

## **God's Call to the Church**

Our second Scripture reading is 1 Peter 2:4-10. Writing to a scattered church facing persecution, Peter emphasizes that the hope we have in the risen Christ. And as God's being saved people, we're part of his spiritual house, the church, with a high calling to fulfill his purpose for us.

Follow as I read **1 Peter 2:4-10**.

<sup>4</sup> *Come to him, a living stone, though rejected by mortals yet chosen and precious in God's sight, and*<sup>5</sup> *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*<sup>6</sup> *For it stands in scripture:*

*'See, I am laying in Zion a stone, a cornerstone chosen and precious; and whoever believes in him will not be put to shame.'*

<sup>7</sup> *To you then who believe, he is precious; but for those who do not believe, 'The stone that the builders rejected has become the very head of the corner',*

<sup>8</sup> *and*

*'A stone that makes them stumble, and a rock that makes them fall.'*

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

<sup>9</sup> *But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people, in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light.*

<sup>10</sup> *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.*

During my tenure as a board member of a missionary sending organization, I recall some correspondence we received from a missionary serving in a particularly difficult region of the world. He and his wife had informed us of their partnership with missionaries from other evangelical churches which, sadly, was not well received by some members of our board, who thought our denomination should be able to win the world to Christ without the aid of any other denomination! But this cooperating missionary countered these objections by saying, "We need each other. Down here, any believer looks good."

I imagine that the believers scattered throughout Asia Minor as "strangers in the world" thought other believers looked good to them. They didn't have the luxury of being exclusive, but rather needed the fellowship and encouragement afforded by a close bond with one another. Although we don't face the same kind or degree of opposition or persecution from the world, we also need each other. Every follower of Jesus should look good to us.

Peter introduced his letter by extolling the riches of God's grace given us through the new birth and also the need we have to grow in our new life in Christ through personal holiness. Just as we are called to a personal relationship with Christ, so are we called just as importantly to a relationship with one another in the body of Christ and to the temple of God, which Peter imagines for us in this text.

Just as we are to seek the Lord himself and feed upon his word (2), so we are to keep coming to him as the living Stone (4). Once again Peter reminds us that we are the Lord's chosen (1:2; 2:4). He had us in mind, Paul says, from before the creation of the world (Eph. 1:4) and took the initiative toward us when we were dead in our transgressions and sins (Eph. 2:1). Just as Christ was despised and rejected by the world (Is. 53:3), so we too share in his rejection by the world. But also, as Jesus was delivered and raised again triumphant over the world, so we are risen with him and await our full deliverance and vindication.

Quoting passages from Isaiah (28:16; 8:14) and the Psalms (118:22), Peter emphatically states that the coming of the Messiah created a great divide among humankind. Christ has come to be the Cornerstone, not just of the nation of Israel, but for all of the people of God, all who are willing to come to him and submit to his lordship. But for those who reject him, Christ becomes "a stone that makes them stumble, and a rock that makes them fall" (8, Is. 8:14). Those who do not come to Christ in repentance, faith and full acceptance of his lordship, must face his judgment and everlasting punishment of separation from God. But Peter expresses God's amazing love and gracious choice when he alludes to the prophet Hosea (1:9f; 2:23) when he says that at one time we were not a people, but are now the people of God, who have received his mercy (10). Just as the Lord called his people into the First Covenant, so now we are blessed to be part of his New Covenant, made possible by the suffering and death of Christ.

We need this awareness of our worth in the eyes of God and also of the inestimable worth of one another. Each member of the body of Christ is precious and dear to him, which should say something to us about the way we must treat each another. Peter uses the image of rebirth by which we come into the heavenly family of God, but also this image of a redemption/ransom price (1:18) which also gives the image of adoption, that we belong to him as his paid-for, adopted children, meaning we are to reflect his likeness (1:13-2:3).

Jesus is the living Stone (4) and we "are like living stones" (2:5). Normally stones are inorganic, but the image Peter gives is stones that are alive and organic, building blocks for the living temple, the church of the Lord Jesus.

No doubt Peter was thinking of his own nickname, "petros," which Jesus gave to him at his calling (Jn. 1:42) and reiterated at Peter's confession of Jesus' messianic identity at Caesarea Philippi (Mat. 16:13-20). At first, when a disciple-learner, Peter was anything but a rock, but eventually, following his reinstatement by the risen Lord (Jn. 21:15-19) and infilling of the Spirit at Pentecost (Acts 2:1ff), he indeed lived up to his name as a solid rock in the building of the church. A young man who bears a likeness to his father, either in appearance or behavior, is a "chip off the old block," using the image of a wooden chip cut from a large piece of wood. In this image, Peter says that we are all to think of ourselves as chips off of the everlasting Block, the main Stone of God's temple, the Cornerstone.

We cannot think of ourselves in isolation from our fellow believers. Our faith is inadequate and possibly even false and pretentious if we separate ourselves

from our fellow believers. Peter says we are called to accept the place Christ has assigned of us in the temple. The temple in the Old Covenant was the place where God met with his people in special assembly and where sacrifices were made in behalf of the people of God. Jesus referred to his own body as the temple that would be destroyed in his crucifixion but then restored in his resurrection (Jn. 2:19-22), and the apostle Paul noted that we are, as the church, the temple where God dwells with a special presence (1 Cor. 3:16). Your body is a temple (1 Cor 6:19) and Dale Heights is a very small and imperfect temple, but nevertheless a temple where God dwells and is at work.

I like the story told about a woman who spoke with the great 19<sup>th</sup> Century London pastor, Charles Spurgeon, explaining that she hadn't become a member of his church because she was looking for the perfect church. He then told her to promise him that if she found it to please not join it. "Why not?" she asked Spurgeon. "Because when you join it," he replied, "It will no longer be perfect."

