

Part 1 of the Series, "Living Foundations for the Church" 1 Peter 2:4-12 by Pastor Bob Stone
Word pictures help us to see, feel and desire. Vividness makes the difference when we are trying to understand spiritual truth. And when it came to communicating through images, Jesus was a master. He used them frequently and skillfully with His audiences to express deep and difficult truths. In the book of John...

He spoke of Himself as a vine that nourishes its branches (John 15:1-5)

He also described Himself as a shepherd who lays down his life for his sheep-10:11.

In addition, He is the One who is a true light in a darkened world-8:12.

In other places He describes Himself as the bread of life-6:35.

I love these word pictures; as a creative person, I respond to them.

Peter followed in Jesus' footsteps and picked up the same manner of vivid speech. This was greatly encouraged by an experience Peter had as one of Jesus' 12 disciples. Peter had made an awesome and accurate acknowledgment of Jesus as the Christ, then Jesus made a statement which obviously affected Peter's life. "And I tell you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it"-Matt. 16:18-19.

What is the disciple Peter in this imagery? (He is called a rock.)

Whose church are we talking about? (Jesus makes it clear this is His church).

How powerful will His church be? (The gates of Hades won't overcome it. The church can go through any barrier because of its power.)

The Message paraphrase of the passage reads,

"You are Peter, a rock. This is a rock on which I will put together my church, a church so expansive with energy that not even the gates of hell will be able to keep us out"-Matt. 16:18-19.

Living Stones

Written by Bob Stone

What powerful pictures these two verses engender. Can you see these images in your mind? The application of this passage, however, has caused some controversy. Some believe that Jesus was saying Peter was the most important disciple, and on him the whole church would be built as its first leader. Paul later interpreted Matthew 16:18 in Ephesians 2:19-22, however, when he said, God's church is (v. 20) "...built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the cornerstone." That passage makes it clear Peter wasn't being made more important than the other disciples or Jesus,

Jesus was speaking prophetically that Peter was only one of the rocks/stones (one of the apostles and prophets) that the church was to be built upon. This image must have made an indelible impression on Peter, because He comes back to this illustration in his letter in 1 Peter 2:4-10. Here Peter elaborates on the church building image.

The Description of Living Stones

This passage very vividly portrays the Christian life as lived in community. We find our life by our union/connection with Jesus, and with the other members of the church. Let's look first at the One who makes this living faith possible.

The Example of Jesus

"As you come to him, the living Stone rejected by men but chosen by God and precious to him..."-v. 4. Let's walk through this passage phrase by phrase. Here we see a description of a living relationship and a living Stone.

A description of the living relationship

begins with: "As you come to him"-v. 4. The language used here does not refer to our initial commitment to Christ for salvation, but to the voluntary, repeated, or habitual coming to Christ for strength and fellowship. For example, the verbs used here are frequently found in Hebrews to portray our "drawing near" to God in worship and communion-Heb. 4:16; 7:25; 10:1,22; 11:6; 12:8,22.

This is a significant description of our connection, as these words underscore the intimacy of our relationship with Jesus. We are not coming to religious activity, but to a Person-the Lord Jesus Christ. A paraphrase might be, "as you repeatedly draw near to God in intimate worship, communion, friendship, conversation..."

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One author said: "No other faith can claim a living founder who has passed through death and has risen to a triumphant station at God's right hand, there to be continually available to the immediate fellowship with each one who trusts Him."

Peter now gives us a very vivid illustration of what our Lord is like.

A description of the living stone

v. 4b-"...the living Stone rejected by men but chosen by God and precious to him..."

He is a stone (lithos). The term "stone" is the usual word used in connection with the construction of a building. In Palestine, structures were commonly made of stone. The term refers to a prepared stone; one that has been shaped for its place in the building. It is not "petros," a loose stone lying in a field or by the side of a road. It is not "petra," simply a rock, in contrast to sand or metal.

The stone isn't any old stone, but the term refers to Christ as One prepared and qualified to carry out the function of a messianic stone. By the way, this is the term Jesus used to describe Himself, too-Matt. 21:42-44; Mark 11:10-11; Luke 20:17-18.

