

Message #6

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1 Peter

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A BUILDING, A PRIESTHOOD, A NATION

1 PETER 2:4-10

I.

Some high schools are known for their sports teams. Some high schools are known for their academic accomplishments. Some high schools are known for their drug problems. The high school that I attended in a small town in north central Wisconsin was known during the time that I was there for its band program.

We had a few students who had exceptional musical ability. I was not one of them. Most of us were closer to average in our ability. Our success as a band was related to the director that we had and to what we accomplished together as a group.

In my four years of involvement in the band there was only once that we received anything less than a first place award or top rating in either marching or concert band competition. During my junior year at our district band competition the judge led the audience in a standing ovation after each of the three pieces that we played. In his evaluation he wrote that we were the best high school concert band that he had ever heard. In my senior year we did the halftime program of a nationally televised professional football game. That was back in the days when they actually showed the halftime programs on TV.

The key to our success was a talented and hard-driving director, by the name of Lovell Ives. A couple of weeks ago he organized a reunion of band members from that era. I was not able to go, but I am sure that it was a nostalgic and enjoyable occasion.

Our director was able to convince us that we were part of a cause. Because we caught his vision, we were willing to march in the snow, march in the heat in black wool uniforms, put up with his admonitions, practice at home, and give up other things that we might have been doing with our time. We succeeded because of our conviction that together we were part of a cause that could overcome the obstacles and trials that lay in the path to success.

We have seen from our study of 1 Peter that the Christians to whom the Apostle was writing were faced with considerable trials. Many of these trials related to persecution that they were facing because of their commitment to Christ. Peter realized that one of the most helpful motivations that these believers could receive was a reminder of their status in Christ. They needed to be reminded that they were part of a significant cause, and that the trials which they were enduring in their participation in that cause were worth the price required. That is the kind of reminder that we need to have from time to time to keep our Christian commitment fresh.

II.

Just as success for my high school came not through individual achievement but rather through group participation in a cause, so also success in the Christian life is often dependent upon our participation with fellow believers in the cause of Christ. This is especially true in the face of trials. Thus in our passage today the Apostle uses three metaphors--- three figures of speech--- to describe our identity as participants together in a cause.

(PROJECTOR ON--- I. OUR CORPORATE IDENTITY) What Peter describes is OUR CORPORATE IDENTITY. The three comparisons that he makes may not initially strike us as relevant. But they were very significant to his first century readers, and do have importance to us. Let's see why.

A.

First, in vv. 4-8 he says that believers are STONES OF THE SAME BUILDING. (I. OUR... A. STONES OF THE...) Beginning in v. 4 he writes, **"As you come to him [Jesus], a living stone rejected by men but in the sight of God chosen and precious, you yourselves like living stones are being built up as a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ. For it stands in Scripture: 'Behold, I am laying in Zion a stone, a cornerstone chosen and precious, and whoever believes in him will not be put to shame.' So the honor is for you who believe, but for those who do not believe, 'The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone,' and 'A stone of stumbling, and a rock of offense.' They stumble because they disobey the word, as they were destined to do."**

In v. 5 Peter calls this building "a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood." This is referring to a temple. (JERUSALEM TEMPLE 1) The temple in Jerusalem had great significance to the Jews. It was central to their religious life and to their social life. Jews scattered among the provinces of the Roman Empire

would bow down during their prayer times toward the temple in Jerusalem. The Old Testament Law required that all Jewish males show up at the temple three times each year.

Peter's audience included not only Jewish Christians but also Gentile Christians. The imagery of a temple also had great significance to most of them. (EPHESUS TEMPLE) The larger cities had temples to the pagan gods. This was the famous temple to Diana at Ephesus in Asia Minor. These spiritual houses were also centers of religious worship and social life for the Gentiles. Trade and business groups and other associations would have their meetings at the temples.

Now the apostle tells these Jewish and Gentile Christians that they are a temple. That was a radical notion to these people. We are a temple? (PROJECTOR OFF) Peter elaborates. He tells his audience in v. 4 that Jesus is a "living stone" and in v. 5 that they are also "living stones."

