

DISCOVERING OUR TRUE IDENTITY

1 Peter 2:4–10

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1 Peter 2:4–10 (NIV)

“As you come to him, the living Stone—rejected by men but chosen by God and precious to him—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. For in Scripture it says: ‘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.’ Now to you who believe, this 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.”

Today’s topic is “Discovering Our True Identity,” continuing a study in Peter called “Help for Struggling Christians.”

In these short verses of Peter we’re at the business of rediscovering who we are. When a Christian is going through trial and is being pressed against the wall of exterior circumstances it’s very easy to forget who we really are. Peter realizes this as he writes. He is, after all, a counselor given a message by the Holy Spirit to share with the church. So he focuses on this little section today on the Lord’s identity and upon our own identity. Both identities we tend to forget in a trial.

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Peter is speaking to persons who in their day were really considered nobodies. People who had been thrown out of their jobs. Some of them thrown out of their homes. Others thrown out of their families. Some out of synagogues. Because of their superstitious belief in a crucified daydreamer—that's what the world thought He was. Perhaps it was that at this point in their existence these Christians, like you, were feeling a sense of being a nobody, worthless. That events in their life were totally beyond their control. There was nothing they could do about them. And that was simply it!

Peter had some marvelously good news to share with them—and with us! There are two basic things he says in this passage to help us discover our true identity. One is that we must be enveloped in Christ's identity (verses 4,6,7,8). Sometimes we need to back off long enough from our humdrum daily existence to realize that we're not just laying bricks. God is at work building a beautiful tabernacle and house and temple in us and through us. Peter, in these identifications of Jesus Christ and ourselves, is trying to give us a more complete consciousness of who we are and who we are in Christ.

I. We must be enveloped in Christ's identity.

He uses, in speaking of being enveloped in Christ's identity, four illustrations of Christ as the Stone. It's fitting that he should choose the word "stone," because in a time when you're being shaken a stone stands for something that is stable and gives foundation.

A. The first imagery he uses of stone, drawing all of his illustrations from the Old Testament, he speaks of Christ as the living Stone. Verse 4: "As you come to him, the living Stone." I've seen stones, but I've never seen a living stone. The imagery of a stone here is most likely drawn from the experience of Israel in the wilderness where twice they found themselves without water—Exodus 17 and Numbers 20—and both times Moses, God's servant, took a rod and struck the

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rock and from that rock came out water, living water for God's people in the wilderness. The rock was smitten, and God provided life in the wilderness. So Christ, the living Rock, was smitten in His crucifixion, providing life for us.

There was a tradition of the rabbis in circulation in the first century that held that not only was there a stationary rock that was smitten in the wilderness but there was a rolling rock, a rolling boulder that followed Israel wheresoever it journeyed in for years in the wilderness. Within that rock was a well. Whenever the people of God were thirsty they simply came to the rock that rolled behind them, tapped the rock, and out came the water.

Paul probably builds on this concept when he says in 1 Corinthians 10:4, "For they drank from the spiritual rock that accompanied them, and that rock was Christ." Paul is dismissing the idea of a literal rolling rock but says if you really want to know the source of life for Israel in the wilderness it was Christ, the rock that rolled behind them.

Peter is saying the same thing in different words here. He's saying that Christ is our Rock in the midst of the stress of life. Christ is our source of life and water. So he says, "As you come to Him," literally in the original it's the phrase "coming to him the living Rock." And it's more than simply a coming to Him once. Because Jesus, like water, is not something you take all in one draft and then go the rest of your life without drinking again. But it's that perpetual process of continuing to come to Him, and as we do we receive life and sustenance.

Always we must remember, whether we're in trial or not, it's critical to keep drinking of Christ. Because if we stop taking in His life, then terrible things, breakdowns, happen to us in our life experience.

So He is first of all a living Stone.

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B. He is then described in verse 6 as a foundation Stone. “See I lay a stone in Zion.” The living Stone rejected by men has been chosen by God, and because it’s precious to Him the metaphor changes. The living Stone becomes the foundation Stone. Peter quotes the passage from Isaiah 28:16 about a precious cornerstone supporting a foundation.

