

# Precious Stones

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Preacher: Paul Barker

[ 0 : 00 ] This is the AM service on the 26th of April 1998. The preacher is Paul Barker.

His sermon is entitled Precious Stones and is from 1 Peter chapter 2 verses 1 to 12. As I said at the beginning we're still preaching through the first letter of Peter you may like to have it open in front of you on page 984 in the Black Pew Bibles, 1 Peter 2.

One of the joys of being single is not being woken up in the middle of the night by a crying, screaming baby. And every now and again when I'm with friends who have crying, screaming babies I give thanks to God that I'm still single.

Many of you will have gone through the experience no doubt night after night just when you've settled into a deep sleep crying, impatient babies urgently wanting some milk or some food not wanting their breakfast at a civilised hour like everybody else eagerly longing, craving for some milk or food.

Well Peter uses the picture of the crying, screaming baby in effect to describe Christian people what we are to be like. He says in verse 2 of chapter 2 like newborn infants crave or long for the pure spiritual milk.

[ 1 : 33 ] And the craving, the longing for is a very intense word. Just like a baby cries out and screams until it receives its food or milk that is to be the same urgency or intensity with which we long for and crave pure spiritual milk.

Not something that we just take or leave or can put on hold till we're ready but something that we want and need now regularly in our lives. We're to have that same longing and craving. Now the object of course is not physical food or milk but rather what's called here pure spiritual milk. Literally the milk is spiritual is in the sense of milk of the word.

That's literally what the word means. Milk of the word. That is talking about God's word. Talking about the Bible. Talking about scripture. For Peter that would have been the Old Testament. For us it's both Old and New Testaments. In the end of the previous chapter Peter has described the word as something that's not perishable but imperishable. It's living and enduring.

[ 2 : 39 ] It was the gospel the good news that was announced to you. That's the word which we are to crave and long for. The Bible. Scripture. The words of the Bible.

And it's to be pure. That is unadulterated. Free from artificial colourings or preservatives or flavourings. Not diluted by something else.

Much of Bible teaching in some churches or in books or on TV or whatever is fairly much adulterated Bible teaching. Difficult bits might be left out or put to one side as being no longer God's word or relevant.

But that's not what Christians ought to teach or to teach or learn or understand. Our understanding of the Bible is that it's pure. All of it.

We aren't to change it. We aren't to leave bits out in our acceptance of what God's word is about. Now why is the Bible to be such important essential nourishing food for us?

[ 3 : 40 ] Peter uses an interesting parallel in the next verse. He says in verse 2 like newborn infants long for the pure spiritual milk so that by it you may grow into salvation if indeed you have tasted that the Lord is good.

We might expect him to say if you've indeed tasted that the word is good. But he says indeed the Lord is good. Because what Peter's conception of the Bible and scripture is about is that it's there that we taste the Lord and his kindness or his goodness.

It's in scripture that we meet with the Lord. So if we are to taste and see that the Lord is indeed good and kind then it's through God's word the Bible that we find that out.

So Peter is suggesting here that these Christian people have already tasted that the Lord is good and that's through scripture through the word that was preached to them that they received as the last verse of chapter 1 says so they are to keep on craving the pure spiritual milk of God through the words of the Bible.

There are many television advertisements that tell us that such and such a product has got the best taste. Such and such a beer is the best tasting beer. That Coca-Cola really has the best taste and Pepsi is not as good and so on.

[ 4 : 58 ] For Christians the greatest taste sensation we can ever have is through tasting that the Lord is good through his word the scriptures and once we have tasted it as Christian people then we will want more and we want to keep coming back almost addicted to this pure spiritual milk the word of God because it is there that we taste that the Lord is kind and good and if we are to grow to salvation if we are to grow to Christian maturity if we are to persevere in our faith and receive the inheritance that's promised for us as Peter has suggested back in chapter 1 verses 4 and 5 then it is by the nourishment of pure spiritual milk regularly in our lives that will keep us in that faith.

Back in chapter 1 Peter said that the inheritance is being guarded for us by God and that we ourselves are being kept for it through faith and that faith is being stimulated and nourished through the word of God.

that's the means by which we ensure our own preservation to the end to receive God's promises. Without the word of God in our lives regularly daily in our lives then our faith will not grow and nourish and be strong to last until that time.

