

LIVING STONES IN A SPIRITUAL TEMPLE

BACKGROUND SCRIPTURE

1 Peter 2:1–17

A VERSE TO REMEMBER

Like living stones, let yourselves be built into a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ. (1 Pet. 2:5)

Daily Bible Readings

Daily Bible Readings			
M	Aug. 25	Isa. 28:14–22	A Sure Foundation
T	Aug. 26	Ps. 122	Let Us Enter the Lord's House
W	Aug. 27	Ps. 50:1–15	Offer a Sacrifice of Thanksgiving
Th	Aug. 28	Gal. 3:23–29	One in Christ Jesus
F	Aug. 29	Eph. 4:4–16	One Lord, One Faith, One Baptism
Sa	Aug. 30	Isa. 51:9–16	Everlasting Joy of the Ransomed

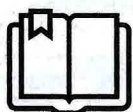
STEPPING INTO THE WORD

We conclude this quarter with a reading from 1 Peter 2. This passage exemplifies something about Scripture that we would do well to notice: the way the New Testament relies on the Old Testament for ideas and language. Christian misunderstandings of the relationship between the two testaments abound. A common mistake is to simply ignore the Old Testament as though it isn't *Christian* Scripture. I have heard it said, more than once, that “we’re under grace, not the law, so we don’t need to worry about that Old Testament stuff.” Such statements imply a discontinuity between the testaments, an idea that the church rejected back in the second century CE. The church affirms the stories of the two testaments as a single, consistent story in which God reaches out to humanity, first through the people of Israel, and then in the person of the faithful Israelite, Jesus of Nazareth.

Other limited understandings of the relationship between the testaments include thinking that the sole purpose of the Old Testament is to issue prophecies of the coming of Christ. While messianic expectation is present in the Old Testament, it does not constitute its sole or primary message. Its valuable and long-standing message is to let the world know that the

God of Israel is the God of everyone. When New Testament passages like 1 Peter 2 take up this message, they draw on the Old Testament to do so. Our Scripture reading for this lesson contains direct quotations from the Psalms, Isaiah, and Hosea, as well as allusion to Exodus and other Old Testament books. The whole passage is full of Old Testament terms and ideas, as though the author learned to write by first reading the Scriptures of Israel. Immersing ourselves in the Bible in this way, so that it becomes the foundation for our thinking, is not a bad way to put ourselves in the presence of the One to whom Scripture points.

O God of the testaments, grant us renewed appreciation for the beauty of Scripture and its testimony to your love for the world. Amen.



SCRIPTURE

1 Peter 2:1–12

2:1 Rid yourselves, therefore, of all malice and all guile, insincerity, envy, and all slander. ²Like newborn infants, long for the pure, spiritual milk, so that by it you may grow into salvation—³if indeed you have tasted that the Lord is good.

⁴Come to him, a living stone, though rejected by mortals yet chosen and precious in God's sight, and ⁵like living stones let yourselves be built into a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ. ⁶For it stands in scripture:

"See, I am laying in Zion a stone,
a cornerstone chosen and precious,
and whoever believes in him will not be put to shame."

⁷This honor, then, is for you who believe, but for those who do not believe,

"The stone that the builders rejected
has become the very head of the corner,"

⁸and

"A stone that makes them stumble
and a rock that makes them fall."

They stumble because they disobey the word, as they were destined to do.

⁹But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people, in order that you may proclaim the excellence of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light.

Note: Find Scripture Notes for this reading on the final page of the lesson.

¹⁰Once you were not a people,
but now you are God's people;
once you had not received mercy,
but now you have received mercy.

¹¹Beloved, I urge you as aliens and exiles to abstain from the desires of the flesh that wage war against the soul. ¹²Conduct yourselves honorably among the gentiles, so that, though they malign you as evildoers, they may see your honorable deeds and glorify God when he comes to judge.

CHOSEN AND PRECIOUS TO GOD

An image that the book of 1 Peter borrows from the Old Testament is that of wandering Israel, longing for its home. First Peter 2:11 refers to the book's readers as "aliens and exiles," invoking the Israelites' captivity in Egypt and later in Babylon. The latter produced the Jewish Diaspora, with Jewish families and communities spread across the Mediterranean world. The book's prologue addresses what follows to "the exiles of the dispersion" located in various parts of Asia Minor (modern day Turkey). The author borrowed this phrase from Judaism and used it to refer to these early Christians. But to what "dispersion" does the author refer?

Two things seem to be going on here. First, by the time 1 Peter was written, Christianity was spreading around the eastern Mediterranean basin, mirroring its Jewish parent in traveling far from its birthplace in Palestine. Second, and more importantly, the author makes clear that the book's readers saw themselves as "aliens and exiles" in the communities where they lived. Earlier generations of interpreters believed this language meant that the original readers of 1 Peter suffered persecution. More recently biblical scholars have concluded that no mass persecution took place in Asia Minor at the time of the book's composition. However, early Christians—most especially those with Jewish backgrounds—were often ostracized by their families and communities for converting to the new religion. This circumstance would account for the writer's reference to the dislocation these early believers faced.