The backdrop of Isaiah’s prophecy was that he said in his day—the eighth century before Christ—that Israel would be swept away by God’s judgment. A small minority of God’s people, a remnant, would remain to form the basis of the new community. The new community would be based upon the stone that God was laying in Zion or Jerusalem. Peter is now saying from the New Testament vantage point that Christ is the massive foundation stone that supports the whole structure that God is building. And it’s also a cornerstone—it bonds the walls together. To speak, therefore, of Christ as the foundation means that He gives our lives rocklike stability. There’s no way you can make a mistake building upon this Stone. You will never be put to shame, Isaiah and Peter are saying.

If you build upon Jesus Christ you’ll never be embarrassed about the way you built your life. If you build your family upon the teaching and the example that Jesus Christ has left us you will not hang your head down in God’s day of judgment about the way the family was built. He who builds upon this rock will not be put to shame.

It’s important what you build upon. Build upon the rock. Peter is saying that Jesus is the only one with sufficient strength to form the foundation in the life of every believer. He is the foundation Stone. Is He your foundation Stone?

C. The third thing that Peter speaks of in regard to Christ’s identity is the fact that He is the capstone or the keystone (verse 7). “You believe this foundation stone is precious. But to those who do not believe, the stone the builders rejected has become the capstone.”

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Peter here again changes imagery. The capstone is the headstone, the stone on top. Unlike the foundation stone, which is on the bottom, it is the last stone to be put in place. In ancient days it might be a very large stone in a series of large stones, which formed a line completely around the building. The capstone could also be a keystone, which in an arch is the center stone, which supports the other stones in the arch. If you take the keystone out, the whole arch collapses. Peter here is quoting a favorite psalm that the New Testament quotes numerous times. Jesus, Peter, Paul quote the psalm, Psalm 118: “The stone the builders rejected has become the capstone.”

The imagery is this. A stone is left to lie among the rubble because no one has found an obvious place for it in the framework of the building. But finally, at the very end of the building, the stone which had been neglected and left there to lie has become the very stone needed to finish the structure and to occupy the place of highest distinction. The Old Testament prophesies that Christ would be overlooked. But in order to complete the house that God was building of humanity, Christ would be the Capstone or the Keystone, which would support it all.

What Peter here is saying to us, in quoting this psalm, is that if you will start out by discovering the foundation Stone you’ll build your life on that. But if through life you neglect the stone of Jesus Christ, you will find at the end that He was the missing piece in your life. He is the Capstone or the Keystone. If He has not had that place in your life you’ll find that when everything else is built and completed in your life that the most important piece was missing. So it becomes kind of a warning to say, “Are you neglecting the Capstone or the Keystone of your life?”

D. Peter goes on from that to speak of Christ as the stumbling stone (verse 8), “a stone which causes men to stumble and a rock which makes men fall.” Here again he’s quoting from the Old Testament. He’s quoting from Isaiah 8:14 in a Scripture the context of which involves Isaiah the

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prophet warning the Judean King Ahaz that Assyrian armies are soon going to be flowing into Judah as well as neighboring territories. They're going to devastate the whole area like the waters of a great flood. In that flood, Isaiah says, there will be only one place of refuge available. It is this: God will himself provide himself a sanctuary for those who put their trust in Him. He will be like a rock amidst swirling waters. For those who refuse to trust in Him, He will not be a refuge at all but a stone of offense and a rock of stumbling against which unbelievers will be swept by the rushing waters and dashed to pieces.

What Peter is saying is, if you embrace Jesus, He is the foundation Stone. If you embrace Him the missing piece is in place, the Capstone. But if you refuse to embrace Him, your doom is sealed. If you disobey the message, you are doomed for destruction.

It would be an awful thing to come to the end of life and not know what it was for and what it was about and say at the end, "Now what?" Peter is saying, "Find Christ as your foundation Stone lest He become your stumbling Stone."

II. We must grow into our identity.

Peter then, having talked to us about Christ's identity, moves into developing into our own lives by growing into our true identity (verses 5,9,10). He says six things about our identity, what we're called to be.