Indeed where there is no spiritual nourishment of the word of God inevitably faith is at best stunted and usually more often is the case it dies.

Sometimes when people come and perhaps express some problems with the Christian faith that they're having their lack of growth or whatever or even perhaps their inability to become a Christian very often they will say something about an intellectual problem that they can't really believe that God's like this or this happened or whatever but very often not always the case but very often the proper diagnosis of the problem is in the end not an intellectual problem about God and Christianity but in the end I find it's often a moral problem that is somebody's practice of life.

[ 7 : 11 ] I remember talking to a young man in England when I was working in the church there who wanted to talk to me about becoming a Christian and he couldn't become a Christian and for a couple of hours we talked about the philosophical problems that he had with God and the nature of Christianity and so on and at the end of it all I felt there was something else going on well I didn't know this person very well and I didn't pursue it but I discovered through a mutual friend sometime later that in the end the reason he wasn't becoming a Christian was because of his own sexual practices it was a moral problem now he may not have realized that but that's what was going on now Peter recognizes that here he recognizes that where there are moral problems in people's lives then Christian growth is again stunted or indeed dies he says that in verse 1 the way the two verses are connected literally in the ancient Greek is not quite what we've got here really it's reading yourselves of five things are mentioned malice guile insincerity envy and slander then like newborn babes keep craving the pure spiritual milk that is as long as there is the immorality of malice and guile and insincerity and envy and slander then there will be no

Christian growth because it stunts it it prevents it from happening now there's a warning surely to us here that if we are to grow as spiritual people as Christian people then we must put aside take off literally like clothes these sorts of things malice is a fairly general term for evil harm for others guile is deceit to other people deception or misleading or lies insincerity is a hypocrisy a pretense of Christian faith where underneath the reality is of something else envy is coveting or desiring something that others have that we don't slander is to speak ill of people to run them down to gossip against people to give people bad reputations whether or not they're deserved where those such things are practiced then Christian growth will not occur we must be careful then if we are to be Christians that two things are going on in tandem one is we're putting aside immorality and two is that we're being nourished regularly sustained from

God's word through our own reading of it through sermons through Bible studies through reading of books books and so on if you don't have a Bible that's in modern English we don't have a Bible at all then tell us we'll get you one because it's that important it's that basic for Christian living if you're not sure how to read the Bible then we can give you some Bible reading notes to do that to help you day by day practice reading the Bible that is feeding on pure spiritual milk if you have a problem in

that area of any sort then please say so because we can help you with that in various ways it's that important we've seen in the last two weeks the Christians are to set all their hope on the grace that God is bringing or Jesus is bringing on the final day and we saw last week how that means practicing holy living and loving one another deeply and now we see that being complemented by these things here to put aside all the things that are wrong and that harm relationships and our relationship with God and to be regularly nourished from the pure spiritual milk of the word of God I don't think in my Christian life I have ever been woken up in my Christian ministry I should say I've ever been woken up in the middle of the night by a parishioner or fellow Christian crying and screaming out for the word of God like a baby now one sense I'm thankful for that but another it makes me question how much are we craving God's God's spiritual milk not just taking it or leaving it or having it in little doses but longing for it earnestly like a baby cries out eagerly impatiently wanting it is that the same attitude we have for it or have we become dulled to its taste the next verses move into a slightly different topic Peter talks about the nature of the Christian church and he does so to encourage his readers we learn here various important things about the church some of which I think are very timely in modern times very very often too often Christians have very weak views about what the church is and what its function is and so verses 4 to 10 are an important corrective to that there are perhaps four key themes that are going on here the first is that Jesus is the key to the church verses 4 and 5 say come to him Jesus that is a living stone though rejected by mortals yet chosen and precious in God's sight and like living stones let yourselves be built into a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ Jesus is the key to the church it ought to be obvious it ought not need to be said he is the living stone he is the one to whom we come he is the foundation stone Peter goes on to say in verses 6 and 7 that is that the church takes all its bearings all its structure all its dependence is on the

[13:00] Lord Jesus Christ any church that is not founded and grounded in practice on him is not a Christian church he is the living stone and we are the living stones being built into him now there's some implications of that one is that membership of the church depends upon our relationship to Jesus Christ not in the end about things like church attendance or whether we were baptized a particular denomination or not church membership mean depends upon our relation to Jesus Christ that we have come to him not to something else that we believe in him as verse 7 says not in something else there are many people who attend churches who are not Christians that's not a bad thing there's no better place for them to be but membership of the church Christ's church depends upon our faith and trust in the Lord Jesus Christ and in the end nothing else we come to him not to something else but we can even develop this point a little bit more the

