

Exiles with a home

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Preacher: David Wriglesworth

[0:00] I start with a question which is not a wee question, but I start with the question, who am I?! And I wonder if you find people, especially younger people, adolescent people growing up, and they are struggling, maybe you're struggling to know who am I?

It's all like the world is going here, buffeting me here, there, anywhere, and I don't know who I am. A song I like, it's not a secret here from some who know me well, I love casting crowns, but there is a song that goes by the title, Who Am I?

And the gist of it is that I quote the first line here, that the Lord of all the earth, how would it be that he cares to know my name? And it goes on a little bit in that vein, but the punchline is, you've told me who I am, because I'm yours.

And you can unpack the detail of that, you need to get a bit of flesh on the skeleton, but there's the point, you've told me who I am, because I'm yours. Now the question largely before us, I think, in this passage coming up, is who are we?

And I'm kind of just assuming for this purpose that we are Christians, and we're trying to think about that question. Who are we?

[1:25] Some may say, quite a lot of people I think, not necessarily in this church, but quite a lot of people may say, I read my Bible, I pray, I go to church, I look forward to being God forever.

Am I missing something? Isn't that about it? And I just want to add a comment, really, that in the West, compared to some areas in the world, sometimes very poor villages in Africa, they have a strong sense of community, really do share together.

But in the West, we are comparatively very individualistic, and this can affect how we can view church. And not in our passage, but there is a key word about the church, and the Bible speaks about it as an assembly.

And the Greek word is ecclesia, it's a called out of assembly, and the church is therefore the ecclesia of God. So going back to that first point of the who am I, I am yours, who are we?

We are his. Absolutely fundamental. So we didn't browse and think, oh, the church down the road is just something, oh, I'm interested, so I'll go. We're here because we're his, and he's called us to come together.

[2:54] And the passage we're about to go on to talks about living stones, and soon in the passage it talks about us being built together. And not in our passage, but on the same theme, 1 Corinthians 12 talks about the church as a body, and each of us having a part to play.

So there is no room in this thinking for people to think of themselves as individuals who just do it on their own, and just go and get a bit of input from something.

But otherwise it's largely something you do on your own. Yeah, there we are. So let's come to what it's saying in this passage.

The living stone, it says in verse 4, rejected by humans, but chosen by God and precious to him.

And I wonder if you can imagine what the New Testament Jews would have thought when someone talks about a stone.

And I just want to point out that if you were a New Testament Jew, and they really didn't quite get what Jesus the Messiah was doing there and then, what were they really expecting?

[4:09] The temple was in ruins. They were expecting a rebuilt temple. And then God was going to come and dwell with them forever. So stones would make Jews think of rebuilding a physical temple.

But the living stone, this is talked about here, rejected by humans. It's almost a little bit cryptic, isn't it? And in verse 6 of our passage, Peter quotes, it's from Isaiah 28, 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.

And this prophecy, if you look carefully at those words there, can you see that in the first line it's saying, I'm laying a stone, but then it says, the one who trusts in him.

So this stone is a person. That's in the prophecy. It points to Jesus as Messiah, who died and was raised to life, hence living stone.

And then it goes on to say, Now, to you who believe, this stone is precious. But to those who don't believe, the stone the builders have rejected has become the cornerstone.

[5:32] I've thrown a picture in there, and this is not the way we normally build these days, so even if you sometimes get a glimpse of a building site, but in these old buildings that were full of stone, there was a key stone in the corner.

And this stone that the builders have rejected has become the cornerstone, a stone that causes people to stumble, and a rock that makes them fall. And those verses in 7 and 8 are quoting Psalm 118 and Isaiah 8.

And it's said in our passage that they stumble because they refuse to hear the word of God. So there's someone stumbling.

And you picture what was going on here in the time of Jesus. The religious rulers, when Jesus lived, instead of welcoming him with open arms, he didn't fit the plan.

They rejected him. They wanted him put to death. Now you can begin to see this cornerstone that had come, and the builders were rejecting it, putting it to death.

