

Living Stones

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[0 : 0 0] Well, please be seated. You may like to have open the Bibles in the pews at page 984. This is from 1 Peter chapter 2 and it's part of a sermon series on this first letter of Peter that we're going through over the next few weeks.

There's an apology from Rob who was going to preach, so sorry for those who are disappointed, but Rob, his grandmother is ill, so that's why he's not here today. So you've got to put up with me in a slightly croaky voice.

Let's pray. God our Father, speak to us from your word in the Bible this morning, we pray, that our minds may be reformed and our lives transformed, so that we may become more like Jesus, growing in holiness and in faith.

We pray this for his sake. Amen. One of the joys of being single, is not being woken up in the middle of the night by a crying baby.

I must say, I don't often think about that when I'm lying in bed and thinking, oh, I'm glad there's no baby about to wake me up, but it is quite nice to think about occasionally when you sort of see little babies around and we're baptising one later on in the service and so on, thinking, oh, I'm glad that usually I have a decent night's sleep, sleeping through the night.

[1 : 2 5] And no tears, no screams for food, no crying out for milk at 2am or 3am or anything like that. And those who are parents or have been parents of little babies, I guess, probably remember, with gratefulness that it's now over for some of you, those sleepless nights with screeching children, crying out, wanting milk or food at all hours of the night, often with loudness in their scream.

That's the analogy that Peter uses in this passage, applying it for Christians who ought to be like newborn children, crying out for spiritual milk, that is the milk of God's Word.

If we look firstly at verse 2 in this chapter, he says, Like newborn infants, long for the pure spiritual milk, so that by it you may grow into salvation.

If you remember back two weeks at the beginning of chapter 1, Peter said that Christians are born again, a new life through the resurrection of Jesus from the dead. In a sense, he's carrying on that language by saying, If we are born again, then, now, be like newborn infants, crying out for what is in our translation, pure spiritual milk, literally the milk of the Word.

What he means by that pure spiritual milk is the Bible in effect, the Scriptures, the Word of God to us that we now have in the Scriptures that for Peter he would have had fundamentally in the Old Testament alone.

[3 : 0 6] Pure spiritual milk, not some other form of spiritual milk, not God's Word watered down or diluted or with artificial additives or anything like that, the pure milk of God's Word, which for us we find in the Scriptures.

Why is it that Peter uses such an analogy about the Scriptures? You see, they're more than just ink on paper. Rather, the Scriptures are spiritual nourishment and food for us.

Just like physical food nourishes, strengthens and sustains our physical bodies, the Bible as God's Word spiritually, does the same thing for us.

In verse 3 he says, if indeed you've tasted that the Lord, Jesus Christ that is, is good. He's in effect putting together in parallel, reading the Scriptures as our spiritual food and tasting that Jesus himself is good.

And for us, 2,000 years after Jesus' life on earth, fundamentally we come to him or we receive from him or we taste him through the words of the Scriptures.

[4 : 20] So that as we read the Bible, both Old and New Testaments, we are tasting that the Lord Jesus Christ himself is good. For the Scriptures fundamentally are about Jesus in anticipation and explanation and description of who he is, what he came to do and the benefits that are ours from his acts.

So it's through the Scriptures that we meet the Lord Jesus Christ and we taste that he is good. Therefore, we are to crave this pure spiritual milk like newborn infants with eagerness and longing and crying out for it.

Not that I want every member of my church to ring me up at 2am in the morning crying out for a little bit of Bible explanation. There are plenty of tapes. You can do it yourself. But seriously, the eagerness and longing of a new baby for milk and food ought to be the same sort of longing that we have for the Scriptures, the Bible.

And yet sadly, it seems to me too few or too many Christians don't crave God's Word in the Bible. Too few do. It ought to be that for every person who's a Christian that we find our regular, systematic, daily, spiritual nourishment coming from the words of the Scriptures.

That we crave to read it by ourselves with our husbands or wives as a family unit. That we crave to hear God's Word in sermons, in Bible studies and in other things during the week.

[5 : 53] Sadly, so often we spend more time feeding our physical bodies and paying far less attention than we ought to our spiritual lives as well.

Our physical bodies of course will be rotting away in a few years' time. Our spiritual life is for eternity as we saw in chapter 1. So we ought to be investing even more for our eternal destiny than we do for just our physical destiny here on earth.

So we are to crave God's Word for in it that's where we taste that the Lord Jesus Christ Himself is good, that we find out about the salvation that is ours through His death and resurrection, that we grow to spiritual maturity through the Word of God in the Scriptures.

And we're to crave that with the same eagerness and longing as a newborn baby cries out for food even in the middle of the night. One of the things, one of the main things that prevents or hinders or stunts Christian growth is not so much the intellectual problems that sometimes people have about Christian faith.