Jesus to whom we come is the risen Lord Jesus Christ for we come to him a living stone not a dead stone not a dead corpse certainly not a dead Lord he's living he's risen from the dead and we've seen over the last two weeks how essential the resurrection is for understanding this letter of Peter the church is a resurrection being it is founded and grounded in the risen Lord Jesus Christ if the tomb was still full and he didn't rise there would be no church in any age but because he's risen there is a church and because he's alive we have life in him and with him and through him we have been born again through the resurrection and we're born again into him into his life the life of a risen church Jesus uses in these verses the idea of a temple or a spiritual house what he's doing is comparing the Old Testament temple with the New Testament church and he finds in the end the Old Testament temple is lacking it's built with bricks and mortar and stone but the New Testament church is built with living stones rather than other stones and when Jesus himself talked about him his body being the temple in say John's gospel chapter 2 he spoke of it in the context of his resurrection so the church is a resurrection being without the resurrection there's no church without Jesus there's no church a few years ago when I was living in England I visited Durham Cathedral a magnificent building they have an audio visual to tell you about why the church is there and what its history is and for 20 minutes I listened to why Durham Cathedral was there in fact it's one of those videos that just keeps going in a circle and I got in halfway through in the first line it says describe the Reformation as a time when the church was ravaged my shackles sort of rose a little bit in a 20 minute video about why Durham

Cathedral is there and what it does Jesus Christ was not mentioned once the grandeur of the building aside this was a dead church it seemed to me no longer a church of the Lord Jesus Christ because any church must be grounded and founded in its essential being on Jesus and his

resurrection and where that is no longer the case it is no longer a church of the Lord Jesus Christ the second point that Peter's making in these verses is that church is essential for Christians come to him to the living stone being built as living stones into him you can't come to Jesus any other way but with the accompanying being built into the people of the Lord Jesus Christ there's no such thing in the New Testament as an individualistic Christian who has no fellowship with other Christians is not part of a body of Christ anywhere it's not on sometimes people say to me well you don't have to go to church to be a Christian I think they're wrong I think the doctrine of the church in the New Testament is so strong that we are inescapably bound into a church if we are Christian people there is no excuse for not belonging to the church of

Christ here on earth if we are Christian people and taking our church membership and fellowship and teaching and learning and mutual love seriously there is no way out it's not an optional extra for the Christian we are bound into the church of the Lord Jesus Christ in essence for being Christians our modern world is so individualistic in its thinking that it's filtered into Christian thinking about the nature of the church and Peter's words here I think are quite a corrective if we are coming to him to Jesus Christ as Christians then we are being necessarily built into his spiritual house as Christian people you can't have one without the other the third point that Peter is making here about the nature of the church is that the church is people not buildings we've already seen that hinted by speaking of living stones compared to the Old Testament temple some of you will have noticed if you're observant that last year we put up new signs on Doncaster road to announce our presence here part we did that so that we had signs facing both directions but in part it was to give a brighter sign than what was there before and you may have noticed if you're observant the wording Holy Trinity

[18:58] Anglican Church meets here a couple of people commented about that and we debated about it at a vestry meeting the reason for the wording is deliberate it's not that Holy Trinity Church is here that is this building Holy Trinity Anglican Church is us and we meet here so that's the church is people rather than buildings we meet in a building that is often called a church but in New Testament terminology we are the church not the building and that's why the wording was given on that sign on Doncaster road for the church is here when we meet here and not when we're not here now Peter talks about living stones of course the stone isn't living he's using a metaphor he's using picture language to describe what the church is about and in effect he's saying the buildings are inadequate the Old Testament temple is inadequate because the building that Jesus has built through his resurrection is a building of people as indeed Jesus said when two or three are gathered in my name there am I in their midst that's church not where two or three are gathered in a consecrated building especially one that's got stained glass windows and hopefully is hundreds and hundreds of years old there I am but rather where two or three Christians are gathered wherever that may be there I am in their midst you see what the New