This terminology is a paradox. Stones are dead. We use the expression "stone dead." But the author calls Christ and Christians "living stones." The original Greek word for "stone" here referred to "a worked stone." This was a stone that had been cut and prepared for use in a building. It is a different word than *petros*, which means "a rock mass," or "a loose, uncut stone." You might remember that Jesus Himself had named Simon *petros*, Peter, the rock.

In v. 6 Peter refers to Isaiah #28 v. 16, which uses the terms "choice stone" and "precious cornerstone." A cornerstone (PROJECTOR ON--- CORNERSTONE) is the most significant stone in a building. It becomes the reference point for putting in all of the other stones. Isaiah used these terms for the coming Messiah. Now it is Peter who indicates that the new temple, the church, is built not upon himself but upon Christ, the precious cornerstone. If Peter was wanting to claim authority for himself as the first pope, this was the place to do it, but he did not. (PROJECTOR OFF) Jesus is the Messiah that Isaiah foresaw. The prophet also foresaw that those who believed in Him would not be disappointed.

In v. 7 Peter cites Psalm 118 v. 22, which says, "**The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone.**" When workers were constructing an important building, they would not accept every stone that was given to them. Some of them would be rejected because they did not meet the high standards required by the building under construction.

In Psalm 118 the writer was saying that the nation of Israel was the rejected cornerstone. Though Israel was the least among the nations, God had chosen to bless it and reveal His glory to the world through

the Israelites. Israel did not do a very good job of demonstrating God's glory to the world. So Jesus came to accomplish that in which Israel had failed. Yet Israel's own leaders rejected Jesus. In God's eyes He was still precious. In fact, He--- Jesus--- became the cornerstone of the church.

Then in v. 8 of 1 Peter 2 the Apostle quotes Isaiah again. The context for that quotation was vv. 13-15 of #8. (PROJECTOR ON--- ISAIAH 8:13) Beginning with v. 13 the Lord says to Israel, **"But the Lord of hosts, him you shall honor as holy. Let him be your fear, and let him be your dread. (ISAIAH 8:14) And he will become a sanctuary and a stone of offense and a rock of stumbling to both houses of Israel, a trap and a snare to the inhabitants of Jerusalem. (ISAIAH 8:15) And many shall stumble on it. They shall fall and be broken; they shall be snared and taken."**

Peter takes the phrase "a stone of offense and a rock of stumbling" and applies it generally to those who do not believe in the cornerstone. (PROJECTOR OFF) The Greek word for "offense" is *skandalon*, which is the basis for our word "scandal." Originally it described the stick in an animal trap that held the bait. To those who do not believe, Christ becomes a cause for stumbling. He trips up people running down the road of self-fulfillment and life without God. Those who continue to stumble and disbelieve will eventually be trapped once and for all--- they will be lost eternally. The root problem, according to v. 7 is unbelief. According to v. 8 this results in disobedience to the word, which ultimately leads to destruction. Such is the appointed end for those who continue in unbelief.

Peter indicates that because we Christians have been joined to Christ, the living stone, we also are fellow stones that are together being built into a spiritual house, a temple. We are dependent upon the cornerstone. But we each have value. We have greater value as we are related to other stones that together are being built into a beautiful structure that is, in some sense, God's house.

So Peter says to his first century readers, and he says to us, "You Christians are significant. You are part of a cause that has great importance. For you are serving Christ. You are part of His church. The trials and the suffering and the sacrifices that result from that service are worth the cost."

B.

In vv. 5 & 9 Peter also compares the members of the body of Christ to **PRIESTS OF THE SAME TEMPLE**. (PROJECTOR ON--- I. A. B. **PRIESTS OF THE SAME TEMPLE**) Peter calls this temple "a spiritual house." The Jewish rabbis of the first century had been expecting a political house. In AD 6 Archelaus, the son of

Herod the Great, was expelled from the office of King of Judah by the Romans. He was replaced by a Roman governor. Later on, Pontius Pilate would fill that position.

When the son of Herod the Great was deposed, the rabbis said, **“Woe unto us, for the scepter has departed from Judah and the Messiah has not come.”** (Babylonian Talmud, Chapter 4, folio 37) In actuality the Messiah had come. He was about ten years old at the time. Twenty or twenty-five years later the rabbis would reject Him as their Messiah partly because He came as a spiritual Messiah and not as a political Messiah.

