

A royal people

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[0 : 01] So on the third new moon, after the people of Israel had gone out of the land of Egypt, on that day they came into the wilderness of Sinai. They set out from Rephidim and came into the wilderness of Sinai, and they encamped in the wilderness.

There Israel encamped before the mountain, while Moses went up to God. The Lord called to him out of the mountain, saying, Thus you shall say to the house of Jacob and tell the people of Israel, You yourselves have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how I bore you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself.

Now therefore, if you will indeed obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession among all peoples, for all the earth is mine.

And you shall be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation. These are the words that you shall speak to the people of Israel. 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.

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.

[1 : 47] So the honour is for you who believe, 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 offence.

They stumble because they disobey the word as they were destined to do. 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 marvellous 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.

Beloved, I urge you as sojourners and exiles to abstain from the passions of the flesh, which wage war against your soul. Keep your conduct among the Gentiles honourable, so that when they speak evil against you as evildoers, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day of visitation.

Good morning all. I'm Ben, a member of the church family here at Grace Church. Lovely to see everybody. Let's pray before we hear God speak this morning.

[3 : 20] Heavenly Father, we pray as we come to you to hear your word, to read your word from 1 Peter this morning. Please help us to be both hearers and doers of the word. So as we hear your truth, please excite us all as your chosen people.

Please challenge us. Please change us. And help us to live wholeheartedly for you. Amen. Well, imagine being the proud architect and engineer of the Parisian building, described by highly respected people in these terms.

We protest with all our strength this useless and monstrous building. This building is without doubt the dishonour of Paris.

Everyone feels it. Everyone says it. Everyone is profoundly saddened by it. It's quite tough to hear that, wouldn't it? How would you feel if you had been that proud architect?

It would hurt. Third, the architect having invested so much, finding himself rejected by the establishment, humiliated by brutal comment and opinion, left perhaps ostracised, maybe thinking about giving up, perhaps wondering actually over time if there is some truth in his critics' comments.

[4 : 42] Well, you may remember that the fledgling church that Peter was writing to, we've seen over the last couple of weeks, who are described in chapter 1 as the elect exiles of the dispersion, well, they were similarly isolated and ridiculed.

And maybe they too, humiliated and certainly unimpressive in worldly terms, were considering just hiding away. Maybe they thought themselves, just give it all in, throw in the towel. Perhaps they too were beginning to wonder if there was some truth in their critics' comments. And so Peter writes to them in the passage today with a question. And it's a question for each of us here this morning as well.

Have you built your life on the risen Lord Jesus? If so, you may well be rejected by people around you, but Peter will say, you are in very good company because you have a foundation that will last forever.

You have an incredible identity and an important purpose. So keep going. And Peter starts by saying this, as we come to Jesus, we're being built into God's living temple.

[5 : 58] That's my first point. As we come to Jesus, we're being built into God's living temple. Have a look with me, will you, down to verse 6. We're in 1 Peter chapter 2, if you've moved away from that, page 1220.

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.

Now in Isaiah chapter 28, where this is quoted from, Judah faced a threat from Babylon. And to protect themselves, they turned to Egypt to make an alliance.

But by turning to Egypt, they ignored God's word and were punished. Because the only real place for refuge is Zion, the cornerstone, God himself.

And while other places may have looked secure, it was only in him, it was only in God, they should really have put their trust. So with that in mind, look back then to verse 4.

[6 : 58] 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.

So Peter takes this stone image and shows what Jesus himself has been chosen for. Verse 4, he, Jesus, is the stone. Verse 7, the cornerstone, the most significant one, the most important one to be laid.

God has a building project underway and the most significant block is the chosen and precious Jesus. He's the living stone, the one that died on a cross, who came back to life to live forever.

This, Jesus, is the place of safety and the one to put our trust in. Now, God's building project begins with Jesus, but he continues to build with other matching stones.

