

The Temple of True Worship

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[0 : 0 0] We'll turn in your Bibles, if you would, to 1 Peter and the beginning of chapter 2, page 1014, 1014. And we'll read and then pray.

So says Peter, putting away all malice and all deceit and hypocrisy and envy and all slander, like newborn infants long for the pure spiritual milk, that by it you may grow up to salvation.

If indeed you have tasted that the Lord is good. As you come to him, a living stone rejected by men, but in the sight of God, chosen and precious, you yourselves, like living stones, are being built 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. 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.

[1 : 2 4] They stumble because they disobey the Word as they were destined to do. Let's pray together. Heavenly Father, we pray that as we come before you and bow before your Word this lunchtime, you would open our hearts that we would not be disobedient, prideful or haughty, but that indeed putting away all malice and deceit and hypocrisy and envy and slander and all that is wrong in our hearts, we would indeed drink in the pure milk of your life.

And we also might grow up into salvation, as you have called us so to do. For we ask it in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen. Well, we've seen already in these last couple of studies that the Apostle Peter is very clear.

When the Christian finds his new hope in Jesus Christ, he therefore immediately finds his new home in the church of Jesus Christ. Not a building, not an institution, nothing to do with structures, with ceremonies, but a home which is a true household, the household of the living God himself.

And we've seen that the church is the home of true life, into which we're born through God's imperishable seed, through his living and abiding Word.

And so we're born into imperishable and abiding life. And we're thus begotten of God, says Peter, in order to be a family of true love.

[3 : 1 1] Verse 22 of chapter 1. We're purified, aren't we, for sincere brotherly love. And that's why, as chapter 2, verse 2 says, our calling is to grow up into salvation.

We grow up as we grow together in love, putting away malice and deceit and hypocrisy, all that is anti-love, and craving the pure spiritual milk, the life of Christ himself, the food of the God who is himself love.

Well, now, as we come to verses 4 to 8 of chapter 2, we see that Peter wants us to see that the church is even more than all of these things. It's more than just being about God's family.

It's about God himself. The church of Jesus Christ is God's own dwelling place. It's where God himself chooses to live.

It's where he chooses to presence himself. In other words, the church of Jesus Christ is God's temple. It's the temple of true worship.

[4 : 19] It's the one and only true and living temple of the one and only true and living God, the only place where he dwells upon this earth. Look at chapter 2, verse 5.

He speaks, doesn't he, of living stones being built into a spiritual house. And all that language of the house that we see there in verses 4 to 8 is temple language.

That's what the Old Testament called God's temple, the house of God. It's language taken directly from the Old Testament. You see about priesthood, about sacrifices, and so on. And Peter takes that language all about the temple, and he applies it directly to the New Testament church of Jesus Christ.

And what he's saying in doing that so very clearly is that the church of Jesus Christ is the temple of true worship.

And indeed, the only temple of true worship of God that remains anywhere on this earth today. The only place where God himself dwells in the midst.

[5 : 29] The only place where God makes his personal residence with human beings. Now, if that is true, and Peter says it is true, then it has monumental implications for all humanity in its thinking about God, in its seeking God, as to where God might be found, and as to how God might be worshipped.

So let's be clear what Peter is saying here. He's saying that the church of Jesus Christ is the only true way to God, and that through the church of Jesus Christ is the only true worship of God.

I mean, to think about both of these things. First of all, then, the only true way to God. Verses 4 to 8 here tell us very clearly about the sole place where the true and living God can be encountered personally.

We don't have time to go through the whole story at this lunchtime, but if you read the beginning of the Bible story in Genesis, you'll see that man was created to be a worshipper.

He began his existence in God's dwelling place. That's what the Garden of Eden was. And that's what Genesis 1 and 2 describe for us. A world of pure worship.

[6 : 46] God and man is at one. The whole of creation is at one. Everything is as it should be. But, of course, as you read on, you very quickly discover man's rebellion, and that destroys that perfect world of worship.

Now, by the end of chapter 3 of Genesis, what do we see? Man is cast out of God's garden temple. He's cast out of Eden, and there's no way back. The angels are there with their flaming swords. And it's a terrible thing.