Jesus is not just a prepared stone, He is a living stone. He is not a dead stone, but a person pulsating with life, strength and personality. He is the living stone, not because He is a living person, but because He is alive from the dead. He is a "living stone" because of the resurrection. If we look back at the passage, however, even though Jesus is alive and risen from the dead, the response of so many to Him is rejection.

He is a rejected stone. People have applied their tests to the "Christ stone," but because He failed to measure up to their expectations and demands, they cast him aside as useless. How tragic! That rejection took place first of all by the Jews when they crucified Christ, and now by all who hear the good news of Christ's love, life, and resurrection, and then reject it.

In spite of the hostility to Jesus by some, however, this passage verifies that He is a chosen stone and precious to God. Notice the two key words: chosen and precious.

Chosen. In other words, God the Father is the judge in the matter, and He has chosen Christ (literally to be alongside the Father), to be man's Redeemer.

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Precious. In addition, the Father esteems Jesus as precious, honored, prized, highly valued-the original and consummate precious stone.

That's a beautiful description of Jesus. How about us? What are we described as?

The experience of believers

(It is beautifully described here, too.)

v. 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."

We too, are living stones.

Christ is "the living stone," but all who believe in Him have become living stones as well. We now have a unique nature. Through the new birth Jesus has implanted His own life (stamped His image) into Christians. Jesus said, "Because I live, he shall live also"-John 14:19. As believers, we possess a life like Jesus that will triumph over persecution, pain, rejection and even death itself. We are "living stones"-living now and also for eternity in Christ, but that's not our only experience.

We are being built into a spiritual house.

v. 5-"You also like living stones are being built into a spiritual house."

We are not only living stones, we have a purpose. What are we being made into? Look closely at the words with me. This section is a little tricky and we can't just read through it quickly.

To begin with, notice we are in this together. "You also, like living stones..." The "You" is not singular, but plural and recognizes our existence not only as individuals but also as a living unit. A paraphrase might be: "We all together are like living stones..."

We are being worked on. "...are being built..." The words make it clear we are not isolated stones scattered over a field, nor a jumbled pile of stones. We are collectively being formed into a permanent union with each other, one that is orderly and purposeful. One of my favorite descriptions of the church is we are "individually important, but collectively joined and

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dependent on each other."

This explains why it isn't "just Jesus and me." We are being built into something individually and collectively: Individually, we are made new because of the work of Christ and we being shaped and arranged to fulfill our assigned task. All the individual work also has a collective purpose, however-being built into something together.

At my last high school reunion I attended, I was asked to pray and say a few words. Prior to that I went to the Wenatchee River and picked up a couple of river stones-one with jagged edges and the other very smooth. I shared with them that when we were in school together, we were like this sharp stone with a lot of sharp edges, but since that graduation in 1963, we were being shaped by the river of life.

In other words, all the experiences we had lived through had shaped us and knocked off most of our rough edges, and we were more like the rounded river rock if we had reacted properly to the waves and experiences we had gone through. I concluded by saying all of these sometimes turbulent experiences would be used to prepare us for eternity. The final question was, would we be ready when the Lord of the river calls us home. The ultimate reunion would be with God in eternity!

Now, I only had a few minutes, so I didn't say anything else. But in the Christian context my illustration didn't go far enough. As believers who are already "living stones," being built means two things:

Individually we are being built up by the master builder.

As individuals, we are working together to build others up as well.

There is controversy concerning this verse. The questions are:

Are we to build ourselves up?

Is Jesus sovereignly building us apart from human assistance?

Or are we to be building others up?

I have no problem with saying it is all three. Jude says, "Build yourself up in the most holy faith"-Jude 20. Jesus says, "I will build my church"-Matt. 16:18. Ephesians 4:16 says: "From him the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work."

I am built up in the faith as God sovereignly masterminds my building up, which in turn enables me—by God's gifts of grace—to build others up. We are being shaped, arranged and built by the Lord according to His purposeful plan, but part of our Lord's building plan involves our labor and ministry to each other in order to complete the task.