Have a look down at verse 5. You yourselves, like living stones, are being built up as a spiritual house. So imagine that Parisian architect or engineer of that criticised Parisian building going to one of the local quarries to hunt for a particular block on which to start his building.

[8 : 21] And he finds one and he punches the air into the light and says, brilliant, this is my cornerstone of this wonderful building I'm going to be building at the centre of Paris. But he doesn't stop there.

He continues to search in that quarry for other similar, smaller blocks with which to build. And that is true of us in the passage today.

We are chosen to be built with Jesus as people stones. But people stones to build what exactly? Verse 5 again, a spiritual house, a temple.

Now, to understand why this would have been encouraging to these marginalised Christians. It doesn't sound particularly encouraging to me to be told you're going to be built up into a temple. But to understand that, we need to look at the role of it as it was back then.

Now, the temple was right at the centre of Jewish life. If we lived in Paris, it would be the equivalent of the Palais de Luxembourg, the La Défense, the Notre Dame Cathedral. All of those things rolled into one because it was the heart of finance and politics and the social life and religion.

[9 : 34] The temple was physically imposing, it was symbolically impressive, and it was spiritually hugely important. Because in the Old Testament, the glory of God moved from the tabernacle during the Exodus to the temple that was built by Solomon.

It was here in the temple that God's presence dwelt. It was here that he came to meet his people. And it was this temple that set the Israelites apart.

After all, who else but the Jews had the presence of God dwelling with them? But at the end of the Old Testament, the glory of God has left the temple.

And we're left at that part of the Bible, the crossover between the Old and the New Testament with a great big question. If God has left the temple, where is he now? Look again to verse 5. You yourselves, like living stones, are being built up as a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood. So where is that temple today? Where is the place in which God's glory dwells, where God meets his people, where God's rule is found and seen?

[10:48] It is us. It's God's people. It's the church. We're the temple. God is dwelling with us. We're the true people of God.

And verse 5, we're priests. As we come to Jesus each day, feeding on and obeying God's word, as we long for that pure spiritual milk that we read about in verse 2 last week, God comes to us. He builds his spiritual house. Wonderfully encouraging words. However, there are actually two building projects taking place.

And the other is being undertaken by those who reject Jesus. Those who, verse 8, look down, disobey the word. And this shows a really significant thing about Jesus. Because Jesus, who, for those who accept him, is the cornerstone, is for those who reject him, verse 8, a stone of stumbling and a rock of offence.

Either we're built on him or we stumble on him and are destroyed. These verses show that we either love Jesus or we hate him.

[12:01] And there is no middle ground. Two weeks ago, as we looked at 1 Peter chapter 1, we saw that all humans worship something. The world builds its own structures, seeking to win praise, seeking to win worship for itself.

But all this will fall and all this will fail. One day, all that will be left is what's eternal. God's building made out of us living stones, his church.

And the question is, are we part of it? Have we built our lives on the risen Lord Jesus? Being part of his building is clearly hugely encouraging for us.

It's wonderful news. But there are serious implications for us because as Jesus is rejected by the world, so are we. Christians are rejected because Jesus is rejected.

However, being built with him also means that, just as in verse 4, Jesus is chosen and precious, we too are chosen, verse 5.

[13:09] We too have the honour, verse 7. We too are precious. And so tempting as it might be for us as we face opposition and rejection from people around us, tempting as it is to interpret that as some sort of rejection from God, in fact, just the opposite is true.

It's actually a very clear sign that we have been built on the cornerstone of Jesus himself. Now, the architect, an engineer, who received such appalling reactions to that building was Gustave Eiffel. And his building, the Eiffel Tower, that so-called dishonour of Paris, was celebrated as the world's tallest building and has since become the most visited paid monument in the world.

Since it opened in 1889, 300 million visitors have been to that building. It's been there for 130 years and while others built in that same year have long since been destroyed, the Eiffel Tower has remained.

The architect Eiffel was vindicated. He was proved to be right and so were we. So look at us here this morning. A relatively small number of us in a rather drab Victorian school hall.

