumbling, and a rock of offense.* Stumbling and offense will always happen on account of the word of God.

Men and women who choose to disbelieve will always stumble over something in the word – ‘*The Bible is full of contradictions*’ – ‘*If God is love, how can He send people to hell?*’ ‘*If God is all good and all powerful, why does He allow so much evil in the world?*’ ‘*I believe that there are many ways to God, not just one*’. Jesus will always provide plenty of opportunity for those who disbelieve to stumble. And Christ will always offend those who are ready to disbelieve. The Pharisees and religious leaders took offense at Jesus; the people He grew up with took offense at Him; they had an idea of who the Messiah was supposed to be and He didn’t fit. And Jesus said, ‘Blessed is he who does not take offense at Me.’ If you stumble over Christ – if you are offended by Jesus – you can be sure of at least two things: Jesus is not precious to you - and you are not a Christian.

Notice what Peter says here *"They stumble because they disobey the word, as they were destined to do.* Stumbling is always occasioned by the word of God. People don’t have a problem if they never hear the word. But when the word comes, it is either accepted or rejected – and that is the stumbling point. But we cannot get away from the force of this text which says that those who are rejecting Christ and stumbling over His words are also appointed or destined for this. Ironically, this is one of those hard texts in the Bible that cause people to stumble. And here is where it is rather important to have a good grasp of grammar. All three principle verbs are in the present tense and you could better read this as ‘But for those who are presently not believing...who are presently stumbling, because they are presently disobeying the word as they were destined to do.’ As Wayne Grudem put it: *"This does not imply of course that they will come to saving faith, but it does stop short of saying that their eternal condemnation is already ordained. It rather affirms that their present rebellion and disobedience has been ordained by God, and does not indicate whether it will continue throughout life or not."*<sup>1</sup>

In fact, Peter essentially argues in verse 12 that these same disobedient people might one day be won by the testimony of Jesus they see in you. What this text does affirm is that those who persist in disobedience and rebellion to the word of God to the end of life were in fact destined by God for that end. Which points up the fact that we do not know whom God has destined for life. We do know that the Bible teaches two eternal truths we must embrace: God is sovereign and man is responsible. Our minds cannot grasp how these two can be in harmony. But just because we can't get a grip on this does not mean they contradict each other.

Charles Spurgeon put it like this: *"That God predestines, and yet that man is responsible, are two facts that few can see clearly. They are believed to be inconsistent and contradictory, but they are not. The fault is in our weak judgment. Two truths cannot be contradictory to each other. If, then, I find taught in one part of the Bible that everything is fore-ordained, that is true; and I find that in another Scripture, that man is responsible for all his actions, that is true; and it is only my folly that leads me to imagine that these two truths can ever contradict each other. I do not believe they can ever be welded into one upon any earthly anvil, but they certainly shall be one in eternity. They are two lines that so nearly parallel, that the human mind which pursues them farthest will never discover that they converge, but they do converge, and they will meet somewhere in eternity, close to the throne of God, whence all truth doth spring."*<sup>2</sup>

You see, God has no other plan for salvation – you must accept this word and believe in the Son of God – there is salvation in no other name. There is not another way to Heaven. God takes no pleasure in the death of the wicked – He is entirely sincere in not wanting any to perish but all to come to repentance – and those who reject Christ today, will one day stand before God justly condemned by their own rejection of Christ. Don’t reject Him – He is so precious for those who believe. He is the fountainhead of our worship. Believing on this stone you cannot lose – disbelieving on this stone you cannot win.

We see the **model** of the church, the **meaning** of the church, and now Peter points us to the **mission** of the church: *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. 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.* Peter is telling his readers, ‘But you are not like that – you are not among those who are stumbling and offended over Jesus – you are not like the disbelievers who disobey the word and refuse to believe thereby storing up wrath for themselves on the day of judgment.’ He points them to their identity in Christ – this is what is true now of you who believe in this stone.