Verse 5 describes Christians as “a holy priesthood.” To those among the Gentiles who had been actively involved in pagan religions and to the Jews, the institution of the priesthood conveyed great respect. A few of you come from a Catholic background. I do not, but I have lived in very Catholic areas and I have had many Catholic friends. I have seen the pride that such a family has when a relative is a Catholic priest. To have a priest in the family is a source of great family pride. It is a cause of honor and blessing. The Bible says here that every individual who is truly a Christian is a priest of God. To be part of a holy priesthood is indeed a great honor.

We are holy in that we are set apart to God. We are a priesthood in that we represent man to God and God to man. In the Old Testament only descendants of Aaron could serve as priests in the temple. Yet in Exodus #19 vv. 5 & 6 (EXODUS 19:5-6a) God told Israel, **“Now therefore, if you will indeed obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession among all peoples, for all the earth is mine; and you shall be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.”**

Israel’s job as a nation of priests was to represent God to the other nations of the world and to intercede for these nations before the Lord. Israel failed to do a good job. Christ came and fulfilled that task. He brought God to the nations, and He interceded for all people before the Father by dying on the cross. Then He appointed the church to carry on with this cause. So, Peter says, we have a tremendous status as a kingdom of priests. (PROJECTOR OFF)

This idea of the priesthood of all believers was a central issue in the Protestant Reformation when Martin Luther and others broke away from the Catholic Church. Luther wrote, **“It is pure invention that pope, bishops, priests, and monks are to be called the spiritual estate, while princes, lords, artisans, and farmers are called the temporal estate.... All Christians are truly of the spiritual estate, and there is among them no difference except that of office.”** (*Luther’s Works*, Vol 48)

In v. 9 Peter calls us a royal priesthood. In the Old Testament a king was not allowed to serve as a priest. Now, the Apostle says, we Christians fulfill both roles. We are priests, and we are royalty.

Jesus Christ is the living stone, the cornerstone. Now we also are living stones. Jesus in John #2 called Himself the temple. Peter here says that we Christians comprise a spiritual house, or temple. Jesus is our high priest, and we are fellow priests.

C.

Thirdly, Peter describes Christians as CITIZENS OF THE SAME NATION. (PROJECTOR ON--- I. B. C. CITIZENS OF THE SAME NATION) Notice vv. 9 & 10: **“But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light. 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.”**

These descriptive terms were originally applied in the Old Testament to Israel. Here Peter applies them to the church. Some have wrongly concluded that the church has taken over the promises that were made to Israel by God. The thought is that the promises made to Israel about a great nation, about world prominence, and about prosperity and peace will be fulfilled figuratively in the church.

As I see it, that is a wrong conclusion. The promises that God made to Israel in the Old Testament were unconditional and irrevocable. Romans #11 is one of the places where God indicates that those promises to the Jews will one day literally be fulfilled. The reconstitution of the nation of Israel seventy years ago after having been nonexistent for 2000 years points toward the fulfillment of those prophecies made to Israel.

There is, however, a continuity between the people of God in the Old Testament and the people of God in the New Testament. God has always desired to glorify Himself before the world through a people. In the Old Testament He sought to do that through Israel. Today He is doing it through the church, which is composed of both Jews and Gentiles, and which is here called “a holy nation.” As Paul put it, we Christians are now citizens of a heavenly kingdom.

That was a problem for Christians living in the first century. They were called unpatriotic for their refusal to worship the Roman emperor as a god. It is a problem today in places like China where Christians refuse to regard the state as having their ultimate loyalty. It is a growing threat to us in this country. Last week the California state assembly passed a resolution blaming religious people for high suicide rates in the LGBT community.

We Americans, more than most other people of the world, should know from our own rich tradition what it means to sacrifice for the cause of serving one's own nation. Many among us are veterans. As Christians, we are called upon to sacrifice, not just for our political nation, but also for our spiritual nation, the church.

