

Christ is our Cornerstone

Picture it, “Rome, Italy in the mid-60s AD.” As a Christian you live in Rome, but your allegiance is to God. Some of the elders in your early church remember Jesus or at least remember their parents’ telling stories about him. You continue to build a following of the Way—the life and path Jesus demonstrated—and continue to share the Good News of Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection. You began life as a Jew, but then Jesus came and you converted. Your church is small but definitely growing. Luckily, the rulers haven’t prohibited your gatherings and even though they mostly think of you as a branch of Judaism, they let you do your thing. Then a new Emperor comes into power. A man named Nero is now the ruling authority of Rome. A man known for his ego, his cruelty, and his lack of compassion, Nero rules with an iron fist. You and your congregation try to lay low and stay out of the Roman authority’s ways, hoping to stay unnoticed.

But then you notice something—off in the distance, it looks like smoke. The air gets heavy with it and the heat. It is July 19, 64 AD, and a great fire erupts. Because of its narrow streets and high wooden tenements, the city is in danger of being destroyed. The fire rages for 3 days. At one point you hear it has ended after these 3 days and nights, but then learn the fire breaks out again. This time doubling in intensity and consequences.¹ Everyone you know is affected by loss of life or property.

Rumors persist that Nero fiddled while Rome burned, but regardless he fiddled, you know the fire is on him. He loves to build; so it’s not hard to imagine he wants to obliterate Rome that he might build it again.² Why friends tell you that people who tried to put out the fire were stopped and men were seen to regenerate it if the blaze dwindled. Since you are still meeting in a house, your church burned as did many of your friends’. In addition, the fire wiped out ancient landmarks and temples. You, along with your congregation, and all the people are devastated and become bitterly resentful of Nero.

To save himself and his image, Nero needs a scapegoat. Tacitus, the Roman historian:

Neither human assistance in the shape of imperial gifts, nor attempts to appease the gods, could remove the sinister report that the fire was due to Nero’s own orders. And so, in the hope of

¹ Barclay, William . *The Letters of James and Peter*. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1976. P 146.

² *Ibid.* p 147.

*dissipating the rumor, he falsely diverted the charge on to a set of people to whom the vulgar gave the name of Chrestians, and who were detested for the abominations they perpetrated.*³

How could he do this? How could Nero blame you for the fire? Everyone knows it was him! But mob mentality and hearing what they want to hear has caused a sudden shift of opinion. Now people are talking about “abominations”. They misconstrue the Lord’s Supper and call Christians “cannibals” as if you actually are eating someone’s body and drinking someone’s blood. Gossip spreads til some folks think you eat children!⁴ You’d think our association with the Jews might help, but antisemitism has grown as well. One accusation they do get right is about tampering with family relationships. As sad as it is, it’s true families often divide when one member converts and the others don’t. The crowd rarely pays attention to Christian teachings, but some folks heard you speaking of a coming day when the world would dissolve into flames—of course you meant the 2nd coming of Christ, but the crowds think you predicted the fire! Not only are Christians thus Nero’s scapegoat for the fire, but he also persecutes you. He has church folks killed by animals, set on fire, and other such atrocities. Nero prohibits Christian gatherings and the Christian religion by law. At first, these consequences remain in Rome, and you could go to the country to escape. But now these actions and persecutions have spread to neighboring provinces and regions as well. No where is safe anymore and yet no law has been broken!

This time of persecution is when Peter wrote his letter, which we now call the book of 1 Peter. Unlike Paul’s letters, William Barclay reminds us, “First Peter was written to meet no theological heresy ; it was written to strengthen men and women in jeopardy of their lives.”⁵

Perhaps as I described this time, you noticed some similarities to our present-day world. Our politicians are quick to divert attention off of themselves and their actions by laying the blame on the opposite party or even a minority group of people. Wars, rumors of wars, and worldwide instability divert crucial issues that need serious repercussions. Christianity is not prohibited by law, thankfully, but is so fractured and divisive with in fighting, name calling, and judgment that those looking in don’t know who or what to believe. One set of Christians support and endorse politicians even saying they are “chosen” by

³ Barclay p 147, quoting *Annals 15.44* from Tacitus.

⁴ *Ibid.* 147.

⁵ *Ibid.* 150

God to lead. Another group of Christians vehemently oppose this position and state just as clearly the injustices and wrongdoings of the same government leaders and actions. In a sense we are hurting ourselves by judging each other and trying to prove who is the “real Christian” of the group.