[14:32] It is hardly impressive is it? You're wasting your Sunday mornings, we might hear people say to us. You're worshipping a man-made, a made-up God, we hear others say.

Well, Peter's saying to us, we may well be scorned and rejected, but we're in the company of Jesus. We are, as we heard a couple of weeks ago, the culmination of God's eternal plan with a foundation that will last forever.

And like Jesus, we too will be vindicated, prove right. Well, if there's a chance that the exiles still felt like giving up, Peter then goes on to explain, in short, hammer blows, the way God sees them.

Their new identity, he goes on to explain, an identity that gives them a very clear purpose and a clear mission. And this is my second point.

We are God's chosen people to declare his praises. Look down at verse 9 and 10. Two verses that are utterly packed with Old Testament imagery.

[15:38] 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 marvellous 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. In Isaiah 43, God established for himself a multinational people, a chosen race, who would declare his praises to the world.

In Exodus 19, that we read in our first passage earlier today, God made the Jewish nation a royal priesthood, mediating between God and the world. They were called a holy nation, chosen to reflect the character of God to the world around them.

They'd be a people for his own possession, Isaiah 43, no longer belonging to themselves, but to God himself. And in Haziiah 1, despite their sin and once not being a people, they are now God's people.

We know that what we'll receive as Christians in the future is utterly amazing. In chapter 1, we read that we will receive an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, unfading.

[16:57] But Peter's saying that for Christians, these Old Testament claims describe us Christians today. We may well be deemed irrelevant to those around us, but God has given us the church almost all the blessings promised to Israel in the Old Testament.

What a wonderful motivation to live for him today. But a motivation to live for him not in a rather conceited and smug inward looking way, which it would be tempting to do.

But did you see that these descriptions are of people that exist for the sake of the rest of the world? Verse 9, have a look, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvellous light.

Just as it was Israel's job to declare God's glory, to be a light to the Gentiles, God made us who we are, to show the world who he is.

His aim was to have the world see Israel and think, what a great thing to have a God. And he wants us Christians to do the same thing. And why?

[18:07] Verse 12, so that they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day of visitation. To use Benji's phrase two weeks ago, the grand goal for God's people is to win the worship of the world, to be worship winners.

Search the word Paris into Google images and 99% of the photographs you'll see will show the Eiffel Tower. It's a symbol of the city, an incredible visual advert for the success and wonder of Paris and the country of France.

Gaze on the Eiffel Tower and you see writ large Vive la France, hooray for France. Our task as God's chosen people is to proclaim his marvellous light both to each other and to people around us. And so as we meet here at Rosendale on Sunday mornings, as we sing together, we praise God, we are doing so together who through Jesus, verse 9, brought us out of darkness into his wonderful light.

Christ, as we talk to each other before and after the service, we remind each other that through Jesus, we were not a people, but are now God's people.

[19:26] As we bump into each other throughout the week, we remind each other that once we'd not received mercy, but now, because of the death and resurrection of Jesus, we have received mercy.

And in fact, this is why each week, or most weeks, we have questions for discussion printed at the end of the service sheet. Because when we talk about God's excellencies, not only does it encourage each other, it also has a powerful effect on any unbelievers who are with us, as they overhear declarations about God's goodness in the gospel.

That is why we talk to each other about Jesus and about what we've been learning each Sunday. Look at us here then at Grace Church Dulwich, and people should see a great big living, active, advert for a wonderful God.

They should see writ large, vive Jesus, hooray for Jesus. In the Old Testament, there was a clear distinction between Israel and those living around them.

Keeping Israel geographically distinct and morally distinct was another of God's designs for just declaring how great he was. And this call to live distinctly is made to us too in verses 11 and 12.

[20:41] Have a look down. Beloved, I urge you as sojourners and exiles to abstain from the passions of the flesh which war against your soul. Keep your conduct amongst the Gentiles honourable so that when they speak against you as evildoers, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day of visitation.