At the conclusion of the Declaration of Independence the founders of our nation wrote, **"We, therefore, the Representatives of the united States of America, in General Congress, Assembled, appealing to the Supreme Judge of the world for the rectitude of our intentions, do, in the Name, and by Authority of the good People of these Colonies, solemnly publish and declare, That these United Colonies are, and of Right ought to be, Free and Independent States; that they are Absolved from all Allegiance to the British Crown...--- And for the support of this Declaration, with a firm reliance on the protection of divine Providence, we mutually pledge to each other our Lives, our Fortunes and our sacred Honor."**

It was for the principles expressed in that document that our forefathers were willing to sacrifice life and property. They came together as citizens of the same nation. As Christians who have been guaranteed eternal life by Jesus Christ through His death on the cross, we are members of a much greater nation. How much more should we be willing to serve and persevere in the face of trials for the sake of the cause of Christ.

II.

The Apostle Peter does not merely describe our corporate identity as a temple, as a priesthood and as a nation. He also deals with OUR EXPECTED RESPONSE. (PROJECTOR ON--- II. OUR EXPECTED RESPONSE) The realization of who we are should motivate us toward worship and service. In the preceding passages Peter used a number of imperative verbs, or verbs of command. Here there are none. It is as if Peter is saying that when we realize who and what we really are, our response should naturally follow.

A.

First, v. 4 indicates that there is a prerequisite for participation and membership in this cause of Christ. It involves COMING TO CHRIST. (II. OUR... A. COMING TO CHRIST) In order to participate in my high school band, students had to submit to the director. We had to make a commitment to submit to his direction. In order to become part of the cause of Christ, one has to submit to Jesus, our heavenly director.

The New Testament uses a number of different terms to describe how it is that we become Christians. Earlier, Peter said that it involves being born again. The Apostle John spoke about receiving Christ. Paul in Romans 10 says that we must call upon the Lord. Here in our passage Peter describes it as coming to Christ. The idea is that we must recognize that we are sinners in need of a Savior. We must believe that Jesus was God who became man, that He died on the cross to pay the penalty for our sin, and that He rose from the dead. When we place our trust in this Jesus and what He did for us, the promise is that we receive the gift of eternal life. This is not something that we can earn. We can only receive it by faith.

B.

Then, according to v. 5, our expected response involves OFFERING SPIRITUAL SACRIFICES. (II. A. B. OFFERING SPIRITUAL SACRIFICES) Animal sacrifices were a big deal in the Old Testament. God required these sacrifices in a number of situations. There were daily sacrifices to be made in the temple. There were extra sacrifices on feast days. Animal sacrifices were to be made to atone for certain sins and to rectify situations of ceremonial uncleanness.

The death of Christ became the final sacrifice for sin. No further sacrifice is required from us to be right with God. Our only responsibility to be right with God is to believe in Jesus. But because of what Christ has accomplished for us, Christians are called upon to make spiritual sacrifices. The New Testament tells us Christians what some of these spiritual sacrifices are now that are acceptable and pleasing to God. Perhaps the most important is described in Romans 12 v. 1. (ROMANS 12:1) Paul writes, **“I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship.”** When we truly commit ourselves to the Lordship of Christ, that is pleasing to God. It is a spiritual sacrifice.

Hebrews 13:15 (HEBREWS 13:15) says that the praise of our lips is a spiritual sacrifice. The next verse, Hebrews 13:16 (HEBREWS 13:16) says that good works are a spiritual sacrifice. Philippians 4 vv. 10-20 (PHILIPPIANS 4:18) say that material gifts are a spiritual sacrifice. When we give financially to the church or to Christian causes or to the poor, we are making a spiritual sacrifice. Also Romans 15 v. 16 (ROMANS 15:16) says that our efforts in pointing people to Christ are a spiritual sacrifice.

In the context of 1 Peter the apostle has been talking about endurance and holy behavior in the midst of trials. (PROJECTOR OFF) It would seem that Peter might have that in mind when he is talking about spiritual sacrifices. When we lose our job because of our commitment to the cause of Christ, that is a spiritual sacrifice. When our boss tells us to sign our time card for a project that we haven't worked on and we refuse, that is a spiritual sacrifice. When we speak a word of Biblical truth in the classroom and are ridiculed for it, that is a spiritual sacrifice. When we praise God even in the face of health problems and mounting hospital bills, that is a spiritual sacrifice.

C.

Then thirdly our expected response involves PROCLAIMING HIS PRAISES. (II. B. C. PROCLAIMING HIS PRAISES) In v. 9 Peter says, **“But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light.”** The word “excellencies” means “virtues,” or “those things which are praiseworthy.” Peter seems to be referring to the Greek translation of the Old Testament, in Isaiah 43:21, where that same Greek word was used.