The main cause of stunted growth is a moral problem not an intellectual problem. That's why in verse 1 that begins this chapter Peter says, rid yourselves therefore of all malice, guile, insincerity, envy and slander.

[7 : 26] Moral things. Rid yourselves of these sins, these failings of human behaviour and character. See, it's moral problems that fundamentally cause spiritual dullness.

And so, if we're not craving God's spiritual milk or if we're not tasting that the Lord Jesus Christ is good, the first port of call to address that problem will be the state of our moral life.

For example, in this selection of verse 1, is there a description of you or me in that? Are we people of malice or guile or deceit, that is?

Are we people who are insincere, envious of things? Whom do we slander? To the extent that those things describe us, they are stunting our growth.

It's a bit like cigarette packets. On them these days they have all sorts of warnings becoming over the years more and more blunt in the warning.

[8 : 31] Cigarettes will kill you. In a sense, we could say the same in verse 1. These moral failings will cause spiritual cancer. These moral failings will stunt your spiritual growth.

These moral failings will kill you. Rid yourselves of them. Put them away. Don't flirt with them. Don't think that you can practice a little bit of guile and malice and envy and it won't harm you spiritually.

Put them away. And in their place, Peter doesn't say now be people of honesty and sincerity. He says, in their place, crave spiritual milk. Sometimes what I find in Christian people is a sort of separation or dichotomy between reading the scriptures and thinking about what is true about God and Jesus and practical living.

And many times over the years in ministry, people have said to me, oh, I don't read the Bible much but I live a Christian life. I practice a Christian life. Peter's putting two things together here that the Bible sits together all the time.

We've got to get our Bible reading, our theology, our thinking about God right, tasting that the Lord Jesus is good, understanding the benefits that are ours through Him so that our lives will be Christian lives, so that we will be people without malice, without guile, without insincerity, without slander and envy and so on.

[10 : 00] So we ought to see our craving of spiritual milk, our thirsting and hungering for the Word of God, not just to be an academic exercise that changes our mind but a practical exercise that flows through to increase moral and holy lives.

That's how the Bible sees it, an added incentive for us to read the Scriptures, to thirst and hunger for them. Now all of this is by way of preparation for Peter now going on to talk more about Christians within the Church.

In effect, to this point in the letter, Peter has been describing and encouraging and challenging individual Christians, that individually we're born again by God's mercy through the resurrection of Jesus from the dead to an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled and unfading kept for us and we're being guarded by faith.

We're born again through the living and enduring Word of God, the end of chapter 1 says and now he says crave that spiritual Word of God's Bible. But now he moves to view the Christian in a corporate way, belonging to a body and again there is a challenge to us here because we live in an era that's come out of the 19th century in particular of a sort of individualistic religion or piety.

For some reason it seems to me a couple of hundred years ago from a public expression of Christian faith there was a movement to become more reserved and private about it so that people would have their communion with God individually.

[11 : 44] The extreme of that I remember from a lady when I lived in England and was involved in a church there who said I've sat next to this person for 25 years I've never spoken to her I'm not going to start now.

But as we see here there is an essential nature for a Christian that we belong together that we belong in church. Periodically people say to me oh I am a Christian I don't go to church.

That's disobedient. Church is not an optional extra. Some people say oh you don't have to go to church to be a Christian. In fact I say you do. Not because you have to go to church in order to become one we're saved by God's grace and mercy.

But church is not an option for Christians and as we see in these verses as well as in so many other passages in the New Testament if we are Christian then by essence we belong together as part of God's church and we're to take that privilege and responsibility seriously indeed.

There are four things that I want to point out in these verses 4 to 10 this morning. In a sense they're all obvious but in a sense they correct our wrong thinking which we drift into so often.

[13 : 01] Firstly that Jesus is the key to the church. It ought to be obvious hopefully it is for many. See in verse 4 come to him that's Jesus the Lord 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.

That is coming to Jesus necessarily involves being built into him as part of his body the church. You don't come to Jesus by yourself and stay by yourself with him.

Coming to Jesus as a Christian means being built as living stones into his body the church necessarily and essentially for Christians.

That is Jesus is the focus through whom the church comes together and is built together. All the bearings come from Jesus indeed in the church.

We see in verse 6 that the scriptures say that I am laying God is laying in Zion a stone a cornerstone chosen and precious and whoever believes in him will not be put to shame.

[14 : 19] One level it's describing using building analogy but it's talking about Jesus as that stone. He's the foundation stone for the church as indeed we sang in the first hymn as well.

So that all the directions the bearings for the church come from Jesus. sometimes people say to me when they're visiting this church oh isn't it a beautiful church and on a good day I might say to them they're lovely and you can see them wondering what?