Testament teaches about Christians and church is that God dwells in people not places not in buildings he's here now because we're here gathered now in his name but he's not here because of the building he's here because of the people now that's very important in our day and age where somehow in church thinking and Christian thinking people think that there's the church building is a holy place well it is holy in that it's set apart for the use of God but it's not holy in the sense that God's captured within it he's here because we're here not because of the bricks and mortar it's not to say that the buildings are important far from it but it's to say that people are more important because we are the church so Peter's been speaking about the church he said that Jesus is its key that the church is essential for Christians that the church is people and not buildings and fourthly he speaks on refers to the function of the church now so much of the modern church needs to hear again these sorts of words so often the church seems to be confused in the world today about what its function is Peter says in verse 5 that we are to be built into a spiritual house to be and this is the purpose and function a holy priesthood to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ we are a holy priesthood it's not that I'm a priest there's great danger in Anglican terminology I think I think it's one of the weaknesses of the Reformation that they didn't change the name of the Anglican minister to a presbyter or elder or presider or president or something like that because the church we all Christian people are a holy priesthood I'm no more a priest than anybody else and we are all together and I suppose individually in our lives to mediate God to a world that does not know him not my job it's our job all of us for we are all a holy priesthood and we are all called to be priests to this world we are all called to offer spiritual sacrifices not sacrifices to atone for our sin Jesus

sacrifice does that of course once and for all but to offer sacrifices of our lives our prayers our giving our praise as the New Testament says in other places as well in the Old Testament it was the same some of their sacrifices were for sin but others weren't and the same now the sacrifice for sin is done by Jesus on the cross the sacrifices we make are much less by comparison but to do with our whole lives etc but anything we offer as a spiritual sacrifice is only acceptable because of Jesus death for us so the spiritual sacrifices we offer are acceptable to God through Jesus Christ not on our own merit or our own skill but purely they are acceptable in and through the Lord Jesus Christ now this is a statement of great privilege in the Old

Testament the priesthood was a fairly elite group which had the extraordinary privilege of access into the holy place of the temple under certain rules and regulations admittedly but now that privilege and beyond has been extended to every Christian we all have the access and beyond what the Old Testament priests had we have direct access now to God to his throne of grace in and through the Lord Jesus Christ and that's for all of us not for those who are ordained only thankfully in recent years in church life there's been a growing sense of every member of the church being involved in Christian ministry and in effect what's called here Christian priesthood but it's not just the person who's ordained who does it and thankfully in this parish too that's very much evident as so many people are involved in Christian ministry rightly so let me encourage those of you who are not to be involved because you are part of the priesthood of all believers and you are therefore obligated to exercise that responsibility as part of your membership of the church now Peter is not teaching about the church here for the sake of teaching about the church he's not wanting to clarify people's understanding just for that sake the whole purpose of these verses is to encourage Christians who are facing opposition and persecution he does that in a couple of ways he does it primarily by identifying Christians with Jesus Jesus was rejected he says in verses 4 and 7 and so too Christians are being opposed rejected or maligned by others for example in verse 12 as we'll see in a minute but Jesus not only was rejected he was chosen by God and so to a Christians chosen he says in verse 9 Jesus is the living stone Christians are living stones like him Jesus is precious verse 4 and Christians also the same in verse 7 what an encouragement you see that is meant to be for Christians who are struggling and facing opposition where to see Jesus yes he was rejected and opposed and persecuted of course even to death though that's not stressed here but he was lifted up raised vindicated by God now he's precious in God's sight so an encouragement for us who face any opposition or persecution in this fairly hostile world to Christian faith and becoming more so it seems year by year the encouragement is to seek Jesus to cling to him to have our faith and trust in him for we will not in the end be put to shame as Peter says the end of verse 6 Peter also does this by stringing together some Old Testament quotes to encourage his readers verse 6 is a quote from Isaiah see I'm laying in Zion a stone a cornerstone chosen and precious whoever believes in him will not be put to shame despite the thoughts and speeches of the world if we are part of him we will not be put to shame if we believe in him we will not be put to shame so to you then who believe he says in verse 7 he is precious indeed the suggestion of the verse is that we also like him are precious in God's sight but for those who do not believe he now quotes from Psalm 118 the stone that the builders rejected has become the head of the corner yes there was rejection for Jesus but God ignored that rejection and made Jesus the most precious stone there is implication we may face rejection in this world but if we're being built into him in God's eyes we are precious the third quote is in verse 8 again from Isaiah a stone that makes them stumble a rock that makes them fall then Peter says they stumble because they disobey the word as they were destined to do yes there was opposition to Christ and because of that there will be opposition to Christian people as well and the reason there was opposition is because of disobedience it's a moral problem again they disobey they exercise immorality and therefore inevitably as they're destined to do that means they will reject Jesus Christ and find him a cause for offense the encouragement of those verses to Christians is this is all part of

