

Living stones; a royal priesthood: the people of God

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Preacher: Benjamin Wilks

[0 : 00] This morning's reading is from 1 Peter chapter 2, reading from verse 1 to verse 10. 1 Peter chapter 2 from verse 1.

Therefore, rid yourselves of all malice and all deceit, hypocrisy, envy and slander of every kind. Like newborn babies, crave pure spiritual milk, so that by it you may grow up in your salvation, now that you have tasted that the Lord is good.

As you come to him, the living stone, rejected by humans but chosen by God and precious to him, you also, like living stones, are being built into a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood, offering spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.

For in Scripture it 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.

Now to you who believe, this stone is precious. But to those who do not believe, the stone the builders rejected has become the cornerstone, and a stone that causes people to stumble and a rock that makes them fall.

[1 : 17] They stumble because they disobey the message, which is also what they were destined for. But 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. Who are you?

Who are you? It's a simple question, isn't it? A fairly ordinary, everyday question. If somebody asked me, who are you, I guess you get a response something like, Well, I'm Benj, I'm 36, I'm a husband, I'm a father, I'm a church minister.

I imagine your response to that question would be along similar lines, though of course with different details. Who are you? But as this passage we're considering today addresses that question, who are you?

The answer doesn't come as I am, whatever, whatever, whatever. No, the answer comes as we are. We are this people.

[2 : 32] When Peter says here in these verses, you this, you that, this is throughout the passage, a plural you. This isn't a singular, it's as a collective, it's as a community, that God's people are built into a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood, verse 5.

It's together that we are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's special possession, verse 9. So this passage that we're looking at tells us about our identity in collective terms.

And that identity of us as a people, us as a church, that identity is defined on the basis of, defined in terms of who Jesus is and what Jesus has done.

So three headings from these verses this morning. Firstly, Jesus is the living cornerstone. Secondly, Jesus is the stone of division. And then thirdly, we are a chosen priestly people.

Jesus is the cornerstone. Jesus is the stone of division. We are a chosen priestly people. So first up, we see in these verses that they speak of the identity of our Savior.

[3 : 47] We're told here that he is the living stone, verse 4. Whatever human beings might think of him, to God, he is chosen and precious.

And that comes through again in verse 6, as Peter quotes there from the book of Isaiah. And there in verse 6, we then add that language of the cornerstone. There's lots of images and ideas here.

We'll unpack them a little bit together. First of all, Jesus is called here the stone. The fundamental idea, I think, behind this image of the stone is solidity, firmness, immovability.

Rocks are generally pretty dependable, aren't they? Rocks are predictable in their behavior. They don't suddenly up and move to another place.

They don't change their nature. They do what you expect. They're solid and firm. I'm sure a geologist can tell you about the circumstances under which rocks do shatter and fall and erode over the years and so on and so on.

[4 : 53] But our ordinary day-to-day experience, rocks are solid and dependable. And so too here. This is what Jesus meant when he said, on this rock I will build my church.

He builds on a solid, strong foundation. That's what God meant when he said through the prophet Isaiah, I lay a stone in Zion. Something that's going to be there for all time.

Something that's going to be predictable. Something firm on which you can build. Something reliable on which you can depend. The one who relies on it, says Isaiah, will never be stricken with panic.

And here Peter takes that it of the stone and renders it him. Jesus is the reliable stone on which we may depend.

The rock of ages. But not just any stone. Not just a reliable foundation. No, Jesus is the living stone.

[5 : 55] Here Peter's referring to Jesus' resurrection. Jesus is not dead. Jesus is alive. Alive forevermore. We, you and I, we have a living hope according to chapter 1 verse 3.

Why? Because of the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead. We have a living hope because he is a living stone. We come to him and we are therefore built as living stones ourselves into this spiritual house.

And this stone, says Peter, is chosen by God. Chosen before the dawn of time for this very purpose. Chosen to live, to die, and to rise again.

Chosen to be pierced for our transgressions and crushed for our iniquities. Chosen to live an exemplary life. Chosen to die a substitutionary death.

Chosen to rise again as the first fruits of the resurrection. Leading inevitably to the resurrection of those who find their lives in him. Chosen by God for this purpose.

[7 : 04] Chosen and precious to him. Precious here, this is honored, counted as worthy of respect. This isn't kind of precious like a diamond is precious.

This isn't a continuation of the metaphor of the stone. No, this is precious, honored as we say of a person. This person is precious to me. This person deserves honor and praise.

Well, Jesus is honored because of who he is. Jesus is honored because of what he has done. He is precious to God because of his identity as the beloved son.

He is honored by God because of his role as the savior of mankind, the redeemer of his beloved children. Jesus is the chosen, precious, living cornerstone.

So we see him. And yet, yet we see too in these verses that this perspective on him that Peter has, that Peter conveys to the recipients of his letter that I trust we share, this perspective is far from universal.

