

## **The Church is the Temple of God (and We Are Royal Priests)**

**1 Peter 2:4-12**

**October 26, 2014**

When I started to think about what I would first preach on, I very quickly thought about the church. I think it is important for us to ask some questions: What does God tell us about the church? Who are we? What are we supposed to do? What is the purpose of the church? As I already said, if we don't know the purpose of the church, it will be very hard for us to evaluate whether we're being faithful to God or not.

Let me explain that point a bit. If you don't know the purpose of something, it's hard to say whether it's good or bad, whether it's successful or not. To understand this point, let me provide the following illustration.

Imagine that an author is at a bookstore, signing copies of his book. In his books, he writes about health. He's trying to persuade his readers to eat a certain diet. He's trying to communicate to the readers that if they eat a certain way, it is dangerous for them: they'll be unhealthy and overweight and more likely to get diseases. But if they eat the healthy diet, they'll feel better, look younger, and live longer. Now imagine a fan comes up with a copy of the author's book to get it signed. He says to the author, "This is a great book." The author is curious, so he asks the fan, "Why is this a great book?" The fan says, "Well, I don't like reading too much, and I have short attention span, so your book is great because it's short." But writing a short book wasn't the author's purpose, so that's an odd comment for the author to receive. The reader seems to have missed the author's purpose. Now imagine another fan comes up to the author to get a book signed, and he too says, "This is a great book." Again, the author is curious, and again, he asks the fan, "Why is this a great book?" This time, the fan says, "Oh, it was very funny. I really like funny books, and you made a few jokes in this one." It's true that the author made some humorous comments along the way, but his point wasn't to write a funny book. In fact, he was being very serious. He just used some humor to spice things up a bit.

Now, when we talk about churches, I'm afraid we're like these two misguided fans. Sometimes people say, "That's a great church." But why do they say that? Is it because the church has a great building? Great music? Good coffee? What if those things, which aren't bad thing to have, are not the purpose of the church?

If we don't understand the purpose of the church, we won't understand what we're doing here, and it will be hard to assess whether or not we're fulfilling God's purposes.

One of the best passages, in my opinion, to see the purpose of the church is 1 Peter 2:4-12. In this passage, we see the identity and the purpose of the church.

But before I read this passage, however, let's quickly look at what Peter says at the beginning of the letter. In chapter 1, verse 1, Peter addresses his readers as "God's elect."<sup>1</sup> In verse two, we see all three persons of the Trinity: Christians have been chosen by the Father, sanctified by the Spirit, for obedience to the Son. Peter says that Christians have experienced "new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, and into an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade" (vv.3-4). Later, in verse 23, he says that they have been born again "through the living and enduring word of God." The basis for this new birth, for the forgiveness of sins, is "the precious blood of Christ, a lamb without blemish or defect" (v. 19). Because Christians have been born again, they are to live holy lives. Peter says, "As obedient children, do not conform to the evil desires you had when you lived in ignorance. But just as he who called you is holy, so be holy in all you do; for it is written: 'Be holy, because I am holy' [Lev. 11:44]" (vv. 14-16). Then, at the beginning of chapter 2, Peter tells his audience to put away their old ways and crave spiritual milk, like newborn infants. And that brings us to our passage today.

This is the Word of God. 1 Peter 2:4-12:

<sup>4</sup> As you come to him, the living Stone—rejected by men but chosen by God and precious to him—<sup>5</sup> 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. <sup>6</sup> 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."

<sup>7</sup> 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,"

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<sup>1</sup> Unless otherwise stated, the biblical text presented here is taken from the New International Version (1984).

<sup>8</sup> 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.

<sup>9</sup> 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. <sup>10</sup> 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.

<sup>11</sup> Dear friends, I urge you, as aliens and strangers in the world, to abstain from sinful desires, which war against your soul. <sup>12</sup> 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.

There are a lot of details in the passage, but I want to focus primarily on two things. Peter says that we are living stones being built up into a spiritual house, the temple of God; and he says that we are royal priests. The church is temple of God, and if you are a Christian, you are a “living stone” and a royal priest. Our purpose as a church is to offer up spiritual sacrifices to God through Jesus, to proclaim his excellencies, and to live holy lives.

So, the first part of our identity is that we are living stones. Peter says we are “like living stones . . . being built up into a spiritual house” (v. 5). It would be easy to miss what Peter is getting at. He is saying that the church is now the temple of God, and each Christian is like a stone in that temple. What is the temple? The temple is where God dwells with his people. The temple is a place of worship. The temple is a place where sacrifices are offered. The temple is the place where forgiveness of sins is found.