A. The first is, we are "living stones" (verse 5). By calling us "living stones" and having called Christ the "living Stone," Peter is saying that we are going to take on the nature of Christ when we're Christians. We're going to become rock-like. I think when we speak of a rock we think of something that is strong. But we may not think of something that's warm and compassionate. So "living stone" brings out Christ's, and our, warmth and compassion. The building of God's new

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temple involves living stones being placed upon the foundation Stone and finally completed by the Capstone.

It's beautiful imagery about the distance between Christ's first coming in which He provides himself as the foundation Stone and His second coming where He presents himself as the Capstone or the Keystone. And in between the first and second coming the walls are rising, which are us, the living stones in the body of Christ. We're living stones, not just bricks left lying on the ground. Brick is no good just left lying on the ground. A brick is only really good when it's put to some use. When it's joined with other bricks as part of a wall.

The Christian life, Peter is saying, is not meant to be lived isolated, left off by itself, not placed in the construction. But we're being built up into a spiritual house. There's a place for me in the body of Christ. There's a purpose for me to fulfill. I'm a living stone.

B. Peter says, secondly, in developing identity that we are a chosen people. What a tremendous thing it is to be chosen. What this does to all of our inferiority complexes! It immediately tells us we're elect of God. The election of God is both a privilege and a responsibility. It's a privilege, in that we know we are the persons whom God loves. It's a responsibility, in that we're being called and named that which was given to God's people in the Old Testament.

And, by the way, the readers of Peter are very conscious that Peter is identifying them as the new Israel of God. The old Israel was given a geographical territory to possess. But the new Israel of God is scattered throughout all the world. Yet in that scattering they are still God's elect, God's chosen. Chosen why? To be light to the nations. To receive and to keep the written Word of God. And to be the family of the Messiah, a responsibility to share that good news in the world.

C. The third thing that Peter says that we are is a royal priesthood. In verse 5 we're called a "holy priesthood" and in verse 9 we're called a "royal priesthood." In the Old Testament it

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would have been impossible for you to be a royal priest. Because royalty came from Judah and the priestly line came from Levi. There was no such thing as a royal priest. One of the kings of Judah tried it one time, Uzziah (2 Chronicles 26). He presumed to offer incense in the temple. He presumed to take upon himself the function of a priest. God severely judged him for it. A sharp demarcation between royalty and priesthood.

But the Christian priesthood is not based on the old order of Aaron, it's based on the new order of Melchizedek. And Melchizedek, Hebrews tells us, was both king of Salem—he was royalty—and he was a priest of the most high God. It is that order of priesthood that you and I belong to where all of us are priests. Not just some of us in the body are priests, but all of us are priests, royal priests unto God.

What is a priest? The Latin word means “bridge builder.” A priest is one who has access to God, communication. He has the ability to get to God. To build a bridge over the chasm that separates us from God.

Speaking of direct access to God as an illustration, a rule I have in the office is that when I'm counseling or in conference with somebody I'm not to be interrupted on the phone. However, there is a standing exception to this: Any member of the family can interrupt me anytime for any reason. I never know when it might be something serious or when it might not be. But the family has instant access. It seems to me that that's what being a priest is all about. That we immediately, always have instant access to God and can come to Him at any moment.

With this access Peter says in verse 5 that, as a holy priesthood, we're offering spiritual sacrifices up acceptable to God. We don't have lambs and goats to offer. But we have spiritual sacrifices to offer. The Scriptures tell us that some of the sacrifices we may offer is the sacrifice of praise for

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example: “Through Jesus, therefore, let us continually offer to God a sacrifice of praise—a fruit of the lips that bear his name” (Hebrews 13:15).

One of the things you find when you’re in a difficult situation is you want to complain about it. To pity yourself in commiseration with what you’re going through. One of the ways out of that is to come to God as a priest and begin to offer up praise for what God is doing in you in that event. The event itself may not be pleasant, but God may be doing something that’s far more wonderful than the event that is occurring.

Another sacrifice that we offer up continually to God is to do good and to share with others. The writer of Hebrews: “Do not forget to do good and to share with others, for with such sacrifices God is pleased” (Hebrews 13:16). In other words, in a stressful situation don’t become passive but continue to do good and to share. Paul tells us that the best sacrifice is offering up our entire being to God. “Present your body,” he says in Romans 12:1, “a living sacrifice holy unto God which is your reasonable worship.”

