

Bible Study Forum over 1 Peter 2 (1/2)

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The text assigned for this morning is I Peter 2: 4-8:

Come to him, a living stone, though rejected by mortals yet chosen and precious in God's sight, and 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. 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.”

To you then who believe, he is precious; but for those who do not believe,

“The stone that the builders rejected and
Has become the very head of the corner,”

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.

It is customary, in a setting such as this, to begin by saying that one is happy to be here. And I am happy to be here. In the few minutes we have spent together, I have already had the opportunity to see again some old friends, and to meet many who I hope will become future friends.

But there is also another sense in which I am not happy to be here. It is always difficult to come to a gathering such as this, bringing together professionals and people with a particular interest, and to join the conversation in the hope of saying something meaningful and helpful. One is always afraid that one will miss the mark, speak out of turn, turn out to be entirely irrelevant. And at the same time, as one listens to the conversation, one wishes one had been part of it

from the very beginning.

In a way, that is parallel to what we are doing this morning with the Epistle of Peter. We are not only bringing it at the middle of our conversation; we are also jumping into the middle of the Epistle, and asking it to make sense to us today. These verses, and the ones assigned for tomorrow, are probably the best known in the entire book of I Peter. And they deserve to be so. But they appear in the second chapter of the Epistle, and therefore in order to understand their import it is helpful to look first at the Epistle as a whole, especially at the earlier part.

When we do so, it becomes quite clear that the original readers of this Epistle were people having a hard time. For this reason, the very first verse of the Epistle calls them “the exiles of the Dispersion,” and then much of the rest of the Epistle is devoted to telling them how, as Christians, they have a hope that cannot be destroyed, “an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you.” They are being tested, as gold is tested through fire. And yet, in the midst of all that, they can be a joyful people, precisely because they live out of a future that the world does not know, but that no persecution can take away.

[Discussion: The Epistle was written at a time in which it was very difficult to be a Christian. What would we say about our times? Is it getting easier, or more difficult to be a Christian? Think about the time when you were young, and think also about the youth with whom you work now. Is it easier for them to be Christians, or is it more difficult? What are some of the

points at which today's Christian young people would find connections with these early Christians, the "exiles of the Dispersion"?]

The Epistle tells its readers that, in order to live in such difficult situations, a special discipline is needed. And then it goes on to talk about being begotten anew, and what this means in terms of life. Finally, that entire section closes at the beginning of chapter 2, where we are told: "Like newborn infants, long for the pure, spiritual milk, so that by it you may grow into salvation."

It is at that point that we come to the passage assigned for this morning. Here the image changes, and we have to do with a building. The metaphor of a building brings in an added dimension, for it underscores the communal in a way that could be easily overlooked in the earlier image of being begotten anew.

To describe Christians as newly born children who must grow by being fed "purely spiritual milk" tends to put the emphasis on the growth of the individual Christian. Important as this is, it is not the entire picture. This other image that appears in chapter 2, of a building going up, reminds us of the communal nature of Christian growth and discipleship.

In this passage, the readers of I Peter are told that they are to be built into a "spiritual house." The word used here for "house," especially in a context such as this, could also be understood as "temple," or "house of worship." So, what I Peter says is that Christians are to be built into a

spiritual house or temple of God.

They are to be “like living stones.” In order to understand this, we have to keep in mind the process of constructing a building out of stone. There is one big difference between building with stone and building with brick. In a brick building, the pieces are interchangeable. They come pre-cut to the appropriate size, and only in a very few cases—at the corners, or around windows or doors—does the bricklayer have to do much else with the bricks than cement them one on top of the other, making sure that the construction is straight.

In a stone building, on the other hand, every piece is different. There are big stones, and there are smaller stones. They are not interchangeable. Some serve well for a particular function, but would be an invitation to disaster at another place in the building.

This is the image employed here. If we were to be bricks in this building, then we would be interchangeable, and we would be brought to the construction site ready to be incorporated into the building. But we are to be “living stones.” What this means is that we are not interchangeable; each of us has an assigned place in the entire building, one for which we are particularly fit.