Tonight, I’ll teach through the theme of the temple in the Bible, covering some of the highlights. So, I won’t explain this now, but the Bible says that right now, the temple of God is the church. (Of course, I don’t mean this building. This building is important, but it’s not the temple of God. It’s not “God’s house,” as some people say. The church consists of all true, born-again believers in Jesus Christ.) The church is the place where God dwells with his people, the place of worship, the place of sacrifices, and the place of forgiveness. The church is the holy temple of God because it is the dwelling place of God’s Spirit. All Christians are indwelt by

the Spirit, and the church itself is the temple. And those who have been born again are like living stones that are part of this temple.

Think about that for a moment. If you are a Christian, you are a living in stone in the temple of God. You are living because you have been made alive with Jesus (Eph. 2:5). You once were dead in your sins, but now you have the Spirit of the living God dwelling inside of you. Peter says that Christians are “elect exiles” (1:1) and a chosen race (2:9). That means that God selected you to be a part of the church, to be a part of the temple. Each Christian is a vital part of the temple of God. I’m going to say that again: God chose *you* to be a part of the church, to be an important part of the temple he is now building. You may not feel important. You may not feel like your life amounts to much, but that’s not true. You’re part of something bigger than yourself. And every time a person comes to faith in Christ, a new stone is added to the building.

I think there are a number of implications that flow out of this idea that we are stones in a spiritual house. One obvious one is that when we come to Christ, we come as individuals. But once we become Christians, we are no longer alone. We are now part of something larger than ourselves. We become part of the body of Christ. We become part of God’s temple. That means we shouldn’t live lives isolated from each other. We should spend time together. We should serve one another. We should be involved in the local church.

Let me expand on that last point a bit. Some people think they can be Christians without becoming members of a local church. They think they can come and go as they please, never joining a church, never serving, never coming under the authority and discipline of the church and its leaders. But this kind of attitude goes against all that the Bible has to say about the church. I think if you said to Paul or Peter, “I’m a Christian but I’m not a member of a church,” you would be met with a long, confused look. The refusal to join a local church reflects a consumer mentality. It reflects contemporary individualism, not biblical Christianity.

I think we can see in this passage that we must be rooted in Christ. Our lives must be centered upon him. As Peter says, Jesus is the cornerstone of the temple. The cornerstone is the most important stone of a building. It is the first stone set in place. It gives the building its shape, its form, its strength and stability. The cornerstone anchors the building and holds up the walls. In verse 4 of this passage, Peter says that Jesus is “the living Stone—rejected by men but chosen by God and precious to him.” He is alluding to Psalm 118:22, which he quotes in verse 7: “The stone the builders rejected has become the capstone”—or, in some translations, the

“cornerstone.” Ironically, Jesus was rejected by the Jewish leaders at the temple in Jerusalem, but he became the cornerstone of the new temple, the church. Peter also quotes Isaiah 28:16, in verse 6, to show that Jesus is a chosen and precious cornerstone, and that everyone who believes in him will not be put to shame. That’s another way of saying that everyone who believes in Jesus will be saved and not condemned.

That, by the way, should give us hope. In his earthly ministry, Jesus was rejected by men. He was humble. He didn’t come from a powerful family and he wasn’t rich. But Jesus is the cornerstone of the church, the temple of God. He is the most central figure in all of history. We may be rejected by others around us, but we are important because we are part of God’s temple.

There’s another implication of being living stones in the temple of God. A building is limited to one place and it doesn’t grow. But the church is spread out across the whole world, so it’s not limited to one location. And the church continues to grow because it’s alive. The stones of a building are static—they don’t change shape, they don’t grow. They’re put in place and that’s that. But living stones continue to grow. That means we should be growing in our faith, in our love, in our understanding, and in maturity. If you’re part of the church, you can be sure that God is continue to mold you and shape you into the kind of stone he wants you to be.

As I was thinking about this, I thought of a passage in *Mere Christianity* by C. S. Lewis. Toward the end of this book, Lewis talks about what it means to be a Christian and he too uses the metaphor of a building. This is what he writes:

Imagine yourself as a living house. God comes in to rebuild that house. At first, perhaps, you can understand what He is doing. He is getting the drains right and stopping the leaks in the roof and so on: you knew that those jobs needed doing and so you are not surprised. But presently He starts knocking the house about in a way that hurts abominably and does not seem to make sense. What on earth is He up to? The explanation is that He is building quite a different house from the one you thought of—throwing out a new wing here, putting on an extra floor there, running up towers, making courtyards. You thought you were going to be made into a decent little cottage: but He is building a palace. He intends to come and to live in it Himself.<sup>2</sup>

In a similar way, we should expect to continue to grow as living stones even as the temple of God continues to grow. And we should expect this local church to grow. We should expect that God will add more living stones to this little wing of his temple.