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1 Wayne Grudem 1 Peter, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries, (Inter Varsity Press, Leicester, England, 1988), 108.

2 C.H. Spurgeon Autobiography: Volume 1: The Early Years; Banner of Truth; page 174

And he gives us four definitions of our identity in Christ. We are a chosen race. This is not racial or ethnic – this is not red or yellow, black or white, brown or pink – this is something new – a people chosen from out of all the tribes and tongues and peoples and nations of the earth to be the people of God. What gives us our identity has nothing to do with us, but with God – He chose us. We didn't earn it, merit it, qualify for it, or meet any conditions. It happened before you and I were even born and it ought to make us profoundly, eternally, tremblingly thankful at the mercy of it all.

We are not only a chosen race, but a royal priesthood. It is a royal priesthood because we are descended from the King of kings. This is not an ordinary, common priesthood – but a royal one – one with authority and power and influence. In Christ, the kingship and the priesthood are brought together and He has invested that in His people. We are a holy nation. We are not Americans first. We are a nation of the redeemed who have been set apart wholly for and unto God. We are special – not because of anything inherent in us – but because of what God in Christ has done. And we are His. For His **possession**. We now belong to Christ, we are not our own, to do with as we see fit – but we belong to Him to do with what He sees fit. He is in control – every decision must be referred to the owner – every action must be under His scrutiny – every thought must be under His control – a people for His possession.

We are all this, Peter says, *that you may proclaim the excellencies of Him who called you out of darkness into His marvelous light*. Is Jesus the precious cornerstone to you? This is what the world needs to hear – Why He is so precious to me. We have been called for this purpose – **to declare the great worth of Christ to the people still stumbling in darkness**. That is the mission. That is what we are called to do as living stones in the house of God – to bring people into the worship of this precious cornerstone. How precious is He to you? How far would you go to be near Him? If you could buy Him, how much would you be willing to spend? In Matthew 13, Jesus tells the parable of the man who found a treasure in the field and in His joy went and sold all he had to purchase the field – because of the precious value of what he found there. If Christ is truly precious to us, if His worth is far above anything we could hope to have here on earth, then we ought to be willing to sell everything we have to buy this treasure, and be bursting at the seams to tell people.

Because *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*. This is the preciousness of Christ the cornerstone to us, this is good news – we have received mercy. The gospel is good news of mercy to the undeserving. Mercy is the quality of getting what you don't deserve and receiving what you could never earn – mercy, which means help to the afflicted – and aid to the wretched. And it is available to whosoever will. Richard Baxter, that great Puritan preacher once said, 'I thank God for that word "whosoever." If God had said there was mercy for Richard Baxter, I am so vile a sinner, that I would have thought he meant some other Richard Baxter; but, when He says whosoever, I know that includes me, the worst of all Richard Baxters.'

*"If you haven't looked at Christ on the cross, you'll have to look at Him on the throne—with great trembling. The sacrificial death of Christ will be brought before the eyes of all who refuse to accept His free gift of forgiveness and eternal life. In Bethlehem He came in mercy to forgive sin. In the future He will come on the clouds in glory to establish justice. What will we do without a Savior? On the day of judgment there is nothing we can do if we have not trusted Christ."* Charles Spurgeon. *As you come to Him, a living stone rejected by men but in the sight of God chosen and precious,*

*Our gracious Father,*

*We thank You this morning for Your eternal word. Your word has awakened new life and brought us to Christ and we stand in awe of Your mercy. You have delivered us from the domain of darkness and given us a Savior, Jesus Christ the precious cornerstone. Grant us a faith to live by Him, to make Him all our desire, all our hope and all our glory. May we be as living stones built on Christ the Living Stone foundation, and may we count Him as precious above every other thing on this earth; so that we might live to tell the glory of His grace and the wonder of His love to every generation, we pray in the saving name of Jesus Christ our Lord, Amen.*