At the same time, it means that we must be interconnected. If it is true that this building is not a pile of interchangeable bricks, it is also true that individual stones strewn all over a field are not

a building. A building requires interconnection, relationships of mutual support in which burden and stress are passed from one member to another and shared by all.

These two elements are equally important for our building: individual difference, and interconnection. There are some who would build the building of society as if all its members were prefabricated bricks, all cut by the same mold. There are others who apparently conceive of society as a field of scattered stones, each not only different, but also standing alone, and each doing its own thing.

[**Discussion:** As you look at the young people with whom you work, were pressures around them (and in church) push them in the direction of brick-like uniformity, and which pull them in the direction of a disconnected individualism?]

There is another important difference between a construction in brick and a stone building. Stones do not usually come pre-cut. Out of the quarry they come with a general size and shape, and then the stonemason has to trim them so that they fit properly in the place assigned to them. This means that the builder—in this case God—may have to do quite a bit of trimming if we are to occupy our place in the building. And still, even in that trimming, the goal of the divine master mason is not to make us all alike, but to make us each fit in our particular place in the building.

The image of the church as a building appears repeatedly in early Christian literature. God is constructing a building, and Christians are stones in that building. In the second century, perhaps two or three generations after I Peter, a preacher in Rome whose name was Hermas wrote a book in which he summarized some of his messages. At a point in that book, Hermas tells of a vision in which his guide took him to a site where angels were building a great tower. Other angels carried stones to the building site. Some of these stones, but very few, were ready to be put into the building just as they were. Most had to be trimmed. Some even had to be set aside for another time.

Hermas then asks his guide about the tower and the stones, and the guide tells him, as we might expect, that the tower is the church. This was a time of persecution—real, bloody, deadly persecution—and so the guide also tells him that those who have suffered for the faith, and died as martyrs, are immediately ready to be added to the building. Most others, however, have to be trimmed. Trimming may be painful; but it is necessary if these stones are to be part of the building.

As is the case with stones, people are trimmed by removing that which is not needed, the excess that does not allow the stone to fit in its proper place. In particular, Hermas speaks of some stones that are round. These, he says, are Christians who have too much. They need to be trimmed. Some may have the grace to do this voluntarily, by sharing with the needy. Others may be trimmed by situations over which they have no control. In any case, trimming is not easy. It is

painful. In that process, there are even some stones that shatter. They become absolutely useless for the building, and are cast aside forever. Others, however, accept their trimming, and eventually are made to fit quite well in the building.

Among other things, this image helps us to understand one of the points that I Peter is making about suffering. As one reads the entire Epistle, it is clear that it is dealing with the fact that, partly through persecution, but mostly through lack of understanding by the society around them, Christians were made to suffer. Suffering is always painful, and I Peter does not deny the pain. But in some cases God may use it to trim us so that we may fit the building. If in such cases we refuse to be trimmed, we may be like those stones that shatter and are cast aside.

[Discussion: Apparently, Hermas thought that wealth was an impediment to the Christian life, and that in order to fit in God's building, Christians had to be trimmed of their excessive possessions. What are some of the things of which we must be trimmed today, if we are to fit in God's building? Do not be afraid of going beyond preaching, and into meddling. Think about your own local church and its youth program. Are there some things that we cherish, or even consider valuable, that in fact are an obstacle in our building of God's tower?]

Let's move on. In I Peter the image of the stone applies also to Christ. He is "a living stone, though rejected by mortals yet chosen and precious in God's sight." And then the Epistle goes on to a combination of quotations from Psalm 118 and from Isaiah 28:

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.”

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,”

and

“A stone that makes them stumble,
and a rock that makes them fall.”

This quotation immediately brings us back to the fact that the very center of this building is Jesus Christ. But, before we deal with that, there are two points that may be made in passing.

The first is that in Acts 4:11 Peter is depicted as using practically the same biblical argument when confronting the Sanhedrin. Whether or not I Peter was written by Peter himself, is open to debate. But what is quite clear is that there was a very ancient tradition in the Christian church connecting the passage about the rejected stone with Peter's preaching and teaching.