No the building isn't it beautiful? Ah but the church you see is the people who've come to Jesus. Jesus is the one that establishes the church it's not about buildings which is the next point.

Peter uses building analogy here in verses 4 and 5 living stones built together into a temple and so on but in a sense he's bursting the boundaries of the illustration or the analogy whilst he's using a building as an illustration he's making it clear that the essence of the church is not a building but people so we're living stones not dead stones it's not about timber and windows and bricks and mortar it's about people who've come to Jesus the cornerstone and are themselves the church that's why in our sign on Doncaster Road when we debated its writing several years ago now its Holy Trinity Anglican Church meets here that is this is not the church we are the church we are the living stones that matter we might be inside a building that's set apart for our gatherings and meetings but we are the church the church meets here the church doesn't just sort of sit here empty for a few days during the week we are it when we gather together as the church as living stones on the foundation stone of Jesus so they're the first two points

Jesus is the key to the church and the church is people not buildings so God dwells not in a building in the New Testament and post New Testament time he dwells in people it's not when two or three bricks are put together there I am in their midst it's when two or three people are gathered together there I am in their midst so often Christians get this wrong it's a correction to our thinking we are the church and our foundation is Jesus and indeed without Jesus risen from the dead there'd be no living stones without Jesus risen from the dead every time we meet together on a Sunday we're wasting our time without Jesus as our key and cornerstone without him risen from the dead we are fools for being here this morning we're wasting our time but because he is risen he is the key he is living and what we do is important

[17 : 22] I remember when I was living in England I can tell lots of stories about churches in England I suppose but I remember visiting one of the great cathedrals in Durham a magnificent building 900 plus years old and I've been there many times I guess now in my life for different things I remember at one time sitting through their audiovisual display in the visitors centre and to my recollection going through 20 minutes I guess explaining the building of the cathedral why it's there and all the things that have happened and go on there not once was the name of Jesus Christ mentioned now I found that horrific I think a big oversight it may be an accurate reflection of what does happen there without Jesus the building is a waste of space beautiful even if it is without Jesus our gathering this building is a waste of space and time beautiful and lovely we might be Jesus is our key and it is people who are the church not the building the third point

I've already hinted at is the church is essential for Christians so when verse 4 says come to him a living stone and be built like living stones into him we are seeing an essential connection church is not an optional extra our gatherings on Sunday our involvement in church fellowship our care for each other and so on so often it seems we have a weak view an individualistic piety there's no place for that in the Bible in a sense those three points describe the church the fourth point from these verses describes the function of the church we see that in two places and firstly we see it in verse 5 being built into Christ like living stones we are to be as the end of verse 5 says a holy priesthood to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ firstly the notion of a holy priesthood is in a sense functional it's describing here all Christians not just me the leader or the vicar the person who's ordained as a priest all Christians together as church are a holy priesthood it's not totally the idea of each Christian individually being a priest but the church itself together being a holy priesthood and the notion of priesthood is a mediatorial one the priest would mediate between people and God and so here the priesthood the priesthood of the church mediates God to the world so that we have an outward looking function about us how we do that is not described in this verse but it's it's a healthy corrective that we're not gathering together to be a cozy club for our own benefit entirely but rather there is an outward looking nature a mediatorial role that the church has to be mediating

God to the world related to this priesthood idea comes the expression to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ when we come together we're not offering a sacrifice of a lamb or a goat like they did in the Old Testament it's very much full of Old Testament language this verse but the sacrifices that we offer are our lives our praise our prayer our giving that's how the language of sacrifice is used elsewhere in the New Testament for Christians that our whole being in a sense is offered to God as a sacrifice individually and together as a church when we do that our offering to God is acceptable not because of our own devotion not because of our own piety not because of our own attendance not because of our own morality or noble character our offering of ourselves our praise our prayer our giving to God is acceptable as the end of verse 5 says through Jesus

Christ that is it's because of Jesus death and resurrection our sins are forgiven we are acceptable to God not in our own merit but because of the work of Jesus we are not acceptable to God and therefore any offering we make would not be accepted by him but because of Jesus it is and they are now the purpose of this section this letter indeed as a whole is to encourage Christians who are under opposition and persecution from God and so in order to encourage them in this passage Peter uses striking language to describe the church but language that he uses to describe Jesus also that is he wants to tie closely together Christians and Jesus he is the living stone we're built into him as living stones he is chosen of God we are chosen people as verse 9 I think it is says

Jesus is rejected verse 4 says and later on Peter goes on to say that Christians are the same in his age rejected and maligned by others Jesus is precious verse 4 says so are Christians precious in God's sight and the reason that he's using language that is striking to tie the church or Christians so closely to Jesus is partly to encourage them for they knew well that Jesus suffered unto death on earth but was lifted up in resurrection ascended to heaven vindicated by God no longer a thing of mockery or shame so for Christians who are suffering opposition and persecution as indeed even in our age many do the encouragement is this is for a short time and that like Jesus who was put to death the ultimate of persecution that's not the end of the story there is an eternal life in a heaven that's guarded and guaranteed by

