

The People of True Witness

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[0 : 0 0] Well, good afternoon, everyone. Good to see you. We're going to be reading once again in 1 Peter. So perhaps you'd like to turn with me there, page 1015, 1015.

And we'll read from the beginning of chapter 2 of 1 Peter. So Peter says, It says, But 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 or honored. 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. And now these verses we are going to look at particularly today.

[1 : 4 4] 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 and 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.

Amen. May God bless his word to us. Let's just keep these Bibles open and bow our heads together in prayer. Let's pray. Heavenly Father, we thank you for these wonderful words that come to us by your Holy Spirit.

Lord, the one who inspired Peter, your apostle, to write these words for us and to record them. And who, through his providential care and power, has preserved them, that we might have them today.

So that we might be directly in touch with your teaching about your church. We pray, Lord, that as we look at these things for the last time today, you would once again impress upon our hearts the great truths that are here before us.

[3 : 1 0] And that we might rejoice that you have called us to be a part of your household, people of your praise. So help us, Lord, to understand your word, to apply it in our hearts and in our lives, and to go on our way today rejoicing because of what you have done for us through Jesus Christ, your Son, in whose name we pray.

Amen. What is the church? Well, we've been asking that question several times. And according to Christ's apostle, Peter, the church is not an institution.

It's not an organization. It's certainly not some sort of architectural edifice. It's certainly not a club or a hobby or anything like that.

No, the church, according to Peter, is the true home of the people of true hope. The hope, that is, of resurrection life through Jesus Christ, our Lord.

And it is, therefore, the home of true life. The life into which we are born, as we've seen, by the imperishable seed of life. That happens through believing the living and abiding word of God.

[4 : 29] Remember chapter 1, verse 23. So it's the home of true life, but it is also the family of true love, as verse 22 reminds us. We are born into this house for a sincere brotherly love.

We're born not to remain babes, but to grow up into salvation, even as we grow together in genuine Christian love. And that is how God is building his temple of true worship, as we saw last time.

That's what's described in verses 4 to 8 of chapter 2. As Christ, the living cornerstone himself, builds his people as living stones around about him, so that he dwells in the midst of his people, in a living temple.

And therefore, do you remember we said last time it follows that the only way to God, and the only true worship of God, is through Jesus Christ. Verse 5.

That is the way to bring spiritual sacrifices that are acceptable to God, in and through Jesus Christ. So how do you need saying, does it, that so-called interfaith worship is not just wrong, actually it's impossible.

[5 : 45] It's no more possible, is it, than that Elijah on Mount Carmel should have had an interfaith worship service between himself and the prophets of Baal. It's ridiculous, because outside the church of Jesus Christ, there is no worship.

Outside the church of Jesus Christ, there is no salvation. There is no fellowship with God that is real at all. But inside the church of Jesus Christ, that is, for all who, as verse 4 says, all who come to him, whoever you are or whatever you've been, inside there is that wonderful declaration of verse 5, acceptable.

You see, acceptable to God through Christ Jesus. It doesn't matter if this living church of living stones has got a building.

It doesn't matter where it meets. It doesn't matter what nationalities belong to that particular congregation. The true church is a living one. It is a temple of living worship.

But we mustn't be confused about what this living worship really is and looks like. We mustn't be confused about how that real and living worship is actually expressed by God's people.

[7 : 07] Because Peter is very clear that a living temple, whose worship is true and real upwards towards God, will always express that worship to God outwardly in true witness to the world.

So the true church, as a church, as a people built together for true and living praise, is always a people bind together for true and living proclamation of the Lord Jesus Christ.

The true church, by definition, therefore, is a people of living witness. It's showing, it's proclaiming the light of God's gospel to the world in Jesus Christ.

And that's Peter's point if you look here at verses 9 and 10. That the temple of living worship is the people who are a living witness to Jesus Christ.

Where there is that, there is the church. And where there is not that, well, there is no true church. It's very, very simple. It's nothing to do with size, but it is everything to do with substance.

[8 : 25] Remember Jesus himself said, Where even two or three are gathered together in my name. Notice, in my name. There he is in the midst. Because he makes his name to dwell there still.

Remember, that's the language of the Old Testament. The temple is where God makes his name to dwell. Well, even where two or three, a small number are gathered. There I am in the midst.

