

Living Stones in a Spiritual Temple

Devotional Reading: Galatians 3:23-29

Background Scripture: 1 Peter 2:1-17

1 Peter 2:1-12

¹ Therefore, rid yourselves of all malice and all deceit, hypocrisy, envy, and slander of every kind. ² Like newborn babies, crave pure spiritual milk, so that by it you may grow up in your salvation, ³ now that you have tasted that the Lord is good.

⁴ As you come to him, the living Stone—rejected by humans but chosen by God and precious to him—⁵ 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. ⁶ 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.”

⁷ 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,”

⁸ and,

“A stone that causes people to stumble
and a rock that makes them fall.”

They stumble because they disobey the message—which is also what they were destined for.

⁹ 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. ¹⁰ 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.

¹¹ Dear friends, I urge you, as foreigners and exiles, to abstain from sinful desires, which wage war against your soul. ¹² Live such good lives among the pagans that, though they accuse you of doing wrong, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day he visits us.

Key Text

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. —1 Peter 2:5

Sacred Altars and Holy Offerings

Unit 3: Christians and Sacrifice

Lessons 10–14

Lesson Aims

After participating in this lesson, each learner will be able to:

1. Identify the stone in Zion.
2. Explain the relationship between Christians as “living stones” and Jesus as “the living Stone.”
3. Propose a way to guard himself or herself against unholy behaviors.

Lesson Outline

Introduction

A. You, the Priest?

B. Lesson Context

I. Sanctified People (1 Peter 2:1-3)

A. What to Abandon (v. 1)

B. What to Seek (vv. 2-3)

II. Spiritual House (1 Peter 2:4-8)

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B. Building Stones (v. 5)

Spiritual Excavation

C. Cornerstone (vv. 6-7)

D. Stumbling Stone (v. 8)

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B. Prayer

C. Thought to Remember

Introduction

A. You, the Priest?

Martin Luther (1483–1546) was ordained as a Roman Catholic priest in 1507. But 10 years after his ordination, Luther began to question the church’s practices based on his reading of the Bible. He eventually led a group to withdraw and form churches independent from the authorities in Rome. In so doing, Luther and his followers abandoned the centuries-old tradition of needing priests for confession and prayer.

Rather than functioning as a hierarchy that elevated some persons (the clergy) above the level of the general membership of the church (the laity), Luther claimed that all Christians were priests. There was no division between the clergy and the laity. Any Christian could minister to another in ways that were seen before as the purview of priests alone. This meant that any Christian could effectively pray for another Christian. This teaching became known as the doctrine of the “priesthood of all believers,” which is still a central tenet of Protestant Christianity. Today’s lesson takes us directly to one of Luther’s guiding texts.

B. Lesson Context

The 27 books of the New Testament include two ascribed to the apostle Peter. The first is particularly rich with citations from and allusions to various Old Testament passages. By one count, 1 Peter is tied for second place with Hebrews for having the highest percentage of verses that reflect Old Testament passages; only Revelation has a higher percentage. As a Jewish man, Peter knew the stories of his ancestors well. We see this in his use of several Old Testament imageries in his two letters.

Peter himself is a perplexing figure in the Gospel accounts. He tended to blurt out whatever was on his mind at the time, sometimes seeming to contradict himself in the process (examples: Matthew 16:22, 23; 26:35; Mark 9:5-6; John 18:25-27). He was impulsive and recklessly bold, often acting before thinking (Matthew 14:22-33; John 18:10). In short, Peter was an apostle to whom we can relate.

I. Sanctified People

(1 Peter 2:1-3)

A. What to Abandon (v. 1)

1. Therefore, rid yourselves of all malice and all deceit, hypocrisy, envy, and slander of every kind.

In this letter's first chapter, Peter described what it means to be "born again," the eternal condition of believers in Christ Jesus (1 Peter 1:23). Now he pivots (*therefore*) to teach about the implications of this new condition: one of having been "purified" (1:22). Changes in behaviors and attitudes are vital.

Those in Peter's original audience had to outgrow the attitudes and behaviors of unbelievers. What comes next in the letter is called a "vice list." There are about two dozen such lists in the New Testament (Galatians 5:19-21; Colossians 3:5, 8-9; etc.). *Malice* carries the sense of evil actions in general. Such actions can be motivated by greed, spite, jealousy, or other moral failings; the resulting action intends to harm another person.