Seen in this light, the message of the chapter encourages the reader to become "living stones" (v. 5), fashioned into a spiritual house of which Christ is the cornerstone. This stone has, like the book's readers, been rejected by others. Yet God has made Christ the "cornerstone chosen and precious" (v. 6), with implication

that Christ's followers are precious to God as well. So precious, in fact that verse 9 refers to them as "a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people." The passage moves from comforting Christ's followers to commissioning us for mission. To be a chosen, holy priesthood is to lift up the world to God in prayer and blessing and to be those who point this hurting world back to its Creator and Healer.



Name a time in your life when you felt like an alien or exile. How did your faith help during that period?

OUTCASTS OR INSIDERS?

This lesson's reading brings a theme that occurs often in the Old and New Testaments: the people of God's frequent experience of being outcasts and strangers in the societies and countries where they live. Upon arriving in the promised land after fleeing Egypt, the Israelites found themselves in the midst of hostile Canaanite tribes. The psalmists frequently voiced lament at being abandoned among those who wished them harm. Jesus predicted that his disciples would face hostility and persecution in the days leading up to the apocalypse. These passages create the expectation that those who follow Christ will be marginalized and despised by nonbelieving societies. These passages indicate that Christ's followers shouldn't be surprised when they receive this treatment.

Does this hold true for us? Are Christians regularly despised and rejected today for their faith? This question carries a lot of baggage, but it seems worth investigating. To start, let us recognize that when the Bible introduces this idea, it seems always to involve minority status. When the book of 1 Peter was being written, the Christians of Asia Minor to whom it was addressed would have made up a tiny fraction of the overall population. Is this the case in our society? No. Although the percentage of Americans who report belonging to and participating in a Christian church has been declining for the last several decades, we still make up a plurality of the U.S. population. When looking at the political influence wielded by Christians in the U.S., the impression is even stronger that we are not a despised minority.

Yet, some believe that individuals and institutions in our culture and society conspire to sideline Christian faith. Many Christians think that they, and not the members of historically marginalized religions like Judaism, are most under threat of

persecution. They regularly employ apocalyptic imagery to exhort their communities to prepare for violent confrontation with the forces of secularism and disbelief. Such talk is neither based in reality nor helpful. Christianity is not under attack in the U.S. Disagreement of ideology does not equal persecution. If the world doesn't share our values, why are we surprised? The Bible already told us it wouldn't. When we falsely portray ourselves as victims, we forget the biblical mandate to protect those who actually are.

? Why do you think some Christians believe they are being persecuted? If it's not happening, what is the purpose of acting as though it were?

STEPPING INTO THE WORLD

In the first section of this lesson, we discussed the way that writers of the New Testament immersed themselves in the language and ideas of the Old Testament. This kind of deep dive into Scripture enriches our experience of God. But is such deep study realistic? What steps can we take to encounter the Bible's depths?

- Start with something doable, and keep doing that thing until it becomes a habit. Once a habit forms, bump it up. Begin by reading Scripture for 5–10 minutes each day. Keep this up for several weeks. Only when it's become a regular part of your day, increase it to 15–20 daily minutes.
- Do you know, or even sort of know, another language? Get a copy of the Bible in that language and read it. It doesn't matter if you have to look up every other word; in fact, that might be better, because working hard to read and understand every sentence means it will stick with you.
- Don't start with Genesis and try to read straight through. Instead, search online for a system for reading through major biblical stories. Or ask your pastor for a recommended reading plan. Pick one that looks good to you, and begin there. The most obvious choice is the Revised Common Lectionary, a list of Scripture readings organized into a three-year cycle, used by many churches to guide Bible readings and preaching during worship.
- Contact your pastor or church office for a list of the Scripture passages on which the sermon will be based for the next weeks or months, and read those.

- Find other people who want to know about the Bible. Agree with them to read the same passages every week. Share insights that you gain from your reading. Sprinkle allusions to the stories you read together into your mutual conversation. The best way to build familiarity with the Bible is to find ways to illumine daily life.



Is there someone in your life who you think knows the Bible well? How did they get there?

SCRIPTURE NOTES

The following notes from the Uniform Series provide additional information about today's Scripture.

1. Jewish interpreters often linked texts based on shared terms. In 2:7–8, Peter adds to Isaiah 28:16 (cited in v. 6) two other stone texts: Psalm 118:22 and Isaiah 8:14. Mark 12:10–11 associates Jesus with Psalm 118's "cornerstone" image.
2. In 2:10, Peter cites Hosea 1:10; 2:23, which reverses God's earlier verdict against Israel (Hos. 1:6, 8–9), promising restoration. Gentile followers of Israel's true king become part of the restored people of God (Rom. 9:24–26; cf. Isa. 19:24–25; 56:3–8).
3. The image in 2:11 ("aliens and exiles") is of God's people (vv. 4–10) dispersed among the nations (see Lev. 25:23; 1 Chron. 29:15; Ps. 39:12; 69:8; and Gen. 23:4). Ancient Greeks conceived of heavenly souls as "strangers" in their bodies, and of fleshly passions as "waging war" against the soul. Whereas philosophers sought to free the soul from earthly distractions, Peter's invitation is to right living (v. 12).
4. "Gentiles" (2:12; non-converted Gentiles) looked down on Jews and their Gentile converts, which included Christians, whom they viewed as a smaller Jewish sect.