It's his temple. It's his dwelling. There is the church. There is the ecclesia. That's where we get our word ecclesiastical. The congregation. The gathering of God's people.

That's always what that word means in the New Testament. It never means some sort of institution. It is the gathering of God's people with the Lord in the midst. And Paul says to the Corinthians, You, all of you, are God's temple.

And God's spirit dwells among you. That's why he says, by the way, Beware to anybody who wants to destroy God's temple. God will destroy you.

[9 : 25] God takes his house very, very seriously. And that's a real warning from Paul to those who might make it their business to divide a church or to deceive a real church of the Lord Jesus Christ.

But you see in these verses 9 and 10, how Peter focuses on both the privilege and the purpose of being God's church.

Think about first the privilege. He's saying that we are a people of worth to God. We're precious to God. We saw how in verses 4 to 8, all the language of the Old Testament temple, his house, is applied directly to the New Testament church.

Well, we find exactly the same thing here in these verses. Everything that is said in the Old Testament about God's household, his people Israel, here is applied directly to the New Testament church of Jesus.

Now, he's not saying, don't misunderstand, he's not saying that the church in the New Testament just replaces Israel. It's important.

[10 : 33] He's not saying that. He is saying, as all the other New Testament writers say, that the church of Jesus Christ is the fulfillment and is the consummation of Israel's whole destiny as the people of God.

But now, into that church, into that Israel of God, is grafted. People from every tribe and every language and nation, Jews and Gentiles, all one in Christ Jesus.

And so when he writes to this mixed group in Asia Minor, modern-day Turkey, he's writing in verse 9 and he says, you, plural, you are a chosen race.

Now, that's Old Testament language going right back to Moses' time, isn't it? And then it's taken up and quoted by Isaiah the prophet in Isaiah 43, where in the midst of these famous servant songs, do you remember where Isaiah is talking about the Messiah who's going to come, he promises that when he comes, through him, all God's redeemed people would be renewed in their whole calling to be his witnesses, to declare his praises, his excellencies to the world.

And that's where this is quoted from. It's the very passage that Jesus quotes in Acts chapter 1, verse 8, when he promises his followers the Holy Spirit who will come and clothe you with power on high for witness to the ends of the earth.

[11 : 58] And that's the privilege of the church of Jesus Christ. We are a chosen race. And look again, he says, we're a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people of his own possession.

Again, these are echoing words that God spoke to his people Israel at Sinai in Exodus 19, when the whole of the nation of Israel, God said, you are a nation of priests.

You're set apart for obedience to God. You're set apart to be a light to the whole world around, because you are my treasured possession. It's exactly the same language that's being used here.

Precious, beloved in his sight, we're a people of worth. That's the great privilege of the church of Jesus Christ. Don't miss verse 10, by the way.

That's a quote there from the prophet Hosea. And he reminds us very forcefully by using these words that none of these things are remotely because God's people are somehow better people than others, better than people of other religions, or better than people with no religion at all.

[13 : 10] Look at verse 10. All this privilege is the result of what? Not our actions.

Our actions would have once excluded us. Look, once we were not a people at all. But now we are a people. Why? Because we have received mercy.

Hosea, of course, was speaking originally about Israelites who God had rejected because of their sin and sent them away and made them as though they were not his people anymore, just like the pagan Gentiles outside.

But now, Peter says, his mercy, his mercy makes all sinners, whether they're Jews or Gentiles alike, makes them into his chosen people once again, set apart by his spirit.

As Peter begins his letter in chapter 1, verse 2, set apart for obedience and sprinkling with the blood of Jesus Christ. And so every single Christian believer, everyone who has come to Jesus Christ in obedient faith, everyone shares in this inestimable privilege of being part of his chosen people, his true Israel, those who are bound in an everlasting covenant with God, who are cleansed by his blood, who are set apart for his rule to be his.

[14 : 38] And we are above all other things, his people. We're a holy nation forever. Now, of course, that begs the question, doesn't it?

To whom, then, do we in our lives owe our first allegiance? When there is a clash of allegiance to earthly powers or nations, it was Margaret Thatcher who once famously said, you can never be over patriotic.

That may be true. I'm a patriotic Scot and a Brit as well, by the way. We've heard a lot, haven't we, of what it means to be patriotic in these recent days, probably far too much.