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<sup>2</sup> C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (1952; repr. New York: Touchstone, 1996), 176.

One more implication: we never stop being part of this temple, part of the church. Church isn't just a Sunday morning activity. When we leave here and go into the world, we're still part of this spiritual house. We are always on call, so to speak. We never cease being part of God's temple. We never stop representing God in all that we do.

There's another part of our identity here, one that tells us our purpose. Peter says that we are a "holy priesthood" (v. 5) and a "royal priesthood" (v. 9). We are priests of the King of kings. What is a priest? Priests are mediators between God and people. That is why Jesus is our Great High Priest, because he is the one true mediator between God and man (1 Tim. 2:5). Priests offer up sacrifices. Priests speak and teach the word of God. Priests intercede for people by offering up prayer. We need to do these things. We need to pray for non-Christians, asking God to save them. We need to teach people about God. And we need to offer up spiritual sacrifices.

As I said earlier, Jesus' death on the cross was the once-and-for-all sacrifice for sin. There is nothing that we do that can add to his sacrifice. Still, in the New Testament we are told that Christians are to offer up spiritual sacrifices. In Hebrews 13:15 says, "Through Jesus, therefore, let us continually offer to God a sacrifice of praise—the fruit of lips that confess his name." So one form of spiritual sacrifice is praising God. Another spiritual sacrifice is found in the next verse in Hebrews (v. 16): "And do not forget to do good and to share with others, for with such sacrifices God is pleased." So doing good and giving to others are spiritual sacrifices. We see that in Philippians 4:18, when Paul says that gifts the Philippians sent to him are "a fragrant offering, an acceptable sacrifice, pleasing to God."

However, our spiritual sacrifices are not limited to a few things that we do. Our very lives are supposed to be sacrifices. In Romans 12, after Paul has explained the gospel of Jesus Christ and dealt with some questions regarding Israel, he writes, "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." (v.1). In light of the fact that God made us and God has saved us, we should give our whole lives to God. All of our lives, from singing hymns and reading the Bible to doing mundane things like folding laundry or mowing the lawn, is offered up to God as worship. That's part of what it means to be a royal priest. We belong to the King. And we represent him here on earth. We are ambassadors for Christ (2 Cor. 5:20). When we praise God, when we obey him, and we deal graciously with each other, we are offering up sacrifices to God.

Another part of being a royal priest is to proclaim God's Word. In verse 9, Peter writes, "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." We could spend a lot of time reflecting on what it means to be a chosen race, a holy nation, and God's own possession, but I want to focus on why we are those things. Peter says we are those things *that* we might proclaim God's excellencies. [When you read "that" or "so that" in the New Testament letters, you are reading a statement of purpose.] We are saved from God's wrath so that we may proclaim how excellent he is. We were once slaves of sin. We were once children of wrath. Now, we are children of God. That should excite us. We should want to proclaim that to the world.

This idea of being a priest has contributed to the doctrine known as the "priesthood of believers." I am not *the* priest of this church. I am a pastor, but I'm also simply a member of this church. Catholics and Anglicans call their leaders priests, but this is wrong. Church leaders play an important role in the life of the church, but they are not the only ones who do ministry. All of us are ministers. I can't do everything myself. I don't have all the spiritual gifts. But God has given us a church that consists of many priests, all of whom should contribute to the ministry of this church.

So, we know our identity as Christians: we are living stones in God's temple and royal priests. Our purpose is to worship God by offering up spiritual sacrifices and to witness to the world about what God has done for us. This passage suggests that our witness should flow out of worship. We proclaim God's excellencies not as a duty, but because he is great and we love him. We should be so thankful that God has made us his people. Once, we were not a people, but now we are God's people (v. 10). Before, we were headed for hell and now we are bound for heaven. There's no greater gift to receive than God's grace and to know God himself. There's no greater gift than to be loved by God and to love him. There's no greater possession than to have the Holy Spirit dwelling within us. God has given us himself, and this should lead us to praise, to worship, and to evangelism.