Although we the living stones are imperfect we are called to accept our place with the Cornerstone. Jesus is the Cornerstone, the most important and the only perfect Stone in the temple of the church. The cornerstone in ancient buildings was the first one put in place and the one that determined the design and orientation of the building, since all other stones had to conform and be true to its placement.

As disciples of Jesus we have come to him and continue to come to him in repentance and faith, and are necessarily brought into relationship with his people, God's temple. Our place is first of all to be under the authority of Jesus as Lord and in line with his will for our lives. Unless we are right with him we cannot be in a good fellowship with others. We must fit next to him and then we can be fitted next to one another.

And Christ's place for us is to be alongside other living stones. Every building stone in God's temple is important, and we are called to be true to one another and in our place. Paul speaks of the necessity of every member of the church when he uses the image of the body of Christ (1 Cor. 12:12-31). Each one of us, whether our gifts are impressive or obscure, must use them for the building and strengthening of the body of Christ. In the same way Peter implies that as living stones we need each other and the temple needs us.

And we must fit together, and accept the place God has for us and be in fellowship and loving unity with all the other living stones. Our part is not dispensable but is essential, even if we remain in the background. I've always been impressed by the work of a good stone mason, who can take different shapes of stones and place them together in such a way that they fit and complement the other stones and make a beautiful and strong wall.

God is the Master Builder, placing us in the wall of his temple, with a distinct place and irreplaceable role in the structure. God sees us each one as essential. Just as Spurgeon reminded the woman looking for the perfect church, we are all imperfect, but God uses us all and has a distinct place for each of us. He has placed us together for a purpose and without you the temple is incomplete because his call is to fulfill his purpose. God has called us

to our place and into his service, to build his temple in a way that will fulfill his purpose and bring honor to his name. And this is done through what we are.

We are to be a holy and a royal priesthood (5,9). In the Old Covenant only those born to Aaron in the tribe of Levi could serve as priests. But in the New Covenant all of us are reborn into God's royal family with the rights and also the responsibilities of the priesthood. Watching the coronation of King Charles of England yesterday, we were impressed by the dignity and solemnity of the occasion. Yet more significant than that in the eyes of God, he's crowned you as one of his royal family of priests, who have direct access to his presence.

First, priests are called and separated from sinful uncleanness and set apart as God's children and servants. We know that in this life we cannot reach sinless perfection but in Christ we stand in his grace as forgiven sinners who daily are being made holy and are becoming more like Jesus. Our first sacrifice we offer as God's chosen priests is the daily offering of our bodies as living sacrifices, holy and acceptable to him, which Paul says is to be our response to his saving grace that has made us right with God (Rom.12:1).

These words must have been of great significance to the uprooted, scattered, rejected and suffering church in 1<sup>st</sup> Century Asia Minor. Although many of them were Gentile pagans, regarded by Jews as outsiders, Peter says they are now part of his chosen people and his holy nation. As one commentator remarked, "Here is the foundational cure for the evils of racism in human society." In our society with different races and cultures, Christ has made us new creations (2 Cor. 5:17) and into a new race, God's chosen people.

Not only that, but they also are ordained, set apart priests. Maybe their citizenship was in question, at least by the local Roman citizens among whom they lived as strangers and aliens. But Peter says they now were citizens of God's holy nation, a citizenship they could never lose. Some of them had been rejected by their families and had forfeited their property and inheritance. But now they belonged to God as his distinct, beloved children and heirs with Christ (9f, cf. Rom. 8:16f).

Before we concern ourselves with what we are to do for God, we need to ask *what God wants us to be* in Christ. We are people redeemed by the blood of Christ, living stones becoming more like the Cornerstone and priests becoming more like the great High Priest, Jesus (Heb. 4:14ff; 7:11ff). Christ has called us to be his children, and as we live as his children and lovingly unite ourselves with other living stones/fellow believers in the temple of God, we are part of a temple that glorifies him.

"The Latin word for priest is pontifex, which means a bridge-builder; the priest is the man who builds the bridge for others to come to God; and the Christian has the duty and the privilege of bringing others to that Savior whom he himself has found and loves" (W. Barclay). And there's a close connection between our being fitted together in love with God's people and our effectiveness as priests who lead the way for others to come to God. Jesus said our love for one another would authenticate to the world that we are his followers (Jn. 13:35). For those of us who have come to Christ the Cornerstone, our part is to answer his call and find the place and fulfill the mission he has for us.

We at Dale Heights are a missional people, each one of us called to be on mission with Christ in our daily life and using ordinary contacts to be a witness and a bridge between unbelievers and God. Our calling is not only to glorify God by our worship, but also to join Christ in seeking after worshipers (Jn. 4:23). As John Piper says, mission exists because worship doesn't. Our ultimate objective is to make disciples who will worship God around his throne.

Warren Wiersbe tells of a contractor in Michigan who "was building a house and the construction of the first floor went smoothly. But when they started on the second floor, they had nothing but trouble. None of the materials from the lumberyard would fit properly. Then they discovered the reason: they were working with two different sets of blueprints! Once they got rid of the old set, everything went well and they built a lovely house."

God is at work, but we need to follow his plans, and here at Dale Heights, and in this post-Christian culture, we realize how much we need each other and must work off of the same set of plans (which might include hosting a reception for our soon-to-be closest neighbors who'll be moving into the apartment building next-door). And it's vitally important that we look at and listen to what God is doing among us (and even next door to us), and whom he has sent to join with us. We must follow his plans for us.

May we all listen and give heed to God's call to the church, his call to us!