As exiles, we should live differently. We should be distinct and holy. Abstain from the passions of the flesh. Why?

Because when we do so, the people around us, even those who see us as irrelevant, those who slander us, those who falsely accuse, verse 12, may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day of visitation.

And so what does this mean if we stop looking different? Well, when Israel compromised, they stopped being a light to the Gentiles.

And when we stop looking distinct, we no longer have anything to say to the world about God. We become indistinguishable and we no longer declare how good it is to be God's people.

[21 : 52] We no longer declare vive jesu, hooray for Jesus. And this does make sense, doesn't it? If we are indeed a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, it would be shocking to live in any other way than that that reflected our previous position through Jesus.

It would, wouldn't it? And so the question is, are we actually different? Do people around us see us as a living, active advert for a brilliant God?

Well, I've been really challenged by this as I've thought about one piece of chapter two over the last couple of months because I recognise just how indistinct I am.

And I think it's partly because like Gustav Eiffel, I'm much happier doing the same things that other people are doing. I don't like to stand out. I don't like to look different. It is much easier for me to fit in to do what others around me are doing.

Here are some of the things I've been considering myself. What about our conversation? Do we engage in conversations about other people we know really we shouldn't be having?

[23 : 06] Maybe, and this is certainly true for me, we should think about our silence in conversation. Are we wrongly silent when we hear of people slandered, when God is maligned?

Is our humour honouring to God? God, at bonus time, or when salaries are reviewed, are we as greedy for gain as the people around us?

What about media? Are the podcasts we listen to, the Netflix programmes we watch, the games we play and discuss, are they honouring to God? Do they make us distinct? And what about drink?

Do we drink as much as people around us? And what about our resources? is what we do with our money, our possessions and our time?

Is that actually distinct from people around us? So what is it, do you think, that non-Christian family members see in our behaviour? How about our colleagues at work?

[24 : 04] Neighbours of ours on the road? What about our schoolmates? Is there really any discernible difference between us and them? Christians here this morning, we are God's living temple.

We're God's chosen race. We're his royal priesthood. We're his holy nation. We're a people for his own possession. Are we, in the battle with our own sin, in the way we live amongst non-Christians, and in the way we speak to each other, consistent with that identity?

Are we a great big living, active advert for God? Well, let's encourage each other to do so and be so. And a word for those here this morning who are not perhaps following Jesus.

Just look back to verse seven and verse eight. The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone, and a stone of stumbling, and a rock of offence.

And so the question for you is, what is your response to Jesus? The famous writer Guy de Montpesson was one of the fiercest critics of the Eiffel Tower, and in fact it was a quote from him that I gave right at the beginning.

[25 : 16] And he said he would rather eat at a restaurant at the foot of the tower, as it was the only place in Paris where he didn't have to look at it. Now does this sound like you and Jesus?

Are you prepared to actually look at him, to consider him carefully? Have you considered what it is you worship? Is it eternal on what is your life built?

Well, let me encourage you to consider the claims of Jesus, the implications of which this passage today are so significant. And let me challenge you after the service today, or day by day, do listen to what Christians say to each other about God's excellencies.

Ask them, your friends, people around you, what makes them so sure of the foundation that they've built their lives on. The claims of today's passage, the claim is that Jesus is the cornerstone of the one single eternal building.

We either live for him, and in which case we want to declare his excellencies as a great big living active advert, despite rejection from the world around us, or we reject him and our stumbling will be eternal.

[26 : 33] Here is a challenge to each of us this morning. Have you built your life? On the risen Lord Jesus. Let me finish with the words of verse 9, and then I'll pray together.

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 marvellous light. Heavenly Father, we praise you for Jesus and for choosing us to be your people built on him, our eternal Lord. Please help us, even when facing opposition, to live lives that declare how wonderful you are.

And we ask that those around us hear about these excellencies, see our good deeds, and do indeed glorify you on the day you return.

Amen.