Another part of being a royal priest is living a holy life. As we go through this life, we are exiles, or "aliens and strangers" (v. 11). We are traveling to the real Promised Land, the new creation. We're not home yet. And as we travel through this wilderness, we face challenges. There are two challenges hinted at here. Actually, there are two enemies to fight, and the first

comes from within. In verse 11, Peter writes, “Dear friends, I urge you, as aliens and strangers in the world, to abstain from sinful desires, which war against your soul.” Though we are born again, though we have the Holy Spirit inside of us, we still have to fight against our sinful nature. We must still contend with our sinful urges. The seventeenth century Puritan, John Owen, talked about the “mortification of the flesh” or putting the old self to death. He famously wrote, “Do you mortify; do you make it your daily work; be always at it whilst you live; cease not a day from this work; be killing sin or it will be killing you.”<sup>3</sup> This reminds us that we are engaged in spiritual warfare. Sometimes, our greatest enemy is our old, sinful self.

The other enemy comes from without. Peter says in verse 12, “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.” The word “pagans” is literally “Gentiles.” As God’s chosen people, we need to be careful how we live, especially as we are surrounded by those who don’t know God. Much of Peter’s letter is about suffering. In chapter 3, verse 16, he tells them they will be slandered and reviled. Jesus was treated this way. He was the stone that was rejected. To those who rejected him, he was “A stone that causes men to stumble and a rock that makes them fall” (v. 8; Isa. 8:14). Those who stumble on Jesus disobey God’s Word, and they were destined to do this. Even though we don’t understand it, part of God’s plan is that there will be people who reject him. And if they reject Jesus, they will likely reject us. Part of the price of becoming God’s people is sharing the sufferings of Christ. The church is supposed to be faithful in the midst of persecution.

Even though we will be surrounded by people who hate us because we’re Christians, we are supposed to act honorably toward them. We must not act as they act. We must not slander and revile them. Jesus told us that we must love our enemies and pray for them (Matt. 5:44). In Romans 12:17-18, Paul writes, “Do not repay anyone evil for evil. Be careful to do what is right in the eyes of everybody. If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone.” We should act honorably among non-Christians because we are commanded to do so. We should act honorably among non-Christians because, once, we were non-Christians. And we should act honorably among them because they are watching how we live. Jesus said, “You are

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<sup>3</sup> John Owen, *Mortification of Sin*, in *The Works of John Owen*., vol. 6, ed. William H. Goold (Edinburg: T&T Clark), 9.



the light of the world. A city on a hill cannot be hidden. . . . let your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven” (Matt. 5:14, 16).

Peter tells us that non-Christians may see our good deeds and glorify God on the day of visitation. This is surely the time of Jesus’ second coming, which will be a day of judgment for those who do not believe in him. This is what one theologian, Tom Schreiner, said: “Peter’s hope was that unbelievers will be compelled to admit that the lifestyle of believers is morally beautiful, and this admission will bring them to saving faith so that God will be glorified on the day of judgment.”<sup>4</sup> Though people may speak against us and our beliefs, when we love each other and love our enemies, our good works will show them our faith is real and it is beautiful. The fact that there will be a judgment should motivate us all the more to proclaim God’s excellencies.

This week, I ask you to think about your identity as a Christian. You are part of the temple of God! You are a part of the church! You are also a royal priest. You represent the King of kings and you minister on his behalf.

I think there are some questions we should ask ourselves: As living stones, are we growing? Are we an active part of the spiritual house? Are we serving the church and spending time with our brothers and sisters in Christ? As royal priests, are we worshiping God on a daily basis through singing, through prayer, through Bible reading, and through obeying his commands? Are we doing everything with thanksgiving and praise? Are we proclaiming the excellencies of God to a hostile world? Are we acting honorably among non-Christians? Do we tell them the gospel? Do we pray for them?

Imagine what the church would look like if we did these things. Imagine how God would be glorified if we were more mindful of our identity in Christ. Imagine if we lived according to our purpose.

I would challenge you to do three things this week. One, consider how you can be more involved in this local body of believers, this little section of God’s temple. Two, find a way to worship God on a daily basis. Remember that almost any activity, if done with the right motivation and the right heart, can be worship. Three, be a royal priest. You may think that you’re not special or that you don’t play a significant role in God’s plans. That’s not true. You

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<sup>4</sup> Thomas R. Schreiner, *1, 2 Peter, Jude*, The New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2003), 119.

are chosen and precious. And you have spiritual gifts that you can use to serve others. Consider praying for every person you come into contact with this week. I mean every person with whom you have some meaningful contact, every person whose name you learn. Pray that they would know Jesus. Pray that God would give you the opportunity to share the gospel. Pray that you would naturally proclaim the excellencies of God. And be ready to proclaim the truth about God when you do have the opportunity. You may be the only Christian that someone comes into contact with this week. Do your best to minister to that person on behalf of the King. Perhaps another living stone will be added to the spiritual house.

Let's pray....