But, thankfully, of course, it's not the end of the story, because God, in his mercy, decides to come back into the midst.

Into the midst, that is, of a people that he calls for himself, his people Israel. He comes to be near them. And as you read on in the Bible story, you read in Exodus about how God quite literally comes and pitches his tent, his tabernacle, in the midst of the camp of all the rest of the Israelites, in the wilderness, and then as they journey through the land of Israel and the conquest.

He lives with them once again. Of course, it's not quite so simple, because no one, not even Moses, can enter fully into God's dwelling place, because God's glory is so overwhelming.

[8 : 05] In fact, it's fatal to sinful human beings. It's dangerous to them. So no one can go right into God's dwelling place, but at least God was near. He was in the midst.

And then later on, of course, that tabernacle became the much more permanent structure of the temple in Jerusalem that Solomon built. God's more permanent dwelling place in Israel and Jerusalem, right at the heart of his people.

And that's why, of course, when you read further on in the Bible story about the exile of God's people out of the land of Israel into Babylon, that's why it was such a disaster. It wasn't just that they lost their homes and their livelihoods and were kicked out of their land.

The real disaster was that they lost access to God's temple. They were far away and distanced from God himself. Because the temple was the only access to God that there was on this whole earth.

And all the way through the Old Testament, if you read the story, you see absolute clarity on that. In fact, even in the wilderness, centuries before the actual temple was built, God was clear.

[9 : 17] It was impossible to worship God, to encounter God for his people, Israel, in the same way as all the pagan nations try to encounter their gods in their temples.

You can't just build a temple in any old place and think you can approach me, says God. No, you shall worship the Lord your God in the place where he will choose to put his name, the place he will put his habitation, his dwelling place.

And that was only one place. Why was that? Why was it so different from all the other pagan religions? Well, for the very simple and obvious reason that their God was a real God.

That he actually existed. That he's unique. He's alive. He's real. And he, therefore, chooses where to dwell and chooses how to make himself known.

This God is not just like an idol of the imagination of man's mind. He is a true and living God. He's the God who made the heavens and the earth. He's the God who rules all things.

[10 : 25] And therefore, you can seek and find this God only where he truly is, not where you imagine that he might be. That's where he chooses to be and where he chooses to be found.

And what Peter is saying in these verses in front of us is that now that the climax of God's story has come in the unique person of the Lord Jesus Christ, in God the Son, look at verse 4, we come to him, that is the Lord himself.

It's a quote here from Psalm 34 about tasting and seeing that the Lord is good. We come to him. We come to the Lord.

Look at verse 5. Do you see? We come with acceptable sacrifices to God. How? Through Jesus Christ.

We come to the dwelling place of God, to the permanent dwelling place of God among men, only one way, through Jesus Christ.

[11 : 33] He is the only real way to the only real God. Because Jesus is the fulfillment of all of God's promises through the prophets that, alas, his dwelling place would be absolutely permanent with human beings forever.

That's why Peter quotes here in verse 6, you see, from the prophet Isaiah, about a new, a chosen and precious, an honored cornerstone of the temple, which is a hymn, not a knit.

Do you see? Whoever believes in him will not be put to shame. Because he, you see, verse 4, is the living stone, chosen and pressured, chosen and honored, the one that Isaiah promises.

Now, that is exactly what Peter himself had heard Jesus talking about countless times during his ministry on earth. Someone greater than the temple is here, he said to people.

What could possibly be greater than the temple of God? What could possibly be greater than the place where God himself dwelled on earth?

[12 : 47] Well, only the permanent, everlasting dwelling place of God incarnate in the person of God, the Son, Jesus Christ. Peter had heard Jesus say, you destroy this temple and I will raise it up again in three days, talking about his own body.

And Peter had heard Jesus saying that he was going to build his church upon this rock. Well, look at verse 4. What is that rock? What is that living stone?

Who is the chief cornerstone? Verse 6. Who is the stone that the builders rejected? Verse 7. Well, Peter's not in any doubt whatsoever, is he?

It is the Lord Jesus Christ. When you see that, it's quite extraordinary, isn't it, to think of the church of Rome. They can think that Peter himself somehow is that rock upon which God's church is built.