So we’re priests, offering to God, sacrifices.

D. Peter goes on to say that we’re a “holy nation.” Again, a term that’s used to describe ancient Israel, and also used to describe us. “Holy” meaning “set apart” by Christ to be His people. In both what we believe and how we behave. In our doctrine and in our lifestyle.

E. Then a fifth term that Peter identifies us as being is “a peculiar people” (verse 9, KJV). The NIV says, “a people belonging to God.” When I used to hear this years ago, when I thought of “peculiar” I thought of it as sort of weird. That looked kind of funny and odd. That they put on certain things in order to make themselves peculiar. So you could be called a peculiar Christian. Now we know this is not in best translation of the text. We are God’s peculiar possession, worthwhile to Him. Maybe not to other people, but worthwhile to Him. Peter is saying to the

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Christians who have been evicted from their jobs and their homes and their life situations, whose noses have been rubbed into the ground and they have been told again and again that they're worthless and they're following a myth, Peter is saying to them as well as to us, "In God's eyes you are God's precious chosen people." If that doesn't begin to work on your identity I don't think anything ever will. We have that standing in the Lord.

F. The sixth thing that Peter tells us is that we are a transformed people (verses 9-10). "You have been called out of darkness into his wonderful light." Here we're not thinking of physical darkness but spiritual darkness. The kind of activity and mindset and vocabulary and ways of treating people and God we had before we were a Christian as compared to now. We've been called from darkness to light.

Not only are we transformed in this measure but we're transformed as having been no people to being God's people and having no mercy to having mercy. Peter again is depending upon the Old Testament. He's taking the prophet Hosea (see Hosea 1-2). Hosea had three children born to him. He'd been told to marry a harlot, Gomer. One of the children born to them was named "Not my people." Hosea wasn't sure whose boy this boy really was. God tells him at a point down the road, "You call that child, 'My people.' Change his name!" That's what God has done to us in His family. He's changed our name so that we who had no identity or belonging to Him are now His people. The second child, a daughter, "Not loved," or "Not have mercy upon." Her status is also changed by God's grace. She receives grace and mercy. Peter says the same thing has happened to you and me.

It is very true, unfortunately—it's true, but it's true psychologically—you will live up to the idea of your identity. If you think yourself a klutz, you will live like a klutz. I live up to my identity.

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Peter is saying to us as Christians, “You’ve got a new identity. You’re a living stone. You’re a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a peculiar people, a transformed people.” The whole idea of the Christian life is not trying to get God to think better of us. We spend so much time as Christians trying to get in better with God so He’ll think better of us. That’s not the issue at all. Once we’re in Christ, He thinks best of us. We’re seen through the work of Jesus Christ. It’s like Jesus Christ is the overlay of our lives, and when God looks at us He doesn’t see anything but Jesus Christ. The idea is not to get God to think better of us; the idea of the Christian life is to begin to get a hold of God and what God is already thinking about us. To get a hold of the identity He already has for us and begin to live out that identity. If I think that in Christ I am someone—if I think that Christ has “this” view of me and this mission for my life—it gives me the freedom to go on and develop and to become what He’s calling me to be. Let’s get our thoughts in line with His and discover our identity in Christ.

Closing Prayer

Our Lord, we remember that first moment when Peter the apostle encountered You. You spoke very simple words to him. You said, “Follow Me and I will make you to become.” That becoming the rock which You called him to be was not an overnight occurrence. But in a lifetime of development Peter became *in fact* what You saw him to be *in faith*. Today, Lord, in the midst of our life situation, in the midst of our workaday weeks, in the midst of, for many of us, our normal routines, You dare to intrude upon us and call us to a vision of loveliness, to call us to a vision of Your understanding to our mission and work—in our world, in our family, in our jobs, in our individual lifestyles. We dare, Lord, to reach out and believe You and trust You that You will bring to pass these things in our lives. We discover our identity by discovering You

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and then by realizing the plan that You have. Let us all walk in the light that You have shed upon our path today through Your Word. We ask in our Lord's name. Amen.