(In passing, it may be interesting to note that the Epistle we are studying is called “The First Letter of Peter” —that is, “The First Letter of the Stone.” According to the gospels, “Peter,” or “Rock,” was not this man's name. His original name was Simon, and “Peter,” “Stone,” was a name given to him by Jesus on the road to Caesarea Philippi. In any case, the one whose name the letter bears is called the Stone, and in the letter itself we are told that we are all stones, and that we are being built upon the Rock of Ages who is also the Stone that was rejected by the master builders.)

The second comment is much more important, for it helps us understand something of this building God is constructing. The passage from Isaiah makes it very clear that this is a building of justice:

See, I am laying in Zion a foundation stone,
a tested stone,
a precious cornerstone, a sure foundation:
“One who trusts will not panic.”
And I will make justice the line,
And righteousness plummets. (Is. 28:16b-17a)

In other words, that this building of God’s is measured, not as we so often think, in terms of piety and attendance at worship, but rather in terms of justice and righteousness.

But back to this precious cornerstone: Not only is it true that in a stone building the various stones are not interchangeable; it is also true that some stones have a crucial function, and must be chosen with particular care. Of these, the most important is the cornerstone. In an ancient building without steel structures—that is, in a real stone building—the cornerstone was much more than a decorative piece. (Not as today) The cornerstone was the stone that stood at the very foundation, and at that place at the foundation where the two main walls met, and where the corner column rested. Choose a flawed cornerstone, and the whole building might collapse. Choose one that is not square, and the entire building will be lopsided. Part of the responsibility of a master builder would then be to select this particular stone.

The point which I Peter makes here—and the point which Peter himself also makes in Acts 4—is that the stone which the builders rejected, that very stone God has made the cornerstone of

the entire building. A cart comes to the building site, and the master builder says of a particular stone: "that one is no good; cast it aside." And yet, as the plan progresses, it turns out that this stone, rejected by the master builder, is in fact the cornerstone of the entire edifice. The significance of the image is quite clear. It is even clearer in Acts: those who were supposed to be the master builders, the religious leaders of the people, they were the ones who rejected Jesus. And yet Jesus, this rejected stone, has turned out to be the cornerstone of the entire edifice. One obvious result is that the supposed master builders were not such, and therefore their having rejected the intended cornerstone results in their own rejection. This is why the text from I Peter says that this cornerstone has now become "A stone that makes them stumble, and a rock that makes them fall."

(It may be difficult to understand how a cornerstone can make one stumble. Apparently, what the text means is that these people, instead of putting the cornerstone in its proper place, threw it out on the field, and now it has become a stumbling block for them.)

In any case, it is easy for us to read this passage now, and to remember Peter's speech before the Sanhedrin, thinking that this means that, because they rejected Jesus, these Jewish leaders were in turn rejected. But bring the passage to today's context, and things are not quite as easy. Today, we are the ones who have been entrusted with the building. We are the stonemasons. We are the master builders. And, there are new ways of rejecting the stones which God has destined for this great building. We clearly do not reject Jesus, for we call ourselves Christians.

But, don't we? Think about what Jesus himself said about where he meets us: in the hungry, the naked, the thirsty, the imprisoned. In other words, in today's stones of rejection. This strange building, built upon the stone of rejection, is to be built with stones that, like him, are also rejected. Jesus was not the perfect cornerstone, that any good builder could recognize as such. He became the cornerstone by being rejected, by being cast aside, and then being brought into the building. Likewise, this Epistle is saying, the living stones out of which this spiritual house is being built will also be stones of rejection.

And if we, like those master builders of ancient times, reject those stones of rejection, they may well come back to us, as Jesus came back to those builders of old, to be "a stone that makes us stumble, and a rock that makes us fall."

In the context of I Peter and its intended readers, it is clear that, as the cornerstone, Jesus gives shape to the entire building. He is the cornerstone, but all those who follow him are to be like stones of the building built upon him.

And, just as he who was rejected is now the cornerstone, so too the living stones to be added to his building may have to go through the same dynamics of rejection and election, of cross and resurrection.

Therefore, let us

Come to him, a living stone, though rejected by mortals yet chosen and precious in God's sight, and 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. For it stands in scripture:

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