And that to communicate with God and to have communion truly with him today, you must do through Peter or through who they think to be Peter's successors, the bishops of Rome, the popes.

[13 : 59] But that's not what Peter himself says right here, is it? Does he say in verse 4, you must come to me? Does he? He says, you come to him, Jesus Christ.

Verse 6. You come to him and believe in him. You commune with God, not through communion with Peter, not through communion with any man.

You bring spiritual sacrifices that are acceptable to God, not through any human being, but verse 5, through Jesus Christ and him alone. He is the only way to the true God.

And Peter says in verse 4, he was indeed rejected by men, but he is the one who is precious, is honored by God. And that same word, honor, verse 7, do you see?

That same honor is for you who believe in him. So don't fear. Don't be made to feel inferior just because you're rejected by the religious establishments of this world, whether he's talking as he is here, to first century Jewish Christians, to whom the Jews and the Jewish establishment said, well, who are you?

[15 : 16] You've got no temple. You've got no priests. You've got no source of real spiritual life. You're nothing. Peter says, no, that's wrong. Nor the Roman Catholic Church establishment today, or indeed any other church establishment, that might think that it holds the keys to the true way to God because we've got impressive buildings, or we've got structures, or we've got history, or we've got size, we've got priesthoods and clergy and all these things.

Now look what Peter says, verse 7, the honor is not for those who have all of those things. The honor is for you who believe, who truly come to him, the living stone, the Lord Jesus Christ.

It's for all who come to him in love and trust and obedient faith. It is these that Jesus himself is building together as living stones into the place that he himself chooses to make his dwelling, the spiritual house, where he himself can be at home.

And the sad thing is, of course, isn't it, that so often that cannot be among all the strictures and the structures of grandiose religion, even if it uses the language of Christianity.

Neither, of course, can there be any way to God at all through any other religious paths or any other religious paraphernalia. Jesus Christ is the cornerstone.

[16 : 51] He is the living stone. And so says Peter, through him alone is the only true way to God. And that also clearly means that through him alone is the only true worship of God.

Peter echoes the whole Bible that the whole purpose of man's existence is to worship God truly. And as we come to Jesus Christ in faith, we are being restored to that true destiny.

Verse 5, it says that we are being built into a spiritual household of priests. We are being turned into those who are offering spiritual sacrifices, true worship that is pleasing to God through Jesus Christ.

We are redeemed, aren't we, for lives of living sacrifice. That's what Paul says in chapter 12 of Romans. And Peter is saying exactly the same here. It's living sacrifices that comes from living stones.

Not, notice, from some special class of people who are priests. He says we're all a priesthood. It's not like the Old Testament any longer.

[18 : 05] It's not like that with a special class of people who are priests who bring sacrifices for sins of the people. Peter is very clear all through this letter.

You see it back in chapter 1, verse 18. He says we've been ransomed forever by the precious blood of Christ. That's over. It's just as the book of Hebrews tells us that Christ is a priest forever.

Having finished all of these things, there's no more sacrifice for sin. It's complete. But of course, just as Hebrews goes on, so does Peter. There are many other kinds of sacrifices that we do offer to God.

Not sacrifices for sin, but sacrifices of praise and fellowship with God and true worship with God. Expressions of love and thanksgiving. That's what Peter's speaking about here, just as Hebrews chapter 12 and 11 speaks about true sacrifices of praise from lips and lives that bless his name.

Just as Paul talks in Ephesians chapter 5 about how we offer fragrant sacrifices to God as we imitate him in love and as we walk in love. Or just as he talks to the church in Philippi and says they're offering fragrant and pleasing sacrifices to God as they send money and support for his gospel mission throughout the world.

[19 : 25] All of these things are the true worship of God that brings joy to his heart. But it can only be so if it comes through Jesus Christ and for his name's sake.

It's so important we grasp that because people often today find that very offensive. They say things like this, well, surely if we do good, that's what matters. Surely it doesn't matter if we follow Jesus or Muhammad or Buddha or even we don't have any particular religion.

