“A CHOSEN PEOPLE”

1 Peter 2:4–10

Key Verse: 2:9

“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.”

Who are you? It’s probably the most profound question in life. People can achieve many things but still not know who they really are. We try to find our identity in our race, our family, our job, talents or appearance. But none of these things really tell us who we are. Without knowing who we are, no matter how good life may seem, we’re lost. In today’s passage Peter tells Christians of our new identity in Christ. It’s a new identity we share with all other believers. In this study we want to think about Jesus the living Stone, and how he transforms our lives with this new identity. May God open our hearts and speak to us personally through his word today.

Chapter 1 tells us that Peter was writing to Christians who were scattered in various places in Asia Minor. They had to flee to these places due to persecution. They had to leave behind their property, family and friends and live as exiles. It was so painful. Now they were living among people as foreigners, and they seemed strange, not only because they were from another place, but also because their lives were so different. As Christians they refused to conform to evil desires and join in the empty way of life, chasing after material things and fleeting pleasures. They chose to crave the pure spiritual milk of the word of God and feed on it daily. People around them made fun of them and verbally abused them. They could feel ashamed because of their faith, and very lonely. Peter wrote this letter to encourage them. So far, he reminded them of their living hope in Jesus, and how God called them to live a holy life of deeper love. Now, he reminds them of their new identity in Christ.

Read verses 4,5. Here Peter speaks both of Jesus and of Christians. He says Jesus is “the living Stone” and that, like him, Christians are also “living stones.” What does he mean? Verse 4 says that Jesus was “rejected by humans but chosen by God and precious to him.” Our Lord Jesus is the sinless Son of God. He came into this world to shine God’s love and mercy on people lost in sin. It was so beautiful. But he was rejected. Why? Simply because he called people to repent. He didn’t come to give people what they thought they wanted; he came to call people into a real relationship with God. But people didn’t want that. They didn’t want to change. When he didn’t give them what they wanted, they rejected Jesus. He was worthless to them. It wasn’t just a mild rejection. It ended in his being crucified on a cross, left for dead and abandoned. But Jesus was chosen by God and precious to him. God didn’t abandon him to the grave (Ac2:23,24, 27,31). God raised him from the dead and made him “the living Stone.”

What does it mean to us that Jesus is “the living Stone”? It draws on the Old Testament imagery of the rock of salvation (2Sa22:3; Ps18:2; 95:1). David wrote, “…my God is my rock, in whom I take refuge, my shield and the horn of my salvation. He is my stronghold, my refuge and my savior—from violent people you save me” (2Sa22:3). This imagery of a rock is fulfilled in Jesus. Jesus the living Stone is the only one we can always turn to and find refuge and strength. So Peter begins verse 4 by saying, “As you come to him…” We come to Jesus first as sinners. We acknowledge that we’re sinful, wrong and totally helpless and ask him to save us. But it’s not just a once-in-a-lifetime thing. We come to Jesus daily. We keep coming to him each day for his forgiving grace and love, for his strength, his protection and guidance. To come to Jesus the living Stone means we build our lives on him and depend on him, not on ourselves.

What happens to us when we do? Read verses 4,5 again. Several things happen. First of all, it says we also become “like living stones.” We become like Jesus! Wow! How so? It implies we’ll be rejected by humans, but we’re chosen by God and precious to him. Like living stones, we draw strength from his resurrection power and grow in his character. As we do, we become a source of his salvation in this perishing world. People come to us and find Jesus.

When we come to Jesus, Peter mainly says we’re “being built into a spiritual house.” It’s not about a brick-and-mortar building. It means each living stone, each believer, is joined together in community. These believers were scattered in various places, and lonely. But their spiritual reality was much bigger; they were all part of a larger spiritual house. It says we “are being built,” meaning an ongoing process done by God. God is working each and every day to join us in loving community with other believers. Like bricks in a building, we all need each other, and each stone is precious. It’s easy to see a Christian fellowship negatively, focusing on people’s weaknesses and faults. But Peter encourages us to see one another as living stones, crucial parts of God’s house.