For these very reasons, First Peter has application and value for us today! Let’s re-examine the text considering these cultural perspectives and situations. I Peter 2:1 states *to rid yourselves of all malice and all deceit, insincerity, envy, and all slander*. As I first read this passage before consulting any commentaries, I thought those are VERY human responses to what goes on in the world around us as it must have for them as well. In the face of bullying and persecution, natural tendencies are to think inappropriate thoughts, desire deceit, adopt a fake persona, envy those with power, and say terrible things against them all. It’s like watching a movie and hoping that the villain “gets what’s coming to them” in the end. Our fight or flight kicks in and we either want to deny and hide what is happening or fight those against us.

Peter doesn’t condemn his audience for their natural, very human inclinations, he simply advises them to “take off” or “rid themselves,” much as one does when changing clothes. Verse 2 then shows us what we need to “put on.” We are called to long for the spiritual milk as a baby longs for food. I imagine we have all heard the frantic cries of a hungry child that cannot be calmed until fed. We are to yearn for God in the same way.

A second purpose in these verses is not only to grow into salvation, but “if indeed you have tasted that the Lord is good or kind.” The Greek word for kind is *chrēstos*, which sounds like Christ. A reminder that the audience has tasted God’s goodness and kindness in Christ. Salvation here is not the same as we think of it today, but rather more of an inheritance and future oriented goal that they are working and anticipating even as they put aside their habits and human tendencies.⁶ Much of the thought at that time was future oriented because the present was so painful and difficult to experience.

We live in “unprecedented” times as well. Unlike the early Christians, we are not as concerned nowadays with future glory, but how to exist and thrive in the present. For us then perhaps an application

⁶ *Ibid.* p 91.

would be to cleanse our diet—not regarding the tasting of food, but rather what ideas, news, and information we allow ourselves to feast upon on a regular basis. With our modern algorithms that highlight what we read or watch to send us more of the same, we can easily only get one side of a story, having our own bias reaffirmed to us in all that we see and read.

Peter challenges us to yearn for and crave the rational, spiritual milk of God. To seek the truth of what is out there and to feast ourselves on God’s Word and most importantly, God’s concept of LOVE as seen through the life of Jesus. If we fill ourselves with God’s love then our natural, human tendencies are easier to ignore while focusing on God’s good gifts.

This love, Jesus, represents our cornerstone. Perhaps like me you have no idea what a cornerstone really is. A cornerstone is the FIRST stone placed in a new building. Back in Bible times, the builder would select the largest, smoothest, best stone and set it as the entire basis and foundation of the structure—some of these stones literally weighed a ton! The architect would reject any other stone he did not feel would suit and was especially selective in finding the perfect cornerstone upon which to build. A cornerstone affects angles and alignment of all the other stones; so, if set incorrectly, the building will not succeed. In addition, a cornerstone bears most of the weight of the outer structure and unites two of its walls for added stability.

Verses 4-8 allude through Old Testament passages that Jesus is the cornerstone of our faith. Isaiah 28:16 reads, *“therefore thus says the Lord God, “See, I am laying in Zion a foundation stone, a tested stone, a precious cornerstone, a sure foundation: ‘One who trusts will not panic.’”* Peter alters the last phrase and changes it to “will not be put to shame.” Remember what the people of that time were experiencing by means of persecution? Well to add insult to injury they were also being shamed on the regular.

Individuals back then worshipped many gods and offered sacrifices to them for varied reasons. For example, one might offer a sacrifice to a god when you need rain; whereas another might make an offering to a different god asking for a good harvest. With so many gods and sacrifices, everyone must do their part to spread out the wealth, literally and figuratively so all the requirements could be covered by all the gods.

Christians no longer made sacrifices to other gods. The people thus accused the Christians of not doing their civic duty and not helping their society to flourish. When religion, the economy, and politics become united and then one group breaks apart, those remaining have many levels of shame to lay upon them.

Shame persists in our society as well on almost every topic. We face shame based on our bodies whether too fat or too thin—shames exists on both sides. We experience shame as partners and parents whether we spend too much time at work or too much time at home. Work life balance seems to serve as a reason for shame rather than benefit. We hear shame on all sides based on beliefs—one group can shame us for adhering to principle A while another group shames us for not adhering to the principle properly. Shame is a powerful emotion that causes us to doubt ourselves and to reject who we are.

The Christians, no doubt, felt rejected and verse 4 reminded them that Jesus had been rejected as well. When have you felt rejected? Were you overlooked for a promotion at work that rightfully could have been yours? Were you left out of an invitation that was joyfully given to other friends? Maybe you have been rejected by a relationship—whether a family member, a romantic partner, or a friend. At some time in our lives, we have all felt the sting of rejection. Peter reminds us that Jesus felt that same emotion—in fact, from Peter himself! The rejection did not define Jesus or Peter, however, and it does not need to define us either.