[24 : 04] God for us and so he's encouraging these Christians to endure persecution just as Jesus endured the cross but was lifted up to glory so there is our ultimate living destiny with God and with Christ so in verse 6 using an Old Testament quote he says I'm laying in Zion a stone a cornerstone chosen and precious and whoever believes in him will not be put to shame the temptation for the readers of this letter was that they were ashamed under persecution from their neighbours their town leaders the Roman Empire ultimately Christians will not be put to shame just as ultimately Jesus was not put to shame as well in verse 7 the stone that the builders rejected has become the very head of the corner rejection to place of supreme significance and honour that was the transition for

Jesus from rejection to being the head of the corner so the encouragement is for Christians as living stones built into him we may be rejected but ultimately like him honoured and indeed a reversal will occur so that those who now are persecuting over the church of Peter's day we read at the beginning of verse 8 that Jesus the stone makes them stumble and a rock that makes them fall so that though now the church may be suffering under opposition just as Jesus suffered and rose so will the church be lifted up and vindicated and honoured by God in the end and those who are opposed to Jesus and therefore his church they will stumble and fall be brought down in fact no longer persecuting over the church of God so all of that is by way of encouragement here is a church that has the function of being a mediator of God to the world but a world which by and large rejects the gospel of

God and indeed persecutes God's people we here in Australia enjoy such ease of Christian life by comparison to these Christians of about 60 AD Nero is the emperor in a few years maybe already he'll be openly persecuting Christians already probably in various provinces maybe in Galatia where this letter was written to Christians are suffering some local opposition and persecution we are fortunate in our country but so many Christian brothers and sisters in so many countries around this world today suffer very deep persecution even death for their faith we ought not to dismiss lightly these words we ought to be encouraged ourselves because there will be those who oppose us even in our society but we ought to be praying for encouragement especially for Christian brothers and sisters in other countries who face even death for their faith life the other part that addresses the function of the church comes at the end of this section verses 9 and 10 you are a chosen race a royal priesthood a holy nation God's own people a privileged language indeed borrowed from the Old Testament

Israel now applied to the church of God and the purpose of that is the second half of verse 9 says is in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light and to describe that work of God verse 10 again quoting Old Testament once you were not a people now you are God's people once you'd not received mercy now you have received mercy that's the action of God to take from darkness into light from no mercy to mercy from not being God's people to being God's people the function of the church is to proclaim the mighty acts that is the acts of salvation the acts of mercy the acts of bringing us from darkness to light from bringing us to a position of faith and trust in Jesus Christ to bringing us to a position of a sure and certain inheritance in heaven for us often this verse is used to urge even cajole individual

Christians to share the gospel with their neighbors friends and so on that is to tell people about God's work that's a good thing but probably the key area in which this is describing is in fact in our gatherings as church that we proclaim God's work of grace and mercy that we sing the praises of God together we hear again the act of God in Christ to bring us from darkness to light to bring us to faith in Jesus Christ to bring us to new birth through his resurrection as we sing his praise as we declare that praise yes there is a role for the church and for individual Christians to be instruments of God's gospel in the world of darkness that we live in but there's also a role for the church together to proclaim in praise in statement in Bible reading and so on what God has done for us in Christ the privilege that verse 9 begins with

[29 : 36] Christ the to proclaim and share the mighty acts of God for which we are beneficiaries and mediators for those who are not yet the beneficiaries of God's mercy in Christ well these words here challenge us in all sorts of ways they challenge us in our Bible reading to crave spiritual milk to sustain us and nourish us to maturity they challenge us about our view of the church and the responsibility we have to be active members living stones of Christ's body the church and they challenge us to about being proclaimers and mediators of God's acts of mercy for us in Christ let's pray God our heavenly father we thank you for the extraordinary mercy that you show to us in giving us new birth through the resurrection of

Jesus Christ from the dead and the guarantee of a perfect heaven that you are keeping for us heavenly father we thank you for the privilege of being part of the body of Christ his church and we pray that your living and enduring word will work in us spiritually nourishing us to grow to spiritual maturity developing within us godly behaviour and character that we may rid ourselves of all malice guile and other sin and developing within us a clear joyful and sincere proclamation of your mighty acts for us in Christ we pray Lord God for that for our persecuted brothers and sisters around the world and even sometimes in our own country and pray that they may look to Jesus and be encouraged by his example and his vindication at your right hand in glory father we long for the day when we with all your people will be gathered around your heavenly throne and there singing your acts and praises unhindered forever amen