[8 : 11] Jesus is, secondly in these verses, the stone of division. And this division begins in verse 4. Though precious to God, Jesus was rejected by humans.

It's implied in verse 6, this quotation from Isaiah 28. If the one who trusts in him will never be put to shame. Well, by implication, the one who fails to trust in him does not enjoy that promise.

By implication, such a one who fails to trust in him will, in fact, be shamed. Verse 7 again picks up the division of verse 4. Humanity throughout history, throughout Jesus' life, and especially in the events culminating in the crucifixion.

Humanity, we, the builders, have rejected Jesus the stone. The builders rejected, but God's verdict is decisive, not ours. He has, in fact, become the cornerstone.

We have sort of these rival buildings, if you like. A building created by sinful humanity, and a building created by God himself. And this building that humanity are building, they look at this stone, and say, that is no good at all.

[9 : 25] The stone is rejected. And that same stone that is rejected for building A becomes not just a stone that you can just about get away with in building B, the building that God builds.

No, not just a little stone, you know, that you kind of bury somewhere in the middle of the wall where no one will see it. No, that rejected stone becomes the cornerstone. The stone that defines the whole building.

The stone from which true directions are taken as the building is erected. Remember again, Isaiah 53, 2.

There was nothing in him that would be attractive to us. Nothing in his appearance that we should desire him. No wonder this stone is rejected. He doesn't look like a stone on which you can build anything.

And yet this rejected stone becomes the cornerstone, the stone from which the building takes its shape, the head of the new humanity, the head of his body, the church.

[10 : 26] Peter here, he's quoting Psalm 118. And it continues on from that quotation. The stone the builders rejected has become the cornerstone. The Lord has done this, and it is marvelous in our eyes.

The Lord has done it this very day. Let us rejoice today and be glad. Friends, let us be glad indeed that God has taken that which was rejected and has made it the cornerstone of his plan.

It is indeed marvelous. It is marvelous, and yet it is not universally recognized as such. There are still those who persist in their rejection of the stone.

Though God has taken this stone and used it as the cornerstone, still those who persist in that rejection, still those who try to build their own building without God, still those who find their identity outside of the head.

Verse 8 is the most explicit in our passage. Jesus is a stone that causes people to stumble and a rock that makes them fall. So you have the contrast.

[11 : 30] The promise, verse 6, those who trust in him will never be put to shame, and now the reality for those who do not. They will stumble and they will fall. Isaiah is very explicit.

The preceding verse, he says, the Lord Almighty is the one you are to regard as holy. And this stumbling, this falling, this is the reality for those who fail to recognize the Lord Almighty as holy, who fail to recognize the cornerstone in its true nature.

He becomes instead a stone of stumbling and a rock which causes a fall. As one commentator puts it, Christ is, if you like, kind of laid across the path, the path of humanity in its course into the future.

He's there across the path. You can't escape this encounter with him. And in that encounter, each person is changed. One changed for salvation, and one changed for destruction.

You can't just kind of step over him and go about your ordinary routine. You can't pass around him to build a future. No, the encounter is inevitable.

[12 : 43] And whoever encounters him is inescapably changed by this. Either one sees and becomes a living stone built into the spiritual house, or one stumbles as a blind person over Christ and comes to ruin.

Jesus, says Peter, is this key point of division. Jesus is the decisive factor. Your attitude to Jesus determines whether you stand or fall.

There is no escape from this. There is no neutrality. And we do not like that, do we? We don't like to think about how divisive Jesus is.

It would be much nicer if we could just say everything's good for everyone. But here, Jesus' own works. Here, the consistent witness of both Old and New Testaments, Jesus is divisive.

Jesus is the cornerstone of the building, and Jesus is the rock over which you stumble. Your response to him is the only thing that matters. And Peter says, rejecting Jesus, this isn't somehow a decision kind of outside of morality.

[14 : 00] No, to reject Jesus is itself sinful. It's not that that rejection then leads you to sins because you've rejected the good path. No, the decision to reject is sinful.

Again, it's not a popular thing to say, is it? It was as unpopular then as it is now. In a polytheistic society like they lived in, the idea of one God to the exclusion of others is offensive.

In a secular society that we live in today, the idea of a God who has the right to order how we live our lives is offensive. But Jesus Christ is the cornerstone.

Jesus is the cornerstone, irrespective of how you may or may not respond to him. Whether you bow before him or stumble across him, the cornerstone is he.

And you see here that those who stumble, according to the second half of verse 8, those who stumble do so because they disobey the message. It's this response to Jesus' identity, this response to what Jesus has said.

[15 : 09] Your response in worship or your failure to obey, this is what determines whether you stand or fall. The question is, is Jesus to you the rock of ages, cleft for your salvation?