Deceit is an orientation of general dishonesty. *Hypocrisy* characterizes a person who will play whatever role is most beneficial to him or her. *Envy* characterizes a bitter, restless spirit that begrudges the success or possessions of others; envy is the opposite of gratitude, of contentment with what God has given (see 1 Timothy 6:6-8).

Slander is also cited in 2 Corinthians 12:20. Such behavior results from the previous three: a deceitful person who feigns friendship yet works behind the scenes to damage the reputation of others.

What Do You Think?

What criteria should you use to determine which vice is the most troubling to you personally?

Digging Deeper

Who could you ask to be a mentor for you in that regard?

B. What to Seek (vv. 2-3)

2. Like newborn babies, crave pure spiritual milk, so that by it you may grow up in your salvation,

As there are different levels of spiritual maturity, different foods are appropriate for those levels. These are described in more detail in 1 Corinthians 3:1-4 and Hebrews 5:11-6:3. There is nothing wrong with *pure spiritual milk*; it is necessary and desirable for those who are spiritual infants. But its ingestion should lead to something important: *that by it you may grow up in your salvation* (compare 2 Peter 3:18).

The words translated "deceit" in 1 Peter 2:1 and *pure* here are the same word in Greek, with the letter *a* added to the beginning of the second occurrence. This additional letter expresses negation. We often express negation the same way in English (compare the opposites *historical* and *ahistorical*). Thus, human guile and the sincere Word of God are complete opposites.

What Do You Think?

What action must you take to keep growing spiritually?

Digging Deeper

Would an accountability partner help? Why, or why not?

3. now that you have tasted that the Lord is good.

The initial encounter with God's grace is incredible, but God desires His children to progress toward maturity. This advancement involves moving beyond the basic teachings, often called milk, and chewing on the meat of God's Word.

II. Spiritual House

(1 Peter 2:4-8)

A. Living Stone (v. 4)

4. As you come to him, the living Stone—rejected by humans but chosen by God and precious to him—

As you come to him speaks of those who approach Jesus in obedience and worship. Based on what God has done in Christ, believers have the privilege of approaching the throne of God in worship, praise, and petition (compare Hebrews 10:19-22). Thus, Peter has transitioned in his line of reasoning, with the focus now shifting from

the believers to whom Peter was writing to the Lord himself.

This shift in focus comes through using Psalm 118:22, the first of several Old Testament texts cited as support (see Lesson Context). Jesus applied this passage to himself in Matthew 21:42. Peter also used it in his earliest preaching (Acts 4:11; compare Isaiah 28:16; 1 Corinthians 3:11; Ephesians 2:20).

As the focus shifts, so does the metaphor: from infants needing milk to a *stone*. The *living stone* is a metaphor for Christ, the one who conquered death. His death, burial, resurrection, and ascension form the foundation of the Christian faith (compare 1 Corinthians 15:14; 1 Peter 1:18-21). The resurrection confirms Jesus as God's *chosen* Messiah (Acts 2:36). The word *precious* indicates high value.

B. Building Stones (v. 5)

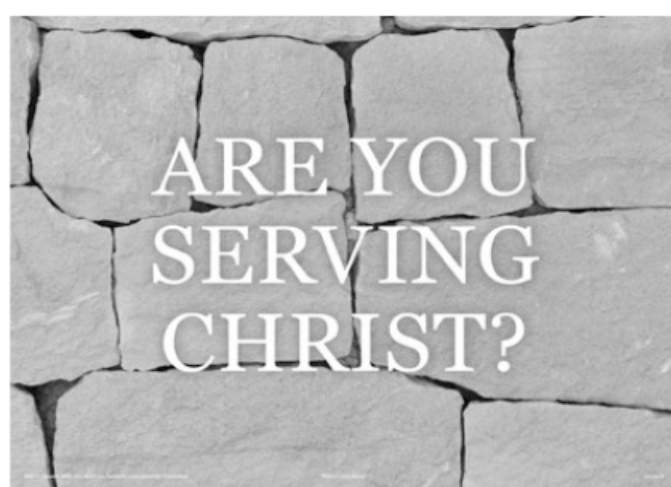
5. you also, like living stones, are being built into a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood, offering spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.