[6:39] But in a sovereign way, God has raised Jesus from the dead. And I do want to just read, I think I need to find this Acts 2. I just want to, this is Peter at Pentecost, telling people, really, what's just happened.

And Acts 2, I just want to read from verse 22 for a bit. You remember the context. The Spirit has just come. People have been talking in other tongues.

People are wondering what on earth is going on. They must be drunk. But Peter says, fellow Israelites, listen to this. Jesus of Nazareth was a man accredited by God to you, by miracles, wonders, and signs, which God did among you through him.

As you yourselves know, this man was handed over to you by God's deliberate plan and foreknowledge, and you, with the help of wicked men, put him to death by nailing him to the cross. But God raised him from the dead, freeing him from the agony of death, because it was impossible for death to hold him. And then I just, verses 32 onwards, God has raised this Jesus to life, and we are all witnesses to it.

[7:56] That was Peter, obviously, at the time. Exalted to the right hand of God, he received from the Father the promised Holy Spirit, which he's poured out, and that's what you'll now see and hear.

So, this stone, the language of this builder's stone rejected, that's become rather important. This is all about what's happened with the Jews, isn't it?

They've rejected Jesus. They thought they'd got rid of him. But actually, he was raised to life. And even though some might ignore him, he is a stone that people will trip over.

So, here's a bit about cornerstones and why they are important, perhaps in old construction, less so the way we do it now.

But if you, I'll just read the bit and then look at the diagram. Historically, it says, the cornerstone was the most important part of any building. The total weight of an edifice, that's a facade, rested on this particular stone.

[8:57] And if it was removed, the other bits would collapse. Perhaps, I'm sure you can build a building so that it's not quite so dependent. But in the way they used to do it, it was a very important stone structurally. It was a foundation.

The cornerstone was also key to keeping the walls straight. Can you see those red and blue and green lines? When that first stone has gone in, the cornerstone first, and now think ahead to where we're going with things coming together.

All these other stones are close to the cornerstone, linked to, become one with, and they get shaped and set to align according to this cornerstone.

Later on, as cornerstones developed, they included details of when built and by whom. Sometimes they were used as a ceremony to remember when things were done.

So then our text goes on. As you come to him, I'm missing out a little bit, and we'll come back to. As you come to him, verse 4, you also, like living stones, are being built into a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood.

[10:10] But I'm thinking just for the moment, for this bit, the spiritual house. So we are a spiritual house. Now, can you get your head around that if you listen to how I was starting and if you perhaps can agree that in some ways we have this weakness, I'm speaking generally in the West, it may be some of us as well, that we think, you know, we can do this largely on our own, and it's wrong because we are meant to be built together.

Let me quote a few texts that support some of this. In 1 Corinthians 3, it says, for no one can lay any foundation other than the one already laid, which is Jesus Christ, fits in perfectly with what we've just been saying.

That particular passage, if you browse on further, it does go on to say, be careful how you build because the work will be tested. And in Ephesians, this is half of it, and you'll see the text when I've got to the end.

Consequently, you are no longer foreigners and strangers, but fellow citizens with God's people and also members of his household built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone.

And in him, the whole building is joined together and rises to become a holy temple in the Lord. And in him, you too are being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his spirit.

[11:48] Now, that's in Ephesians 2. Are you getting some of the excitement of what this picture is? That we come to Christ, it's not just that individual, your sins are forgiven, you're just waiting and you're doing your path.

You are being joined to Christ, joined to one another. But the question largely comes, and this might prompt discussion even later, where I think we all have some problems, I'm sure all churches have some, but where do you find you fit in?

How do you find out where you fit? That's a tricky question. Now, this next bit, I think, is particularly friendly for the children. Now that you've got this idea that church is something like being built into a spiritual house, here's a house.

Any of the children, what can you see in the house? Do you want to tell me something? Bits of a house, Isaac? A TV. Did you see one? Yeah, I think there is one.

Good eyesight, I can just see that. Anything else in the house? Sammy? Table, tennis, table? Bethany? A bed. A bed.

