

The Living Stones of God's Temple

I Peter 2:4-5

⁴ As you come to him, the living Stone - rejected by men 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. (NIV)

Now, when Rick Steves, that very premier tour guide takes us on a TV tour of Europe, we're exposed frequently in certain parts of Europe to the many majestic and splendid ancient cathedrals. Now, a lot of them aren't as splendid as they were originally, but you are overwhelmed by the architecture and the amazing architectural design and all that's there, and sometimes you see other aspects that just take your breath away. And then when he takes us to Israel, we see the remains of portions of the Old Testament temple in Jerusalem. It too is gone, but my, it was the most magnificent temple ever built. Well, in 1 Kings Chapter 6, we read a description of what that most beautiful and awesome temple looked like. It was splendor beyond splendor in beauty. It was overwhelming. And each stone was meticulously and perfectly hewed and placed by the best stone masons in the Middle East at that time. Then, King Solomon, followed with exact precision and accuracy every detail that God had specifically set for its construction, and it was amazing. Timber from Lebanon and gold from other parts of the world and just wonderful woods and paints and it was just unbelievably awe-inspiring. In the center, the most prominent room was the Holy of Holies - the site where the Ark of the Covenant rested and where God, actually God Almighty, met His people there once a year when the high priest would enter. The sacrifice on the Day of Atonement, that pure unblemished lamb, and the priest would sprinkle that blood on the horns of the altar of the Ark for the payment of the sins of God's people. They are very amazing, powerful and beautiful places where God resided, or at least had His people come to meet Him.

Now as majestic as those cathedrals are today, or were, very much so in Europe, and how significant, spiritual, and vital for the people of God was the temple in the Old Testament, they all pale in significance when compared to the spiritual house made with living stones that the apostle Peter describes for us this morning in this text. Where you see Christians as the living stones are God's true spiritual temple and as His holy priests, they alone can offer continual spiritual sacrifices acceptable to Him.

When I read that and studied this, I said, "My, oh my, what a glorious transforming truth this is to just really have sink in." For instance, just look at the stark difference between the temple in Jerusalem and the temple building that Peter describes. First of all, it is not a physical building, the temple that we're talking about. It is a spiritual building. It is not confined to time and space. It is, in reality, now being built and universal and eternal. It cannot be destroyed by any force or power in the entire universe that would seek to destroy it. It is supernaturally indestructible. It is truly stupendous. It is overwhelming. It is the church where God dwells with His people. It is the living temple of God, and Jesus Christ, the Living Stone, is the eternal foundation stone of this holy edifice.

What's interesting, we know about the foundation, that Jesus is the foundation. But as you hear me talk today, you'll hear about this building being built and the capstone. When that last stone is placed will be the time when Christ returns, it is completed. So, the amazing, rich blessing then for us to be aware of is the fact that if you are one who has placed your faith and trust in Jesus Christ and His shed blood on the cross of Calvary for the forgiveness of your sins, if you rest alone in Him and Him alone for your eternal salvation and the promise of eternal life, then you are one of the vital, dynamic, and essential living stones that comprise this spiritual temple of God. That is a "Hallelujah, Praise the Lord!" moment in a Baptist church. No, I'm sorry. It should be really exciting to you to realize what's happening here, what Peter is telling us.

Now, it will help us as we proceed to differentiate between the visible church and the invisible church because that helps you understand this better. Visible churches are all those churches today, all over the world worshipping God, worshipping God in Christ. I mean, you know, Christian churches all over the world. Now, we know that some people in that church, maybe a lot, are believers, true believers. But, there are some who are not. So, that's the visible church. Both visible Christians who are truly born again, others who are may be there because friends have asked them, they've never been born again or come to know Christ personally, and they're there, just there. The invisible churches are those same churches who trust in Jesus Christ as savior and lord.

All over the world. In huts in Africa. In maybe some of the old cathedrals that they have maybe little services in, in those places. In churches in our country - all over the world. Those men and women, boys and girls who are trusting in Christ, they are the invisible church of the true church of God. They are the invisible church. And, here in this church there are many who are an invisible church. But I know, and we all know as pastors, that there are some possibly here quite surely who are not part of the invisible church. Though, be listening to what God would have for you this morning.