As rapidly as Peter shifts the focus away from his readers, he turns back to them. One stone does not make a building, and God's spiritual house requires numerous other *living stones*. Their identity is not in doubt, as witnessed by the opening phrase *you also*. Peter intended for his readers to envisage *a spiritual house* built of active believers in Christ.

This spiritual stone house is like a temple, where *spiritual sacrifices* are made, and Christians make up the *holy priesthood*. The concepts of priesthood and temple have not been done away with; instead, they have been transformed (compare Revelation 1:6; 5:10; 20:6). Christians do not need the kind of priests the ancient Israelites did, because we now are priests ourselves as we serve under the great high priest, *Jesus Christ* (Hebrews 4:14).

Spiritual Excavation

When we decided to build a fence, my wife and I learned a lesson in Alaskan geology: glacial valleys are densely laden with rocks. The rocky terrain significantly delayed the construction of our fence.



Visual for Lesson 14. Display this visual as you ask, "How are you serving Christ as a member of the 'holy priesthood'?"

Following a day's work that yielded only one hole, it became clear that we needed an auger. We rented one, but it was apparent that we needed something more powerful. An auger mounted on a backhoe proved adequate for our needs. Looking back, I can say that building the fence was easier than preparing the land to receive it.

Before Peter discussed constructing a spiritual house, he first addressed the need to clear the terrain. What needed to be removed were remnants of his readers' sinful nature—things such as malice and hypocrisy. Construction would not be successful for those readers until that clearing occurred. What "terrain" in your life needs to be excavated to ensure your contribution to the building of the Lord's spiritual house? —J. M.

C. Cornerstone (vv. 6-7)

6. 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."

Peter demonstrated the value of *Scripture* as he began to weave together several Old Testament texts. The passage quoted here is Isaiah 28:16. The quote doesn't read quite the same in our English version of Isaiah because Peter quoted from the ancient Greek version of the Old Testament, known as the Septuagint.

Zion, which is Jerusalem (see the words used as parallel expressions in Psalm 102:21; etc.). The

Greek phrase translated *cornerstone* or some variant of it occurs several times in the New Testament (compare Matthew 21:42; Mark 12:10; Luke 20:17).

The first stone laid in construction was the cornerstone. If the structure was to endure, it was essential that the cornerstone be true on all sides and set into the ground so that it was level. The ancients used plumb lines to determine vertical trueness (see Amos 7:7-8) and trays of water to gauge horizontal levelness. A cornerstone needed to be without defects to guard against the potential for cracking. In Isaiah 28:16-17, this spiritual stone is measured to size by a standard of justice (judgment) and set to true vertical by the plumb line of righteousness (contrast 2 Kings 21:13).

7. 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,”

Here, in a quotation from Psalm 118:22, we see the second of the two uses in today’s text of the cornerstone concept. The two occurrences are entirely consistent in identifying this cornerstone as Jesus (compare Acts 4:11; Ephesians 2:20).

This second usage comes with a darker tone. For *those who do not believe*, Jesus is *rejected* as that cornerstone. Their faith is misplaced and mistaken. They are like the man who built his house on the sand rather than the rock (Matthew 7:24-27).

D. Stumbling Stone (v. 8)

8. and, “A stone that causes people to stumble and a rock that makes them fall.” They stumble because they disobey the message—which is also what they were destined for.

The first two phrases are parallel expressions from Isaiah 8:14. In Hebrew poetry, parallel lines often describe one thing by using two synonymous phrases. Thus, the *stone that causes people to stumble* and the *rock that makes them fall* are the same.

How to Say It

Messiah Meh-sigh-uh.
Septuagint Sep-too-ih-jent.

Compare the apostle Paul’s use of this same Old Testament passage in Romans 9:33. In 1 Corinthians 1:23, he is most direct in identifying the crucified Christ as this stumbling block.