But for the Christian, for the Christian, our true country, says Peter, is not an earthly one, not even our beloved Scotland. Our true nation is a heavenly one.

Actually, it's rather interesting that the hymn that Bernice Thatcher chose for her own funeral actually expresses that very clearly. People don't often realize it. You know, it begins, I vow to thee my country, all earthly things above.

[15 : 51] Very patriotic. But that hymn ends in its last verse by singing about another country, more dear to them that love her. the kingdom of heaven, the kingdom of the Lord Jesus Christ.

But if that other country, the home of God's holy nation, his church, if that other country is really most dear to us, then it means, doesn't it, there are going to be times when there will inevitably be clashes and conflicts in this life.

because this world doesn't tolerate rival patriotism very easily. It's all right, you see, the world says, as long as you keep your temple worship private, that's fine.

But if it starts to become public and impinge on society, that's another thing. No, no, no, says the world. We don't want that kind of Christianity intruding its views upon our society.

We don't want it messing around with our way of life. No, thank you. Now, Peter's readers in first century Asia Minor would have known that very, very well.

[17 : 02] They were living under the Roman Empire and of Rome, of course, tolerated, very famously, all sorts of religions. As long as they didn't interfere with the Roman way of doing things.

But if they did dare to start threatening the Roman way, well, they were ruthlessly opposed, ruthlessly put down, violently if necessary. And the witnessing church today all over the world will face that certain reality and does face that in many, many places.

Sometimes it is with violent suppression. In our experience, it's not that, at least not yet, but it is met with vehement scorn and opposition and demands to keep that sort of thing out of our schools, keep that sort of thing off our TVs, off our radios.

It's illegal even in this country to have religious broadcasting and satellite things and so on in many places. And real evangelical Christian faith is largely sidelined if not suppressed.

But you see, Peter's point is that regardless of what society might say and might want, this temple cannot be kept private and this people cannot be kept silent.

[18 : 26] Because Peter is clear, the privilege of being God's people, a people of worth, implies the purpose of being a people of witness. Those who are precious to God, Peter says, must be, by their nature, proclaimers of God.

God. We're chosen, Peter says, to be a priesthood. And the chief task of the priesthood is to, well, look at verse 9. What does it say?

To proclaim the excellencies of him who called us out of darkness into his marvelous light. to proclaim the praises of the great redeemer God to the whole wide world.

And Peter is saying here that a huge part of these spiritual sacrifices that we offer to God through Jesus Christ is the telling forth of the wonders of our Savior. And the language here is corporate language.

It includes everyone in the church. It includes all sharing of the glorious truth of the gospel. But the focus is on the corporate public telling forth of God's wonders by his people.

[19 : 35] And I think, therefore, especially when they are gathered as the ecclesia, as the church, the assembly, the household of God. The proclaiming language that he uses here is the language that's used of the acclamation of God in the Psalms.

It's exactly the language that we find in Isaiah chapter 43 where God promises that in the latter days, the days of fulfillment through the coming of the Messiah, his redeemed people will be witnesses to the world that they might, quote, declare my praises.

That's where Peter lifts these words from, declare my excellencies. And that's what happened, if you remember, on the day of Pentecost, wasn't it? All those who were among or even around the gathered church of Jesus Christ there in Jerusalem that day, all of them saw and heard in their own language the praises of God being proclaimed.

And Peter's saying that's what God's temple does. That's what it's for. His temple and his dwelling, his presence in power is there when his people gather to tell forth his wonders.

In words of preaching, yes, but also in prayer and also in gospel-filled song, in all that's said and done when God's people are gathered. Because the church is a people of living witness to the world.

[21 : 01] That's what it means to be a royal priesthood according to Peter. Paul talks similarly in Romans chapter 15. He talks about what he calls his priestly service. And what that means, he says, is telling forth the wonders of God to the world so that outsiders may be drawn in and themselves become living sacrifices and offerings to God.

And he's saying the whole church is a part of that. That's Peter's message here. That's why in 1 Corinthians 14 verse 24, Paul tells the Corinthians to ensure that that is what their gatherings are like when they get together.