The apostle Peter affirms the fundamental role Jesus, as the foundation of the spiritual temple, has. In verse 6 we read,

⁶ 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. (NIV)

Peter is substantiating the earlier statement that was made in verse 4 as he quoted the fulfillment of the prophecy of the prophet Isaiah. And that's what I want to share - That our Lord Jesus Christ is first of all chosen, elected by God. He is the excellent one. He's God's only begotten Son. Precious to God, rejected by men, the living eternal stone, the life-giving stone, the one who was victorious over death, suffered the powers of Satan and the evil of this world, truly our solid rock, and the foundation and capstone of our holy Christian faith. We, coming to this rock, this living stone by the providential predestined election of God, then become with Him living stones being built into this spiritual house, this holy eternal temple. Thus is the supernatural transformation that takes place when a person accepts Jesus Christ as their savior. They're clothed in His perfect righteousness, they're covered with the perfection of Jesus, they're holy saints and living stones; stones for the master builder Himself. But what is the significance then of all of this? It is the fact that you're being built up into a spiritual house, and here's what we see, and why in verse 5.

⁵ you also, like living stones, are being built into a spiritual house . . . (NIV)

And, the apostle Paul helps us as we read this, as to what is being said here in Ephesians chapter 2, verse 19.

¹⁹ Consequently, you are no longer foreigners and aliens, but fellow citizens with God's people and members of God's household, ²⁰ built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone. ²¹ In Him, the whole building is joined together and rises to become a holy temple in the Lord. ²² And in Him you too are being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit. (NIV)

You see, as living stones you are no longer strangers and aliens to God's people, but are members of God's household. This building is built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets with Jesus Christ as the chief cornerstone. And then, listen to this. According to Paul, we are all joined together as living stones connected to all true believing Christians of all ages past, present, and future, becoming as they become that holy temple. Together becoming a dwelling in which God lives by His Spirit. This house is daily being built up, every part improving, and the whole being supplied in every age as its being built by the addition of those new, true believers who by God's grace become brother and sister living stones - the universal, holy church of God.

You see how blessed we are? In the Old Testament, God dealt with His people in the tabernacle tent in the wilderness. They had the cloud by day and the pillar of fire by night where they knew when the cloud was there over the Ark that they could go and know that God's presence was there. They could come close to Him. And certainly as they saw the fire at night, they had that same assurance. Later, Solomon built the temple in Jerusalem where God dwelt in the holy of holies and His glory as I said, surrounded the Ark of the Covenant. But now, God dwells in the hearts and lives of His people, in His holy sanctuary, and each living stone is chosen by the master builder carefully and systematically being chiseled and molded so it fits perfectly in its preordained place in that growing building, each stone having a specific and vital place in this building. God makes no mistakes where He places the stones. Some have places of significant purpose. Some will be just gloriously just sitting there in some beautiful something or other that just takes your breath away. Some will have lesser places of visibility but will be very vital for that building. And some may be more hidden in areas of support where you might not see them but they're there. But be assured that all the stones are valuable and essential. He says because each stone, every stone is very important and loved by God, extremely important and loved by God, and

cemented together by their common love for one another in their savior Jesus. That's that mystical body which I'll make reference to as we share the Lord's Supper later. Yes, this spiritual temple consists of brothers and sisters from every nation, every tribe, and every tongue, and every effort that Satan and the evil forces of this world apply to the gates of hell to break through those gates, to destroy that building, will utterly fail. They will utterly fail. For in Mathew 16 we read where Jesus boldly declares He is building His church and the gates of hell will never push out of it. The Satanic evil forces will not push out and utterly destroy in any way the temple that I'm talking about this morning. You see, visible churches and denominations may suffer internal divisions, spiritual disruption, and terrible scandal. They may be closed down by the authorities and even burned to the ground. The people of the world may see these things happening in the visible church and laugh and mock our Savior and Lord Jesus. But, be forever assured. The invisible, spiritual church of God is immortal, and it is invincible - immortal and invincible. What is so wonderful and amazing, as I said before, you and I are the living stones in that very special, spiritual building, each one being specifically molded and conformed just like the rock to be the image of Christ, to fit perfectly in the building wherever God places us for His honor and glory. I remember growing up in the Middle East as a young boy, and sitting out of my window and watching these master craftsmen take those pieces of stone, chipping, chipping, chipping, chipping, chipping, and wonderfully taking this funny, terrible, funny looking rock into a beautiful, beautiful piece that fits. And I watched him get up off the ground, you know, he brushes the stuff off, and he carries it over - choooff - perfectly put there as the next is put on. And so, there we are. That's the wonderful thing that He's doing in our lives. And flowing from this exciting and wonderful understanding of Christians as living stones, something else I want to share - a very powerful truth. That Christians, those living stones, are the only holy priests that can offer sacrifices acceptable to Almighty God. And that's in verse 5. So "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."

You know, in the Old Testament, only the priests of the tribe of Levi could offer up the daily sacrifices to God. But now, Jesus Christ our high priest through his sacrificial death has opened the door into the presence of Almighty God to all who believe, who can come forward and bring their sacrificial offerings to worship Him. Peter reiterates that amazing truth in verses 9 and 10.