III. Special People

(1 Peter 2:9-12)

A. Characterized (vv. 9-10)

9a. But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood,

The phrase *chosen people* draws on the Septuagint version of Isaiah 43:20. The church has not been granted that status because of its accomplishments but because God selected it to be *a royal priesthood* (see discussion on 1 Peter 2:5, above; compare Exodus 19:6). In ancient Israel, those of royal lineage were separate and distinct from those in the priesthood. That changed in the New Testament era. Christians are royalty because of our relationship with King Jesus. Christians are also priests in that we intercede for one another.

What Do You Think?

How will the realization of your priestly responsibilities affect your prayer life?

Digging Deeper

What can you help your church do to better inform its members of their priestly obligations?

9b. a holy nation, God’s special possession,

These descriptions speak of the church as a collection of believers rather than individuals who share the same beliefs. The wording comes from promises given to Israel that God’s covenant people were to be unlike any other people in their dedication and service to him and in his favor to them (Exodus 19:5-6; compare Deuteronomy 7:6; 14:2).

Implied in being *a holy nation* is the obligation to maintain a holy lifestyle (1 Peter 1:15-16). The church is the Lord’s *special*, prized *possession* (Titus 2:14).

9c. that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light.

The characteristics just described come together in their purpose: to show *praises* for the mighty deeds of the Lord (Isaiah 43:21). Peter emphasizes the personal nature of God's actions in that he has *called people out of darkness into his wonderful light*, a key theme in Scripture (9:2; John 8:12; etc.). When Christians fail to use that light to *declare the praises of him*, the countercultural power of the Christian faith is lost.

10. 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.

Peter draws on Hosea 1:6, 9-10; 2:1, 23. These speak of faithless Israel's spiritual adultery. The Gentiles, for their part, had never been God's people just by definition. But in Christ, the reversal for both is completed: followers of Christ are *the people of God* and recipients of his *mercy*. In light of that, no persecution or suffering at the hands of enemies of the cross can ultimately prevail. God's forgiving mercy has allowed rebellious people to be restored so they can minister for the Lord and his church (2 Corinthians 4:1).

B. Challenged (vv. 11-12)

11. Dear friends, I urge you, as foreigners and exiles, to abstain from sinful desires, which wage war against your soul.

As *foreigners and exiles*, Christians are temporary residents of this world (compare 1 Peter 1:1, 17). Given this fact, why indulge in the world's *sinful desires, which wage war against the soul*? Because our citizenship is in Heaven (Philippians 3:20), immoral rules and standards of the world are not to be embraced (Colossians 2:20-23).

12. Live such good lives among the pagans that, though they accuse you of doing wrong, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day he visits us.

The Greek word translated *lives* is a favorite one of Peter's. He uses it eight times in his letters (1 Peter 1:15, 18; 2:12; 3:1, 2, 16; 2 Peter 2:7; 3:11)! Combined with the word *good*, the idea is to give no ammunition to outsiders who want to attack the church for the hypocrisies of its members (2:1). Peter's expressed concern is for the church's repu-

tation and its members in the eyes of Gentiles. He does not mean Christians of Gentile background, but Gentile unbelievers and *pagans*. They should see only the *good deeds* of the church. If they are fair-minded, their disdain will change to admiration, attributing proper conduct to the Lord's influence.

The day he visits may refer to something like the Old Testament's "Day of the Lord," a day of judgment. But another possibility is that it refers to the day the Lord visits an unbeliever with conviction driven by the Holy Spirit.

What Do You Think?

What are some ways you can sanctify your lifestyle so that it stands out more brightly in a sin-darkened world?

Digging Deeper

How do Matthew 5:14-16 and 6:1-4 influence your answer?

Conclusion

A. Who Are We?

This lesson contains important teachings about the nature of the church, but nothing is more important than this: if you are a Christian, Christ calls you to be a "priest" to other believers. That means ministering to and interceding for them without the need to secure permission or credentials. We are members of the kingdom of King Jesus, serving others as he would serve them.

Remember that we are a royal priesthood, ministering to one another. We are a holy nation, those who obediently try to follow God's will. We are redeemed from the curse of death by the gift of his own Son.

B. Prayer

Holy God, we offer our loyalty, obedience, and service to you. May your name be praised above all others, and may you build us into a holy church for your glory. We pray this in the name of your precious cornerstone, Jesus our Savior. Amen.

C. Thought to Remember

Live as God's chosen people.