[13:00] There you are. That'll do. I'm going to give you some other ones. A house has many parts. There's a door. If you were a building, if we were being, who'd like to be a door?

Anyone want to be a door? People would just sort of, you keep on, this happens to you a lot, doesn't it? And it sometimes goes, yeah. You could be a door. Who'd like to be stairs?

Yeah? You could be, do you like being walked on? Right? Right? These, there are parts of a chair. Who wants to be a chair? Anyone? Do you like being sat on?

No? We could try that later. A roof? What does a roof do? What does it mean? What do you want a roof for?

Why bother with a roof? Bethany? Stops rain coming in. That's pretty important, isn't it? Because particularly in our country, we get quite a bit of, so roof, yeah?

[14:02] What's that? Isaac? A floor? Anyone want to be a floor? It's not, not the most appealing, is it?

It gets dirty, and it has lots of bugs on it, but it's all, yeah, still part of a house. Now, there's a nice one. Who'd like to be a window? Yeah? Because you can see through it, and it's all crystal clear, yeah, and your people come to you, and they're going, oh, as long as it's not raining outside, and

it's dark and grey.

Now, here's a tricky one. What's that down there? Anyone know? This might not be so easy, Sammy. It's a foundation.

Now, who in a building would like to be a foundation? I can think of two answers to this, and then actually, in our passage, it's quite a tricky one, but yeah, Isaac? Isaac? Yeah.

Okay. It is.

[15:08] It is. Yeah. I can, on the, on the, picturing a building, which part you'd like to be part of, I can think of actually reasons why, if it's buried and not visible, like the cornerstone we saw earlier, might have been a bit grand, but if it's buried and not visible, I think I don't really want to go there.

But, if it's super strong, and everything else sits on it, yeah, I'd like to be one of those, but in the passage, that we're looking at, there is only one foundation.

We've quoted those verses, that there's only one main thing, that we're building on, and that's Jesus Christ. But, foundation is an important part, of a building.

We actually, some of you will know, we're privileged to sometimes, go down to Dunster Beach, where we have some, they're just like timber sheds, but ultimately, a little bit under them, they're just sitting on sand.

And actually, there are rabbits on this beach, and they kind of, sometimes there are a lot of them, and they dig underneath. So, they're cute, but they are the enemy, because they go under the foundations, right, and they give us work.

[16:17] So, any of you who go there again, they're the enemy, don't smile at them, right? So, what in a building, if you just had, three doors, and seven staircases, so I'm going to make a building, and I've ordered, three doors, and seven staircases, because that's all I've got, would it be a house?

Would I be able to make a house, out of that? Anyone, Isaac? Okay, there you are. I put them together, but it's a bit of a mess, really, and it's not a building.

It's not a building. So, all I'm really, trying to, to get through here, is that, there's a question, isn't there?

Who makes the plan, of what goes where? Because when someone, originally made this building, there would have been a plan. Someone would have made windows, someone would have made doors, floors, you know.

And who makes the plan, on who goes where, in God's, spiritual house? Is it the elders? Is it the deacons? Is it God?

[17:33] I think in the, in the way, other pictures, also help us answer this. The picture of the body, in 1 Corinthians 12, it says, there are, similar picture to the idea, of building.

There are different kinds of gifts, but the same spirit. And now, to each one, the manifestation, of the spirit is given, for the common good. To one, there is given, the spirit of the message, of wisdom, and to another.

And then it goes on, there can be a long list, of things that God, has given as gifts, to the body. And, they all work together. But who is giving, these gifts? Who's, it is God, who is giving, each one their gift.

Or in the building sense, helping, you know, we often have, a very specific place, in the whole picture. And then, Colossians 1 says, and he, Christ, is the head of the body, the church.

He is the beginning, of the firstborn, from among the dead, so that in everything, he might have the supremacy. That's in Colossians 1. So that was the idea, of a building, coming together.

[18:44] And I think there are, challenges, on how we, I mean, for one thing, and I state the obvious, even though, we, Wendy and I are at a time, when my work, and I think, makes it challenging, to be, to hear as much, as we would like.