Why do you have to be so exclusive, you Christians? Talk about Jesus all the time. Well, the Bible's answer is just very, very simple because Jesus Christ is real and he is the real God incarnate and he is therefore unique and through him is the only way to the real God.

And because Jesus himself says that worship is only real and acceptable to God if it is in his name, if it's in his honor. He and he alone is the chosen and precious one.

That's why when you read Jesus himself in Matthew 25, when he speaks about judgment day, do you remember? And he speaks about dividing the sheep and the goats, the one to everlasting life and the other to everlasting punishment.

[20 : 51] judgment. The key criteria for judgment, yes, it is people's works. But the key issue, according to Jesus, is whether your loving good works have honored and blessed his brothers, his people, his household, his church.

If you blessed and honored his people, his church, because they are his chosen people, then you did it, says Jesus, to him. And you show that you belong to him and to his people.

But if you scorned and you hated his people, so you showed your scorn and your hatred for him. Now, the only way to God and the only worship of God that is true and real is through the Lord Jesus Christ.

Therefore, within his dwelling place and among his people, this where communion with the living God must be found. One of the ancient saints put it this way in Latin, *extra ecclesia nulla salus*.

Outside the church, there is no salvation. But we need to be very clear what that does mean and what it doesn't mean. It doesn't mean, it doesn't mean the church is some institution of man or controlled by man.

[22 : 17] It does mean the church, as Peter describes it here, the living church of the living God, where God truly dwells now and forever. So the key question then is who has the honor of belonging to that church?

Who can know and truly take part in this temple of true worship? Well, the answer is there in verse 7.

It's very, very clear. The honor is for you who believe. For those who do not believe, says Peter, Jesus Christ, the cornerstone, becomes, as verse 8 says, a stone of stumbling, a rock of offense.

You cannot come close to God the Father unless you believe through God the Son. And notice verse 8 very carefully.

Notice what belief really means. Do you see? Those who stumble through disbelief, says Peter, stumble because they disobey the word.

[23 : 24] That is the word of God's call through Jesus Christ alone. The word to surrender, the control of their lives to Jesus Christ alone. See, the sad truth is you can be a paid up member of a church.

You can even be a leader of a church with all sorts of knowledge, with all sorts of accolades from other people. But at heart, at heart, you can be full of disobedience and denial about God's true word.

So that you don't actually belong to Jesus' true household at all. That's what Jesus himself found so much in his own day. And it's no less true today.

Notice how clear Peter is here about the culpability of unbelief. You see, some people say, well, I wish I had your faith. I wish I could believe, but I just can't. But you see, Peter is very clear, isn't he?

There are only two possible responses to Jesus Christ. either obedient belief or disobedient unbelief. The truth is, you can obey and believe.

[24 : 39] But those who do not just do not want to obey and have Jesus' control over their lives. They stumble because they disobey the word as they were destined to do.

It's not a surprise to God that this happens. God planned it this way. He planned that Jesus, his son, would be the touchstone. The touchstone of honor for all who believe and obey and of dishonor for those who refuse and disobey.

And so the church of Jesus Christ is the temple of living worship. It is the place alone where the true worship of God is possible through Jesus Christ alone.

the place alone where our life's purpose can be realized and fulfilled. Outside, Peter says, there can be no worship, no salvation, no fellowship with the living God at all.

But inside, that is for all, Peter says, who come to him, the living stone, for all who believe in him, there is that wonderful declaration that verse 5 proclaims.

[25 : 55] Do you see? Acceptable, well-pleasing to God through Jesus Christ. That is his verdict upon all who come to him.

You see, once you're inside Jesus' household, inside the home of true life, inside the family of his true love, which is the temple of true worship.

But once you're inside, it doesn't matter where you've come from or what you have done or what you once were. Look at the end of verse 6.

Because you have believed in him, you will never, never be put to shame. Let's pray.

Lord, we thank you that you've opened the kingdom of heaven, the Father's house, so that we may indeed find the way back to true worship forever.

[27 : 02] And so keep us, we pray, always coming to the Lord Jesus, always in obedient faith to him, so that as living stones, we may always be the temple of his Holy Spirit to the praise of his glorious name.

Amen.