⁹ But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, 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. (NIV)

And the apostle John, in Revelation chapter 5, verse 10, making reference to the end-time moment when all this is consummated, he says we are priests to serve God forever and ever.

Remember that the sacrifice in the Old Testament included the burning of sheep, goats, bulls, grains, by the Levitical priests in the physical temple in Jerusalem. And the smoke and the aroma of those burnt sacrifices rose from that altar and were beautiful blessing according to the scripture, a beautiful blessing. God was just receiving the sacrifices of his people. And there are numerous references in the Bible, from Genesis to the prophets, who speak of how blessed and pleased God was by the sweet aroma of those sacrifices by his people. Having said that, do you realize you also as priests, the Levitical priests today in God's spiritual temple, have the distinct and honored privilege to offer up spiritual sacrifices that rise to heaven as sweet aroma, blessings to God's nostrils, and he is blessed? That's why many times you'll hear us say in the mornings when we call you to worship, "We're coming now to bless the Lord. He awaits (as we always say) our sacrifice of worship, our sacrifice of our lives." These spiritual sacrifices which we Christians are to offer up to God are our bodies, our souls, our affections, our prayers, our praises, our financial gifts, our services, and all other duties that we're involved in as we live our lives daily in this world. And the writer of the Hebrews assists us, really, at this point in understanding that joyous responsibility. We hear in Hebrews, in chapter 13, starting with verse 15 and 16,

¹⁵ Through Jesus, therefore, let us continually offer to God a sacrifice of praise - the fruit of lips to confess his name. ¹⁶ And do not forget to do good and to share with others, for with such sacrifices God is pleased. (NIV)

See, he emphasizes prayer and praise, and doing good deeds, and serving others. And that's part of our living in this world as we just live on this earth. Certainly our gathering on Sundays to worship God is one of the unique times we together as a body offer praises to God from our heart, our mind, our soul. But also, in times of trouble

and adversity, one would cry out to God with prayers originating deep from within our inner being, of all kinds of doubts and fears and concerns and questions. Where also those prayers are sacrifices honoring to God as we look to him alone in that time of human need. It's interesting that Dr. Spurgeon in one of his sermons demonstrated powerfully the impact of our prayers, the sacrifice to God in His sight. He says this, "God tells us that our call for his help in the hour of distress will be more acceptable to Him than the oblations or the physical things which His own law ordained, or even our other responsibilities - more pleasing than bulls or rams which liberal princes could present at His altar."

So you see? Certainly our faithfulness on a daily basis of living out our faith sacrificially, in using our gifts and talents to do good in our homes, communities, church, and wherever we go and whoever we interact with in our journey of life, is what blesses God. And the reason our spiritual sacrifices are acceptable to God and a blessing is because they're offered on the altar of the final and perfect sacrifice; the altar of the cross where Jesus Christ paid the full penalty, offered the full sacrifice for us. It is vital for us to know that the greatest humility, that the most spiritual of sacrifices of the best men and women who have ever lived or live now are not, can never be, acceptable to God unless they come to our Lord Jesus Christ. It is only as we serve Him, focus on Him, in all that we do because we trust Him and He is in us. God receives those as sacrifices. People who are not Christians, who do not have a saving relationship with Jesus, even though some can do amazing good works, marvelous works – doctors, not Christian, saving people; scientists that bring technologies that save lives. That's wonderful! Praise the Lord! But they'd done it because they do not have a savior and they're seeking to earn their way, and their pride lies in that they felt that this invention, this particular good work, will certainly satisfy a God who, "I know must love me" and hope He does receive it like that. You see, apostle Paul referred to his own good works when he was a devout Hebrew before he trusted in Jesus, was as nothing, filthy rags. Because they were filthy rags, they were unworthy of God's acceptance. Nothing he did was worthy of God's acceptance. He says only the good works that Christians do as they live out their faith in Christ are acceptable to God as true, holy, and sacrificial.

So I hope this morning you have come to realize at the deepest level of your understanding, that if you truly have saving trust in Jesus Christ, you can know for sure that you are a living stone that is being built up, talked about here in this scripture, to be that spiritual temple of God Almighty. And hopefully that knowledge will cause you to reflect on this powerful biblical truth as you live your life daily. May it affect you in ways that will bring honor and glory to the Lord, knowing that as living stones being molded and conformed more and more by the living of life that God ordains to you, whether the most mountain-high experiences or being just in the depths of unbelievable pain and anguish, that your good deeds then, in the midst of this, are spiritual sacrifices - holy, acceptable to Him. As we now prepare to celebrate communion together, may we positively anticipate and expect a powerful move of the Spirit of God upon us to bless us and encourage us in faithful obedience to that responsibility as living stones, His spiritual temple.