The one in whom you may hide, is he him or is the message of his death and resurrection offensive? Maybe it's unpleasant to recognize that we need to be saved.

Maybe it's uncomfortable to acknowledge that he's entitled to our obedience as the Lord of all creation. Maybe it's not what you want to hear, but it's the simple truth.

Jesus is the living cornerstone. Jesus is the stone of division. And so if Jesus is this living cornerstone, and Jesus is this stone of division, then in light of that identity, what is your identity?

What is our identity? See, sandwiched around these verses about the identity of Jesus, Peter tells us about our own identity. Verse 5, he says, those who find their identity in him are being built into a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood, offering spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Christ Jesus.

[16 : 28] And then verse 9, the people to whom Peter writes, you and I, as we stand in their shoes, we are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's special possession, that we may declare the praises of him who called us out of darkness into his wonderful light.

Once not a people, but now we are the people of God. Once we had not received mercy, but now we have received mercy. That's a pretty rich description of the people of God, isn't it?

These are amazing descriptions of who we together are. Not so much as individuals, but as the church of Jesus Christ. This is our identity.

This is what Jesus says of his own people. And as he's done through the last few verses that we've seen the past couple of weeks, what Peter's doing here in these couple of verses, he's taking Old Testament passages and ideas, and he's applying them to the church.

Isaiah chapter 43, God calls Israel his chosen people, a people he formed for himself. Why did he do that? Well, there in Isaiah, just as here in Peter's letter, the purpose is praise.

[17 : 50] God is worthy of all praise, worship, and honor, and so throughout history, God has acted to bring glory to himself. He's acted in order to have a people who recognize who he is and recognize what he deserves.

Here Peter says, the purpose of this new chosen people, the purpose is that once again, they may declare praise. The praise of him who has called you out of darkness into his wonderful light.

Now given that precious truth, given that move from darkness to light, how could they not delight to praise him? The people walking in darkness have seen a great light.

The people mired in sin have been lifted up and their feet set upon a rock. The people who were once not a people, who were once isolated individuals and scattered among the many tribes and nations.

These people are now the chosen people of God. The people to whom Peter writes, this is made up of both Jew and Gentile, slave and free. These fundamental dividing lines of the ancient world broken down because of the shalom peace of Jesus Christ.

[19 : 00] Those divisions fall. They become irrelevant as they are built into a chosen people. And so too these divisions fall. We are united.

Never mind America as the melting pot of the nations. Never mind Glasgow as a great multicultural city. No, it is in Jesus that barriers fall and that true unity comes.

See, if we are collectively chosen of God, chosen people, if that's who we are, then we can't be divided from others who confess the same Christ, can we?

It makes no sense. And yet there's more. You are a royal priesthood, verse 9. Again, Old Testament language. Exodus 19, 6, God said to Israel, you will be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.

Maybe you've heard talk about the priesthood of all believers. And this is one of the verses that's sometimes referred to. It's not a new concept in the New Testament.

[20 : 10] It goes back to the Old Testament. Because here, Exodus 19, all Israel were called to be priests. Now, by the way, that means that whilst we affirm that all in Christ are called to be a royal priesthood, it's here in black and white, that does also mean we can't use that argument to reject the idea of ordained ministers in the church.

Some groups have argued that through the ages, that if we're all priests, then we shouldn't have separate ministers. Well, Exodus 19, God says you will be a kingdom of priests. And then a couple of chapters later, sets up a group of priests within that kingdom of priests.

So you can't use that as an argument for what does and doesn't happen in that respect. So that's not what he means by you are all priests.

You're a kingdom of priests. But what is he saying? Well, I think there's two dimensions in view here as Peter calls us to be a kingdom of priests.

First dimension, relationship to God. See, priests, priests have the opportunity to approach God, don't they? Priests come into his presence.

[21 : 19] Israel, and now the church, have this kind of close relationship with God such that their access to him can be called priestly. To call them a kingdom of priests is to say how good their access into God's throne room is.

Now, why do they have that access? Because they're set apart as holy. Peter says in the same breath as calling them a royal priesthood, he says they're to be a holy nation.

If you want priestly access, you have to have the holiness. There's this set apartness that's fundamental to the identity of God's people.

For the temple, there's these special holy vessels, these different things that can only be used for service within the temple.

Set apart for that purpose. Kept pure for the service of God. Those are the holy vessels for use in the temple. God's holy people are to be set apart for his purpose.

[22 : 30] We're his special possession. Not for common use. Not to be sullied by the world. Not to be engrossed in our priorities. But rather to declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his glorious light.

Set apart as a holy nation for that purpose. So, that's the first dimension. Access to God. Second dimension, priests create a link.

Priests are, in some sense, mediators. Now, we have to be careful with that because we know 1 Timothy chapter 2 there is one God and one mediator between God and man, the man Christ Jesus.