What’s the purpose of Christian community? Read verse 5 again. It’s to make us a holy priesthood who offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ. But what does it really mean? First of all, let’s think about priests. Priests are mediators between God and people. If people were not separated from God, there would be no need for a priest. The point of a priest is to bring God to people, and people to God. To do so, he gives people God’s word, and he prays for them. He especially prays for people to find God’s atoning grace in Jesus for their sins. We’re all too familiar with hypocritical priests, but in Jesus we become a “holy priesthood.” As we obey him and are sprinkled with his blood by faith, he sanctifies us by the Holy Spirit (1:2; cf. Ro15:16b). In this way Jesus equips us to really help others. In a loving, Christ-centered community we work together as holy priests who love the world and bring broken and lost people back to God. It’s so beautiful.

It also says we offer “spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.” An important part of the priesthood was to lead people to worship God. Worshiping God involves giving to him. This was the point of making sacrifices in God’s house, to teach people to give to God, to truly thank him and honor him. God never wanted just any sacrifice. God had many specific rules for sacrifices that were acceptable to him. It wasn’t just that God is picky; God is holy. He doesn’t want superficial offerings, but genuine ones. The Old Testament has many instructions on the right offerings. But the whole system of offerings in the temple was fulfilled by Jesus, the Lamb of God, who is the atoning sacrifice for our sins. Receiving Jesus makes us acceptable to God.

But here it says that after believing in Jesus, we still offer “spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God.” What are they? The Bible mentions several. David wrote, “You do not delight in sacrifice, or I would bring it; you do not take pleasure in burnt offerings. My sacrifice, O God, is a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart you, God, will not despise” (Ps51:16,17). A spiritual sacrifice acceptable to God is a true spirit of repentance. Hebrews 13:15,16 says, “Through Jesus, therefore, let us continually offer to God a sacrifice of praise—the fruit of lips that openly profess his name. And do not forget to do good and to share with others, for with such sacrifices God is pleased.” Here, spiritual sacrifices are praising God, doing good and sharing. Romans 12:1 says, “Therefore, I urge you, brothers and sisters, in view of God’s mercy, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God—this is your true and proper worship.” Our main spiritual sacrifice is to offer our bodies not to sin but to God as living sacrifices available for his use (cf. Ro6:13). In Romans 15:16 Paul said he carried out “the priestly duty of proclaiming the gospel of God, so that the Gentiles might become an offering acceptable to God, sanctified by the Holy Spirit.” Here, it’s actually people—non-believers who accept the gospel through us and are sanctified by the Holy Spirit—who also become our spiritual sacrifice.

Today so many people go to church to find a community for themselves. They are looking for peers, friends, fellowship. And that’s good. But ultimately, church is not a place for our needs to be met; it’s a place where we give to God genuinely. It’s where we make spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God—where we repent, praise God, do good, share, dedicate ourselves in daily worship, and share his gospel with people who don’t know him. This is God’s vision of a healthy church that’s pleasing to him. It’s God’s goal in joining us together as living stones.

Read verses 6–8. Here Peter uses three Old Testament quotations to support his point about Jesus. The first one is about the cornerstone from Isaiah 28:16. It’s in verse 6, but “cornerstone” is repeated in verse 7, in the quote from Psalm 118:22. Jesus is the stone the builders rejected, but God made him the cornerstone—the foundational stone for the building. In all three Synoptic Gospels, in his famous parable of the tenants Jesus himself said he is this cornerstone (Mt21:42; Mk12:10; Lk20:17). In the Book of Acts Peter preached that Jesus the cornerstone is the only way of salvation (Ac4:11,12). Paul also taught that Jesus himself is “the chief cornerstone” of the church (Eph2:20).