It's like a building program where a contractor, volunteer help, and finances are needed to complete it. We as a church look to God for the resources we need financially. We expect, however, that He will provide these resources through us, and we give as He is giving to us. We will, however, see our people and facility building plan completed only as we all work together and everyone participates in the way God enables them.

Summary? We work as He works in us and enables us to work together.

An illustration of this process happened when Nancy and I were youth pastors in Poulsbo and lived in a house that was to be remodeled. We didn't know, however, how soon they would start. One morning we woke up and the wall behind our bed was being removed in order to put in a rock fireplace. We screamed and ran for cover. From that point on, each night as we went to bed we could see the work that the stone mason had completed that day. I was very impressed at how he carefully selected each stone to fit securely to the next one. Some of the time he had to take out his mallet and chip a corner here and there in order for the stones to fit.

Likewise, as we work, He works and we work together:

This house is a people church. 1 Tim. 3:15—"If I am delayed, you will know how people ought to conduct themselves in God's household, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and foundation of the truth."

This is a house—a "people" building devoted to the worship of God. This is spiritual work, but in order for us to carry it out, there needs to be a material house to enable it. This church as a spiritual house is capable of indefinite growth, with no limitations on how big the spiritual house should be. As a complement to the spiritual house, however, there must be ministry and material growth. We will all have to serve; we will all have to give.

This is also a spiritual house of stones being made by the Spirit; and together they form a house where the Holy Spirit dwells.

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1 Cor. 3:16-"Don't you know that you (plural) yourselves are God's temple and that God's Spirit lives in you?"

Eph. 2:22-"And in him you (plural) too are being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit."

Peter refines the image even further with the next description:

We are being built into a holy priesthood.

"...into a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood, offering spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ"-v. 5b.

This habitation of God actively serves as a spiritual temple, and this spiritual house functions as a place for a holy priesthood. The idea is that those who make up the house also function as priests. The living stones joined and fit together serve as the priests of the spiritual house.

This verse is basic to the belief that all believers are priests, i.e., the priesthood of all believers.

Rev. 1:6-"...and has made us to be a kingdom and priests to serve his God and Father-to him be glory and power or ever and ever ! Amen."

Rev. 5:10-"You have made them to be a kingdom and priests to serve our God, and they will reign on the earth."

These verses make something foundational to our church life very clear: all believers constitute a priesthood; there is no longer any need for a special office of priests to mediate between individual believers and God. Because each believer has direct access to God; he himself is a priest before God.

We are a priesthood who is to offer sacrifices.

"...offering spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ"-v. 5c.

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What does "spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God" mean? It means offerings befitting a spiritual priesthood and prompted by the Spirit. These are not sacrifices offered so we can be forgiven of sin, or to win God's favor. These kinds of works have no place in the church, because of the perfect sacrifice of Christ Jesus on the cross-Heb. 8:1-10:18.

Rather, these offerings are expressions of worship, gratitude, self-surrender and love. What do they look like in Scripture? Let me list the kind of sacrifices we are to offer as God's priests:

We ought to make the living sacrifice of our bodies.

Rom. 12:1-2-"Therefore, I urge you, brothers, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God-this is your spiritual act of worship. 2] Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is-his good, pleasing and perfect will."

We are to be temples where no illicit sexual involvement or improper use of our bodies takes place. We are His.

We can offer a sacrifice of praise-the praise of our lips. Heb. 13:15-"Through Jesus, therefore, let us continually offer to God a sacrifice of praise-the fruit of lips that confess his name." This people temple is being built to worship God.

We can offer the sacrifice of material possessions to be used for God's service. Phil. 4:10-20, esp. v. 18-"I have received full payment and even more; I am amply supplied, now that I have received from Epaphroditus the gifts you sent. They are a fragrant offering, an acceptable sacrifice, pleasing to God." (Example: Hillcrest 2001.)

When we give intentionally to meet the material and financial needs of a local church/ministry, it is a fragrant offering to God.

We can offer good works we do for others. Heb. 13:16-"And do not forget to do good and to share with others, for with such sacrifices God is pleased" (1 Pet. 2:12).