God gave Jesus a place of honor and viewed him as precious so much so that Jesus became the cornerstone of faith, love, and relationship according to God. Peter’s audience, and we ourselves, are also called to be “living stones,” or building blocks upon which God can build a church or “spiritual house.”

Barclay reminds us that one stone by itself is useless in creating a building.⁷ Rather it is only in combination with other stones that it can be utilized. Community is thus like a cornerstone for us. Just as Peter’s audience drew comfort and solidarity from their fellow Christians, we need fellowship and accountability with other Christians as well. Church attendance becomes rarer these days as people opt for a life of faith outside a faith community. The same benefits that it held for the early church of Peter’s day can be present now. We must grow as individuals into the fabric of a church, relying on each other for

⁷ Barclay, p 193.

community, accountability, fellowship, and support. Much as Nathan discussed last week like the early church in Acts. Connectedness and community are more important now than ever.

In reality, though some of us have been shamed for religious beliefs while others have felt rejected by the church. Our prayer is that you feel love and accepted here at Milledge Avenue and if you don't, please let us know so we can work and grow in that way together. We say, "No exclusions, no walls, and no boundaries," and we genuinely mean it. We want to model God's love of accepting and choosing everyone—no rejection, only honor. Our choosing you is just a small glimpse of the immense love, joy, acceptance, and desire that God has for you! As people of faith in this community, our calling is to reach out and to bring others into the family—to help nonbelievers learn to believe in God's love.

Peter draws a comparison between believers and unbelievers in verses 7-8. The New Interpreter's Bible reminds us that the distinction is not that we see different things than non-Christians, but that we see the same things differently. Those who believe and those who don't both see Jesus as the rock. For believers, that rock is a cornerstone of faith. For nonbelievers, that same rock gets rejected, proving to be an obstacle. The corner of a rock is very sharp and can pierce a foot that hits it. The difference in pain and foundation proves to be FAITH in determining the way of seeing.⁸ The New Interpreter's Bible summarizes it like this.

To unbelievers it seems that the Christian believers have been rejected, as Christ was rejected; they are...exiles, foolish and straying. To the eyes of faith, it is clear that Christians are chosen exactly as Christ the cornerstone is chosen, precious and beloved of God. From the perspective of faith, the world is turned upside down. Pagan unbelievers who seem secure in their positions and prestige, are stumbling and falling. Christian believers, who seem foolish and useless, are God's own people—holy, blessed, royal.⁹

We now arrive perhaps at the climax of this passage v.9-10. Peter's message is clear—no matter what the world does to you or how people label you—you are God's--Chosen and loved! Individuals who once have been in the dark without love and mercy, become insiders of God's love and light, who

⁸ *The New Interpreter's Bible, Vol. XII.* Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1998. P 268.

⁹ *Ibid.* p 266.

experience God's compassion. Barclay pointed out that a characteristic of non-Christians can be fear of God, while those who know and understand God have discovered the love of God.¹⁰

Being chosen is not simply a gift, but also a responsibility. Christians are a royal priesthood and God's own people, IN ORDER THAT we proclaim God's love and the change we have experienced. We are not only to obey as believers, but also to sing God's praises in worship and thankfulness. Our praise is a response and celebration of our journey from darkness to light and from outsider to insider.¹¹

We, too, are called to live as God's loved and chosen people—a holy nation. As a response to being chosen, and a rejoicing at our journey from dark to light, our thanks and praise to God become a natural offering. As a holy nation, we must recall that we are not divided along racial or political lines, especially in these tumultuous and tension filled days, but rather we are to be united as God's race.¹²

With Jesus, the one rejected by humans, chosen by God, and the model of love, as the cornerstone of our faith we can build a church of strength with each of us serving as individual, living stones, united in Him. We can create a stable building based on his teachings and example; remembering to use them to unify us as God's chosen race, and not to divide us, which only serves as an obstacle to others outside the faith. The world is filled with all kinds of noise and shame now, just as it was in Peter's time, but we can align ourselves with Jesus remembering our calling and responsibility.

Consider this:

You are the ones chosen by God, chosen for the high calling of priestly work,
chosen to be holy people, God's instruments to do God's work
and speak out for God, to tell others what God has done for you.

You are loved. You are chosen. You are precious in God's sight.

¹⁰ Barclay p 198.

¹¹ *Ibid.* p 267.

¹² *Ibid.* p 269.

As Clarence Jordan notes in *The Cottonpatch Gospel*, “Former nobodies are now God’s somebodies; outcasts now included in the family.”¹³

Let us go into the world as the chosen and dearly loved family of God through the grace of Jesus Christ, and the power of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

¹³ Jordan, Clarence, *The Cotton Patch Version of Hebrews and the General Epistles: A colloquial translation with a Southern Accent*. New York, NY: Association Press, 1973. P 60.