In that passage Isaiah appears to be describing the coming millennial kingdom, that time in the future when Jesus will return and rule upon the earth for a thousand years. In v. 21 the Lord says that one of the things that will be true of that period is this (ISAIAH 43:21): **“The people whom I formed for Myself will declare My praise--- or My excellency, or My virtue.”** In the next couple of verses God says, in effect: “You haven't honored me with your sacrifices. Instead you have burdened Me with your sins.”

A primary purpose that Israel had was to be a witness to the other nations of the world. In Psalm 96 v. 3 (PSALM 96:3) the psalmist says to Israel, **“Declare His glory among the nations, his marvelous works among all the peoples.”** Israel did a lousy job of proclaiming God's excellencies among the nations. So Christ came, partly for the purpose of carrying out that mission.

Now Christ has appointed the church to carry on that ministry of proclaiming to the world the excellencies of the Lord God. (PROJECTOR OFF) When we realize the darkness, the lostness, the road to destruction out of which we were taken, and His marvelous light to which we have now been exposed, we will hopefully be prompted to proclaim the excellencies of our God. We will take up His task as our cause.

About 1/6 of our student body was involved in my high school's band program. I don't know statistically how that would compare with other high schools. I suspect that it was higher than average. We actually had two bands--- a varsity band and a junior varsity band. Why was there such a great student participation? Because the students talked about the excellencies of the program. They talked about the trips and the awards and the feelings of accomplishment and the band director. They also talked about the work involved, but many students were willing to pay the price to participate in the cause.

When most outsiders think of Boulder City, they think of Hoover Dam. They think of Lake Mead. They think of Art in the Park. They think about a nice residential community close to Las Vegas. Few people outside of Boulder City think about, or even know about, Bethany Baptist Church.

But from God's perspective we are one of the most important institutions in this town. For we are part of the cause of Christ. The National Park Service doesn't send money to missionaries who spread the gospel. The city council doesn't proclaim the excellencies of His name. The Chamber of Commerce doesn't tell people how to get to heaven. Boulder City High School doesn't teach people the Bible. But we do, and because of that, we have more eternal significance than all of those other institutions.

We have limitations of size and money and spiritual gifts. We have families with trials. We have a location off of the beaten path. But we have a Director who believes in us. We have a cause that has eternal significance. What we need is a collective commitment to this cause--- a commitment that reflects itself in a willingness to teach Sunday School, to help out with Good News Club, to participate in our prison Bible studies, to use our musical talents, to help with special projects, to give financially, to invite people to church, to participate in Bible studies and to love one another fervently from the heart. For **“you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession.”**

FOR FURTHER STUDY

A central theme of the message related to the need for believers to recognize that they are part of the cause of Christ. When in your life have you felt most like part of a cause? What more could you do to contribute to a sense in our church that we are part of a cause? What more could the church as a whole do?

One of the illustrations that Peter used in the passage involved comparing Christians to priests. He said that we are part of a royal priesthood. To better appreciate what it means to be a priest, consider what the Old Testament says about the subject. In the times of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob the heads of families offered sacrifices, prayed for people and performed other religious duties. It was in the time of Moses and during the stay at Mt. Sinai that a separate priesthood was established. Check out Exodus 28:1, 40-43 and 29:44.

Look up the following passages to find out some of the specific responsibilities that priests had:

Deuteronomy 18:1-5 Where were the priests to serve?

Leviticus 1:1-9 Skim through these verses to note some of the duties involved in serving in this place.

Joel 2:17 What are the priests supposed to do for people? Leviticus 10:11; Malachi 2:7

Exodus 28:30 The urim and thumim were probably two flat stones, each having a dark side and a light side. They were thrown into the air and allowed to fall. Two dark sides facing up meant "no." Two white sides facing up meant "yes." One of each meant "no reply." Cf. 1 Samuel 10:19-22; 14:37-42. Why were these things used? Deuteronomy 17:8-10

Now come back to 1 Peter 1:9. Also look at Revelation 1:6. Given this Old Testament background, what are the ways in which we Christians should be functioning as priests? How have some churches discouraged lay people from functioning as priests?