But by and large, it's so important, that we are here, to, because it's the only way, you have a chance, of being built together. So that's the building idea. As you come to him, this is the same text again, but highlighting a different bit.

You also like living stones, being built into a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood. Now we don't often talk about, priests these days. There's an Old Testament priest.

Why did the Old Testament people, need a priest? Isaac again? Yes. Basically like, so, why should, can I, you know, preach, to the Old Testament, mission, or a mission?

Yes. Yes. By and large, the people, did not have access, to God. And the priests, who were from the Levites, they actually had to go through, special ceremonies, to make, themselves, clean, before, as it were, they offered sacrifices, to God, on behalf of the sins, of the people.

[20:07] So they were kind of, an intermediary, that stood between, the sinful people, and I mean, they were sinful themselves, but that's why they went through, in the ceremonies, as it were, dealing with their own sin, before they came to God.

So only the priests, went near God. Now, now go back to our task. You, Peter says, and I think, we have covered this, in the previous sessions, but this is largely Gentiles, he's talking to, isn't it?

In 1 Peter, this is not a Jewish audience. He says, you are, a holy priestess, so he's not just talking to Jews. The key thing, now of course, is that believers, are all priests, and able to, to draw near to God.

One of the roles, that isn't there, is we don't, stand between, sinful people, and God, but, but the thing is, we are able to draw near to God.

That's the thing, we have in common, that there aren't the barriers. You remember, the curtain of the temple, had been torn in two. And I quote, quite an important thing, that invites us to draw near.

[21:19] This is in Hebrews 10. Therefore, brothers and sisters, since we have confidence, to enter the most holy place, that was a part of the temple, by the blood of Jesus, by a new and living way, opened for us, through the curtain, that is his body.

And since we have a great high priest, over the house of God, let us draw near, to God with a sincere heart, and with the full assurance, that faith brings, having our hearts sprinkled, to cleanse us from a, guilty conscience, and having our bodies washed, with pure water.

So, priests these days, if we know roughly, what priests in the Old Testament, did offering sacrifices, and the kind of things they were, grain, animals, that kind of thing.

But it does raise the question, offering, we as priests, these days, offer, spiritual sacrifices, it says that in the text.

Where do we get some help, on what that would be? Well, I can think of two or three things, two or three verses, that help a bit. This is in Romans 12, and very well known.

[22:35] I urge you, says Paul, to present your bodies, your lives really, as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God.

That is your true, and proper worship. So, there's nothing small here. Your whole life, is to be offered back to God, as a living sacrifice.

David, in Psalm 51, very aware of his sin, of adultery with Bathsheba, and having been found out, he says, you do not delight in sacrifices, or I would bring it.

You do not take pleasure, in burnt offerings. My sacrifice, says David, O God, is a broken spirit, a broken, and a contrite heart. You, God, will not despise.

So, this is, this is not a, being a Christian, is not about, keeping all these commands, so that you're, good enough, to, be accepted, and looked on, with favour by God.

[23:41] We couldn't do that. We are seen in Jesus. That's how we pass that test. So, actually, when we have one eye, looking at, the awareness of our sins, and our shortcomings, and then another eye, seeing that God, has wiped it all away, there is this, broken, and a contrite heart, which is so important, so healthy, and David, reminds us, God will not despise it.

And in Hebrews 13, through Jesus, therefore, let us continually offer to God, a sacrifice of praise, the fruit of lips, that openly, profess his name.

Then the last part, of what we're dealing with, is, from, verse 9 onwards, and there are some punchy statements here, about our identity. We go back to that key question, started with, who am I?

Who are we? Are we learning a bit more? We've got the idea of living stones, being built together into a house. I'm hoping we'll just find, a few more things here, that will help us to understand, who we are.

And the first one is, a chosen people. And this is, this is a difficult bit to, understand.