That they're clear, that they're full of words that people can understand, telling forth God's wonders, words that people can hear. So that, he says, an outsider who comes in who may be totally ignorant and have no knowledge of this beforehand whatsoever so that they will sense that God is really among you.

And they'll be struck to the heart by what they heard. And they'll fall down on their faces and bow down and worship Jesus Christ as Lord. One of the Psalms, Psalm 22, has a verse that says, God, the Lord himself, inhabits the praises of his people or even is enthroned on the praises of his people.

And what Peter's saying, you see, is where the church is real, where it is, a people, a temple of true and living worship, because his people are a people of true and living witness, gathered to tell forth on their lips and in their lives the excellencies of the great Redeemer.

[22 : 36] When that is true, then he is there, the living God in the midst. And that means he can be met, he can be found, he can be heard, and he can become a great Savior drawing people to himself.

God is in his temple still. He really is. And that means, doesn't it, that if we want people to find God and encounter God, then the best thing that we can possibly do is to bring people to his temple to meet him where he is.

Bring outsiders to the place where God inhabits the praises of his people among the people of his church. And people will find God according to the New Testament when people are brought among a people of living witness among whom God himself delights to dwell.

That's how people begin to experience the living God in his living church. When they come in amongst its groups, its gatherings, its activities, whatever they are.

But above all else, I think, when the whole church is gathered on the Lord's Day, the whole assembly of the Lord, when they come together to delight and to praise his name and to hear his word and to proclaim his excellencies.

[23 : 57] And Paul says that plainly to the Corinthians. Even when people know nothing at all before, when they're completely ignorant, God can and will meet people and transform their lives because he is in the midst of his temple calling them to himself.

That means, friends, doesn't it, that the very best form of evangelism is so very simple. Bring people to the temple of the living God. Bring them among his people because God is there.

God will draw them to himself. Whether it's in a home gathering among believers from the church, whether it's in something like Christianity Explored where people are gathering together as a living temple to share his word, whether it's in the home meeting on a Wednesday like this or on a Sunday or whenever it might be.

If that's really true that God is in the midst, we should be much, much more confident than we often are, shouldn't we? In fact, bringing people to where God is and where he can be heard and met. Well, this is the authentic church according to Peter.

The home of true life, the family of true love, the temple of true worship, the people of true witness, brothers and sisters sharing the love of their heavenly father, priests who dwell with him sharing his life and telling forth his praise and sharing his light to the whole world.

[25 : 22] It's a picture, isn't it, of humanity redeemed and restored and rejoicing in their destiny all through God's great mercy in his son, the Lord Jesus Christ.

So let me ask at the end of this little series on the church, let me ask you, are you a part of this wonderful reality? The future that is only, the only real future for all time and eternity, are you a part of that?

Have you come to him, the living stone, Jesus Christ, to receive his mercy? Have you stopped disobeying him? And have you started believing his word so that you will not be put to shame, as Peter says here?

Do you really belong to God's household and his home forever? Maybe you hesitate, you've listened to me say all these things, and you've said, well, how do I know if he would welcome me if I was to come to him?

Because you don't know me, you don't know my heart, you don't know what I've done, you don't know what I'm like. How could I know that I could be one that God has chosen in his foreknowledge to be redeemed by his Son?

[26 : 36] How can I know that I'm one of God's chosen people? That's a really important question, isn't it? And I can tell you the answer, because Peter is quite clear.

Look again at verse 4. You can know if you have come to him. Or verse 7. The honor is for you who believe in him.

Or verse 8. If you stop disobeying and you obey his voice, he will honor you. Verse 7. The honor is for you who believe.

Because, as we saw in verse 10, it's not about what you've done, it's all about receiving God's mercy. And Peter knows this, friends, on the highest authority.

He heard the Lord Jesus Christ himself say, come to me and I will give you rest. He heard him say, whoever comes to me, whoever comes to me, I will never cast out.

[27 : 53] And that is true. So don't let anything or anyone keep you outside your true home, the church of our Lord Jesus Christ. Well, let's pray.

Heavenly Father, we thank you for your church. We thank you that you've opened the gate of your home to people such as we are. Grant that every one of us in this room today might know that we have come to you, believed in you, obeyed your gospel, and that we have the privilege and the purpose of telling forth your excellencies to this world.

For we ask it in his name. Amen.