What does it mean for us to accept Jesus as our cornerstone? Peter says in verse 7 that we “believe” in him, and he is “precious” to us. In fact, he’s most precious. There are so many things in life we consider precious. Precious moments, precious objects, precious places, precious people. But Jesus the cornerstone is most precious to believers. The world doesn’t value him, but to us, he’s more valuable than all the glittering things of this world, all the seemingly impressive people. We each need to make Jesus the cornerstone of our lives.

God promises that when we make Jesus our life’s cornerstone, we will never be put to shame. Shame has always been a big problem for human beings. These early Christians were shamed because of their faith in Jesus. Socially they were treated as strange. As followers of Jesus we still bear the shame and disgrace that he bore (Heb13:13). But we have the ultimate hope of sharing his glory (Ro8:17,18). In the end, no matter how much we’re shamed or despised in this life, God will never let us be put to shame. By his amazing grace God will even honor us along with Jesus his Son in his eternal kingdom. As we hold onto Jesus our cornerstone, we need to believe this promise of God.

Peter’s other two Old Testament quotes here are about those who reject the cornerstone. In verses 7b,8 it says they reject Jesus the cornerstone, and he becomes a stone that causes them to stumble and fall. It’s not like just tripping on a crack in the sidewalk; it’s a permanent, eternal destiny. It also says that rejecting Jesus is disobeying the message. In this letter Peter repeats several times about obeying or disobeying the gospel (1:2,22; 2:8; 4:17). When we encounter Jesus the cornerstone, we can’t just step over him and go on our merry way; we’re confronted with a choice—to obey him or not. Unbelief is disobedience. And unbelief ultimately leads us to stumble and fall spiritually. People may seem to be doing great and enjoying life freely. We may even envy them. But if they’ve rejected Jesus the cornerstone, their end will not be pretty.

Read verse 9. Here Peter comes to a climax, summarizing all of what he’s been saying about trusting Jesus, the living Stone, our precious cornerstone, and about the spiritual house and priesthood he’s building. Unlike those who stumble and fall, we are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation and God’s special possession. All these things are related to one another. Peter is quoting here from Exodus 19:6. When God saved the Israelites from their slavery in Egypt, he had a glorious plan for them to be his chosen people. It was the old covenant. We find in the Bible that the Israelites totally failed because of their sins. But in Jesus God fulfilled this glorious plan for his people. And God included all peoples of all nations—anyone who repents and believes in Jesus. Race doesn’t matter. Social position or gender doesn’t matter. Anyone who receives Jesus becomes a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, and God’s special possession. This our glorious new identity in Christ.

So many people struggle with self-image issues. They don’t like themselves for many reasons, most of which come from comparing themselves with others or trying to live up to society’s standards. People rebel in so many ways, trying to find their own identity, but it ends up leaving them scarred. But God gives us our true identity when we believe in Jesus. We’re chosen by God; we’re his royal priests, his holy people, his special possession. Of course, people around us don’t see us that way. We may look unimpressive, or like nobodies, or even strange. But to God, we’re the apple of his eye. We are so special and precious to him. Really?

We need to accept who we are in Christ. Why? Only when we have this clear identity can we keep on living as his people in the world. We can have a deep spiritual bond with his other people. And based on this shared identity, we can have a clear direction in life. What is it? Read verse 9b again. It’s our new life purpose. We don’t have to be forced; we *want* to tell others how great God is, who called us out of such miserable darkness into his wonderful light. It’s such a free and joyful life that truly blesses others. This new identity doesn’t make us proud or feeling better than others, but so humble and grateful. Read verse 10. This is based on Hosea’s prophecy. In our sin we were not God’s people. But by his great mercy he made us his people. Only as we appreciate how miserable it is not to be his people and not to receive mercy can we appreciate what God has done for us in Jesus.

Read verse 9 again. May God help us to come to Jesus the living Stone, our cornerstone, and deeply accept our new identity in him. And may God help us really join together in our priestly duty to bring his good news to young people in our time, until they can find their true identity in Christ.