[24:57] And I think, rather than get my words, all muddled up, I'm going to read you something, that helps. Because this is, this is at the root of it, that God chooses, some to be saved. And in essence, by default, some are not.

But let me just read, a little bit of this, to help, put it in a helpful way. So as the church, of the new covenant, is not only a holy temple, and priesthood, enjoying the presence of God, God, it is also, an elect race.

And if that's not a word, you come across very much, a chosen race. The people of God's, own possession, and that's in verse 9. God dwells among his people, because he has chosen them. The heart of the covenant, is God's electing love. The scriptural teaching, of God's choosing, is sometimes questioned, because it is not understood, and sometimes hated, because it is understood.

It can be received, only by faith, for to receive it, one must confess, that God is God. The wonder is not, that God chooses some, and not others.

[26:08] Abel, not Cain, Isaac, not Ishmael, Jacob, not Esau. The wonder is, that God chooses any. Certainly God does not, choose an elite.

Israel is a chosen people, but not a choice people. God's elect have no ground, for pride. And on the contrary, God chooses not the wise, the mighty, or the noble, but the foolish, the weak, the despised.

No one may boast, before him. That's a tricky subject, to talk about, but there is this sense, it's in our text, you, the church, are a chosen people.

And a little part, of Deuteronomy 7 here, is a beautiful, this also gives a little window, into God's heart. The Lord did not set his affection, on you, and choose you, because you were more numerous, than other peoples, for you were the fewest, of all the peoples, but it was because, the Lord loved you, and kept the oath, he swore to your ancestors, that he brought you out, with a mighty hand, and redeemed you, from slavery, in the land of Egypt, from the power of Pharaoh. So that's, that's that one. Now royal priesthood, priesthood I think, we've covered, we've touched on that, but put this word, royal in front of it, what does that make you think? We have royalty, in this country, so why, what would make a priest, different if he's a royal priest?

[27:45] I'll help you, well I've given you, a bit of a hint there, there is this, kingly thing, because Jesus was a priest, and a king, and as we are joined, to Christ, there is a measure, in which we are invited, in the kingdom, to rule and reign, with Christ.

So there is a, a kind of authority, a kingly authority, behind, being joined to Christ, in this spiritual house, a royal priesthood, it really, really elevates it.

We are also, a holy nation, in this phrase. Now the nation, would have meant, a lot more to, Old Testament Israel, that particular geography.

The Old Testament law, set standards, laws, and it required obedience, the people, were also to be holy, like God was. And then, in that culture, when the nation, stayed close to God, they were blessed.

And at that time, other nations saw this, they marveled, I think sometimes, in the wars that went on, they also lived in fear, because if they had, had to come, and do battle, with God's nation, they, they feared this God, because even when they, had small numbers, God could do, all kinds of things, to rout his enemies, and then the last thing, in that, part of verse nine, we are God's, special possession, and I come back, to that thing, we put up before, but he set his affection, on you, to choose you, it was because, the Lord loved you, that he kept his, you see this, special place, that God's people have, in God's heart, the apple of his eye, and deeply loved, I wonder if that, is how you, sense it, is that how you feel, I hope it is, the tricky thing, we do have, is that, is that the world, is bustling, and any one of us, can look at things, that are quite troubling, and we forget, we need to come away, from it, and see, and believe, that we are, this special to God, and although, some of these other problems, don't go away, it does change, the perspective, on them, here's another text,

[30:15] I'll put it all out, so you know, where it came from, this is actually, from Hosea 11, when Israel was a child, I loved him, this is just, the beautiful language, and out of Egypt, I called my son, that's God's, personal name, for his people, I called my son, it was I, who taught Ephraim, to walk, taking them by the arms, but they did not realise, it was I, who healed them, I led them, with cords of human kindness, with ties of love, and then, a little gap, how can I give you up, Ephraim, how can I hand you over, Israel, how can I treat you, like Adma, or like Zeboim, actually cities, that were destroyed, a bit like Sodom, and Gomorrah, my heart is changed, within me, says God, all my compassion, is aroused, I will not carry out, my fierce anger, nor will I devastate, Ephraim again, for I am God, and not a man, the holy one, among you, you get a sense, particularly with a hint, of judgment, that was being meted out, that this God, had such a big heart, for his people, and he really cared, cared for them tenderly, required them, to stay close, and to obey, and there were consequences, very clearly, when they didn't, but he loved them, his special possession, and then our passage, goes on to say, that you may declare, you are a royal priesthood, holy nation,