[ 28 : 08 ] God's sovereign plan there was opposition to Christ there will be to you but if you cling to Christ and believe in him you like him will be chosen and precious and not be put to shame in the end by God Peter draws this discussion to a close in verses 9 and 10 but you unlike the unbelievers who stumble and fall you are a chosen race a royal priesthood a holy nation God's own people great statements of privilege great statements of our status before God due to his grace and all of them are terms that come from the old testament for Peter's making it clear here that the Christian church is in continuous line to the old testament people of God of Israel but he's also saying that Israel by and large not not totally but by and large has forfeited its privileges because it has not

placed its faith and trust in the Lord Jesus Christ the people of God you see are those who trust in Jesus Christ and his resurrection from the dead and Christians whether Jewish or not are those people the ancient people of God some of them placed their faith and trust in Jesus and they remained as part of God's chosen people but for those who didn't they forfeited their right there is one people of God and it is those who place their faith and trust in Jesus Christ none other in our world today but the privilege carries the responsibility the reason we are all of those things of privilege is because he says in verse the end of verse 9 in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light privilege with God carries responsibility we are to declare God's mighty acts to the world that was a responsibility that Israel had that they abrogated it they failed to do it we have the same responsibility we're not here as a cozy club we're not here for our own self-fulfillment or egos we are here to declare the praises of God for the world we are here for God's sake not ours we're here for the world's sake not ours in the end something that churches all over the world need to keep in mind day by day well Peter draws out this responsibility in verses 11 and 12 he knows that this is a hostile world he knows that for his readers especially they face opposition so what will it mean for them as church living in the world beloved he says I urge you plead with you as aliens and exiles that is as people whose home is in heaven whose citizenship is in heaven but yet who live for now transiently temporarily in this world I urge you as aliens and exiles to abstain from the desires of the flesh that wage war against the soul we live in the world but we belong in heaven so therefore we are to abstain for the sinful and wrong things of this world the sinful things that he describes there the desires of the flesh doesn't mean sexual sins it's a general term for anything that is wrong in this world we're to abstain from it rather positively we are to conduct ourselves honorably among the gentiles that is a derogatory term for the unbelievers the pagans of the world notice that in the old testament Israel was to be gathered together as a people but now the people of God live scattered in the world amongst the pagan people and in that context we are to live holy honorable lives and the purpose so that though they malign you as evildoers they may see your honorable deeds and glorify God when he comes to judge in the first century the Christians were accused falsely of all sorts of things they're accused of incest because of their

emphasis on brotherly love they're accused of being cannibals because they fed on the body and blood of Christ they're accused of being unpatriotic and treasonable because they did not revere and honor the emperor as other Romans in the empire did indeed ironically they're accused of being atheists because they had no statues and idols in their homes today Christians are also accused of things maybe not those we're accused of being narrow-minded we're accused of being bigoted or hypocrites or wowsers or something like that sometimes sadly those accusations are true often they're not our job is to live such honorable lives in our world that people notice the difference the standards of God rather than the standards of the world are to be how be by how we live and that ought to make such a difference in our world that our world takes notice but notice the attitude to the world that's being inculcated here it's not world denying or world hating or despising or condemning a holier-than-thou type attitude it's not retreating from the world like so many Christian groups in history have done but on the other hand it's not so much identifying with the world that there is no difference either as sometimes seems to happen in Christian churches as well rather the attitude of the Christian to the world is to be world loving and yet at the same time being markedly different from the standards of the world that is not world condemning but rather God commending by behavior and as verse 9 said by speech as well being a Christian in the world in Peter's day and in our day is not easy we are to crave spiritual milk to grow up into salvation so that our lives reflect God and therefore the world will take notice and we're to do that praying and eager that our world converts that it confesses the Lord Jesus Christ on the day when he returns Amen