What are some examples of these sacrifices in real life? What are some practical ways we can be built up as stones and build others up, thereby offering spiritual sacrifices to God? Think of some examples from your own experience and some ways you can apply these principles.

Conclusion

What is the people and facility building plan of Hillcrest?

I've given you the Scriptural call for it and the reason for it. The reason is, so we can offer spiritual sacrifices to God through Jesus Christ in an increasing fashion.

How will it be done?

By our asking God to help us meet the need-through prayer.

By our building each other up in the faith-through belonging.

By our spiritual gifts offered to God-through service.

By our financial commitments to Hillcrest 2001-through our giving.

Are you going to join us?

We have a challenge to build and be built both materially and spiritually. We must never give up, even though the task seems impossible. Small stones of service—praying, belonging and giving—will make a difference.

If you don't join us, then join with another Body of believers and commit to be a willing participant in their people building program. If you don't participate anywhere, you may face the alternative.

1 Peter 4:6-12: For in Scripture it says: "See, I lay a stone in Zion, a chosen and a precious cornerstone, and the one who trusts in him will never be put to shame." Now to you who believe, the stone is precious. But to those who do not believe, "the stone the builders rejected has become the capstone," and "a stone that causes men to stumble and a rock that makes them fall." They stumble because they disobey the message—which is also what they were destined for.

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. 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. Dear friends, I urge you, as aliens and strangers in the world, to abstain from sinful desires, which war against your soul. 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.

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-Matt. 16:18-19.

1. What is the disciple Peter in this imagery? (He is called a *rock*.)
2. Whose church are we talking about? (Jesus makes it clear this is *His* church).
3. How powerful will His church be? (The gates of Hades won't overcome it. The church can go through any barrier because of its power.)

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We are being built into a spiritual house.

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We are to be temples where no illicit sexual involvement or improper use of our bodies takes place. We are His.

We can offer a sacrifice of praise-the praise of our lips. Heb. 13:15-"Through Jesus, therefore, let us continually offer to God a sacrifice of praise-the fruit of lips that confess his name." This people temple is being built to worship God. We can offer the sacrifice of material possessions to be used for God's service. Phil. 4:10-20, esp. v. 18-"I have received full payment and even more; I am amply supplied, now that I have received from Epaphroditus the gifts you sent. They are a fragrant offering, an acceptable sacrifice, pleasing to God." (Example: Hillcrest 2001.) When we give intentionally to meet the material and financial needs of a local church/ministry, it is a fragrant offering to God.

We can offer good works we do for others. Heb. 13:16-"And do not forget to do good and to share with others, for with such sacrifices God is pleased" (1 Pet. 2:12). What are some examples of these sacrifices in real life? What are some practical ways we can be built up as stones and build others up, thereby offering spiritual sacrifices to God? Think of some examples from your own experience and some ways you can apply these principles.

Conclusion

What is the people and facility building plan of Hillcrest?

I've given you the Scriptural call for it and the reason for it. The reason is, so we can offer spiritual sacrifices to God through Jesus Christ in an increasing fashion.

How will it be done?

By our asking God to help us meet the need-through prayer. By our building each other up in the faith-through belonging. By our spiritual gifts offered to God-through service. By our financial commitments to Hillcrest 2001-through our giving. Are you going to join us?

We have a challenge to build and be built both materially and spiritually. We must never give up, even though the task seems impossible. Small stones of service—praying, belonging and giving—will make a difference.

If you don't join us, then join with another Body of believers and commit to be a willing participant in their people building program. If you don't participate anywhere, you may face the alternative.

1 Peter 4:6-12: For in Scripture it says: "See, I lay a stone in Zion, a chosen and a precious cornerstone, and the one who trusts in him will never be put to shame." Now to you who believe, the stone is precious. But to those who do not believe, "the stone the builders rejected has become the capstone," and "a stone that causes men to stumble and a rock that makes them fall." They stumble because they disobey the message—which is also what they were destined for.

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. 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. Dear friends, I urge you, as aliens and strangers in the world, to abstain from sinful desires, which war against your soul. 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.