God's special possession, that you may declare, the praises of him, who called you out of darkness, darkness, and into his wonderful light, now I'm hoping, that you do have a sense, something of that, it's worth, I did pick up, reading around this, darkness to light, is a very clear picture, of coming to God, if you didn't know, I think the Billy Graham, memorial center, over in the US, when someone was trying, to work out, how to make it, make you know, what to do in it, they deliberately, made you, walk from a very dark place, into a very light place, because it just, come, conjured up this idea, but there is a sense, that without God, and without being forgiven, without being, drawn together, and called out, you are just in a dark place, but now, he calls us, 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, and I think particularly, when we have been Christians, for a number of years, it does us well, to remember, a time, before we knew God, and what we were like, because sometimes, at the moment, we think, oh, we're not moving very fast, we're not growing very fast, you know, but actually, compared to where we were, we have received mercy, mercy, and we are now, a people, and the, once you were not a people, almost has echoes,

I think of, the name given to Hosea's, second son, I am I, not my people, so, I'm mostly done, but I just want to bring back, a summary slide, and then we'll sing, a song, who are we, that was the question, I was trying to bring, at the start, and I hope, if you slightly answered it, on the individual way, I hope, that your vision, has changed, we are living stones, being built, into a spiritual house, could be a discussion later, but you know, if we all want to be a door, or an entrance door, or a window, if we all want to do that, the building doesn't work, does it, so, finding where you fit, in the building, is not easy, some of it's to do with, what individuals, think they can do, some of it's to do, with other people, confirming, what they can do, living stones, being built, into a spiritual house, joined to, and built upon,

Christ, joined to one another, being built together, and, I could, I could just, if you picture the way, that blocks go together, you know, a block starts, but you know, it gets worked on, to get the shape right, so it fits, and I think in essence, as we get built together, by God, rough edges get, chipped off, sometimes that might, hurt, I don't mean, stones don't really feel anything, but we do, and when bits are being, changed, so that we fit together better, God knows, where each one fits, and what changes needed, so improve, that fit, so living stones, being built together, we are a chosen people, this is a very high privilege, and it is very undeserved, and never let us think of it, in any other way, don't make the mistake, of thinking, that you know better than God, and how can, some be chosen, and some not, like that part I read, we are not God, we don't understand, the whole picture, but if, if we respond to God, and come to him in repentance, we can enjoy this, it's a high privilege, just remember to be humble, and be glad of it, we are a royal priesthood, in the king's family, and asked to draw near, so if there's any perception with you, that God is far away, and doesn't know, we need to get through that, because we are, we couldn't be, have better access, to God, able to draw near, a holy nation,

I just quote a bit, from Micah, acting justly, loving mercy, walking humbly, just, but that sense, that being part of this building, means you're not just, part of the building, but kind of living, in another way, you're taking on, a likeness of God, and following his ways, God's special possession, has told us who we are, we are his, that we may declare, his praises, it says, so this is who we are, and the challenge, to believe it, and be, who you are, because I tell you, it's easy to say, yes, I agree with all that, but actually, to really live, like this is true, this is true, of his people, but like I was saying, when you walk around, building sites, and remember, that the church is, on earth, is salvation, under construction, any glimpse, of any church, and you could, like if you go, and see a building site, halfway through, yeah, when it's finished, and the scaffoldings, come down, and all the finishes are on, it'll be lovely, but in the middle, of the process, doesn't always look so good, there are things, to trip over, there are problems, it's just, a bit in the nature, of being in the middle, of the process, and that's how it is, but this is who you are, be who you are, and let's enjoy, working it out, together, so I'll finish there,