We know this. And yet, in some sense, we're still called to mediate, still called to declare, still called to draw in, still called to invite, still called to create this link, if you like.

To invite others into this same closeness of relationship as we ourselves enjoy. Not that we, if you like, remain a conduit for people, but that as a conduit we draw people in to their own relationship.

[23 : 41] We are called to proclaim the excellencies of his name. We declare the praises of God. Why? First and foremost, because he is worthy of it.

Because it is pleasing to him when we do it. Because it is the reason we exist to glorify God. That's the first reason we declare his praise. But there's a second reason too.

We declare his praise also in order to proclaim to the world what he has done. To say, this is who he is. To rejoice at his goodness and thereby show the impact of what he's done.

As we proclaim the praise of God, we bear witness to the world around us. Ed Clowney says this, he says, the heart of evangelism is doxological.

Doxology, perhaps not a common English word, but it's a good word. It's a good one to learn, okay? This comes from the Greek doxa, glory. The purpose of evangelism is to increase the glory of God.

[24 : 44] That's what it's for. The purpose of evangelism is not fundamentally about you or about me or about the people we love and want to see saved. No, the purpose of evangelism is God's glory.

That his name may be praised. The heart of evangelism is doxological. John Piper puts it another way. He says, missions exists because worship doesn't.

Worship is ultimate, not missions, because God is ultimate, not man. When this age is over, when this world passes away, when the countless millions of the redeemed fall on their faces before the throne of God, missions will be no more.

Mission, evangelism, is a temporary necessity, but worship abides forever. Worship is the purpose. Worship is the goal. The purpose of mission, the purpose of evangelism is to produce worship of God.

Evangelism is doxological. We are called to be a holy nation. It means we're called to be set apart, and yet, as a set apart nation, as a holy nation, we still are called to have the world's most generous immigration policy, where absolutely everybody is welcome under whatever circumstances possible.

[26 : 08] All are welcome, and in fact, the key task of this nation is to invite other people to become citizens of it, all to the praise and glory of our God. Evangelism is doxological.

And so here in these verses, these are wonderful promises about who God's people truly are and about the work to which we are called. We have these wonderful promises.

How do they come about? Come back up to verse 4. As you come to Him. As you come to Jesus, as you come to the precious living cornerstone, as you come to Him in truth rather than stumbling over Him, as you come to Him, the inevitable result is that you are built into this spiritual house, that we become this royal priesthood.

It is inevitable that the God who chose Christ and counted Him precious, likewise chooses us as His special possession, that we're built together as the people of God as we come to our precious Savior Jesus.

That's the how as you come to Him. Of whom is this true? Who are this royal priesthood, this holy nation? Who's welcome?

[27 : 24] Well, verse 10 draws on the language of the prophet Hosea. Hosea chapter 1, the prophet is told to name his child Lo-Ami, which in Hebrew means not my people.

Folks, I may not choose the most common of names for my children. I don't think we're going for that one. The people of the northern kingdom, as Hosea writes, the people of the northern kingdom have rejected God.

They've engaged in adulterous relationships with other gods. They've been disowned by God. And as Hosea speaks, Judah, the southern kingdom, they're set to follow in the footsteps of the northern kingdom, to walk that same path of spiritual adultery, rejection by God.

And so, God declares to the prophet Hosea, this is what's coming. You will be rejected. God's precious covenant people, those who were declared years ago to be a chosen people, a holy nation, God says of them, you are not my people.

That's one of the lowest points of all scripture, isn't it? As God says, you are not my people. I don't want you. And yet, it seems, God cannot bear to say it.

[28 : 48] The very next verse he says, yet, the Israelites will be like the sand on the seashore, which cannot be measured or counted. In the place where it was said to them, you are not my people.

They will be called children of the living God. And the end of the next chapter, he declares, I will plant her for myself in the land. I will show my love to the one I called not my loved one. I will say to those called not my people, you are my people.

And they will say, you are my God. It is the most profound mercy, isn't it? The endless benevolence of God. Benevolence not only to those who were never God's people before, but also, according to Hosea, benevolence to those who were God's people, who rejected him, who were rejected by him in turn, even to them, God shows mercy.

God says to those he rejected us, not my people, you are the people of God. I don't really know what better news there could possibly be.

these are wonderful truths for those to whom Peter wrote, to Jew and to Gentile alike, whatever their former status before him, now recipients of mercy, a precious people for his own possession.

[30 : 08] Wonderful truths to those to whom he wrote, and wonderful truths for you and for me. Wonderful truths for us, whatever our prior standing, whatever our background, whatever our former rejection of God's mercy.

This precious promise that if we take refuge in the living stone, he will be to us not a cause of stumbling, but a precious refuge, where we will never be put to shame, where instead, because of the immense mercy of our God who called us out of darkness into his wonderful light, we will have this opportunity to declare the praises of his name forevermore.

Amen.