

Hometown Exiles: A Royal Priesthood, A Holy Nation

LaGrave Christian Reformed Church

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1 Peter 2:4-10

In order to get the full weight of Peter's words, let's take a journey together. First, we will go across the Atlantic Ocean to northern Turkey to the shores of the Black Sea. Then we will go back in time to about 60-something AD, and we are in the city of Nicomedia, which is the leading city of the province of Bithynia. It's Sunday morning. We're standing in the middle of town and we're in front of a large roman temple. Wide steps lead up from the street to these huge white marble columns. They soar above us, each column as thick as a tree trunk, rising three stories. Above the columns, there are carvings of Roman gods and goddesses. The female goddesses are beautiful with perfect classical features. The male gods are bare chested and buff. Their muscles bulge. Some of the gods brandish swords, others are holding lightning bolts. It's a feast day and people are streaming from all over the city towards the temple. Leading the way is a who's who of Nicomedia. There's the governor with his personal guards in their shining armor. There's a group of the wealthy local merchants. They are wearing designer togas—the latest styles from Milan. They greet each other with big handshakes. They walk with long strides. Out in the courtyard in front of the temple is an imposing statue of the emperor. His head is upraised. It's crowned with a laurel. There's a sword in his hand and under his feet the head of a defeated enemy.

Now we leave the city center and we walk to the outskirts of town, to one of the poorer districts. We notice there are some people walking, not towards the temple like everyone else, but away from it. Most of the city is streaming toward the feast. They're headed in the opposite direction. These walkers are ordinary looking folk. There are some slaves. There are laborers. But there are people from the other classes as well. Their heads are down as if they are trying to not attract attention. It looks like they're worried about being seen. These walkers all make their way into a house. They're here for a worship service. Their worship space is small and plain. There's no magnificent statue and no soaring columns. Instead, on the wall is a simple picture of a crucified man. There are no laurels on his head; his head is bowed and he wears a crown of thorns. There's no sword in his hands; his hands are nailed to a cross. His feet aren't resting on the head of a defeated enemy; his feet are pierced by a spike. These are the Christians of Nicomedia. These are the hometown exiles. They are here to worship Jesus Christ, the man in the picture. The one on the cross. And today there is excitement in the air! They've just received a letter from Peter! A message from the apostle himself. The liturgist for the day walks up to the podium, he unrolls the scroll and he reads these words.

Do you hear what Peter is trying to say to this little church? Do you see what he's trying to show these hometown exiles? The imagery of this passage is aimed right at their situation. My dear friends, you may not worship one of these muscular gods with the lightning bolts, but you belong to the living stone, the rock of ages. You may not be worshipping in a soaring marble temple, but you are glorious in your own way: you are a temple of living stones built on the foundation of Jesus! In our passage, Peter wants to show this tiny band of socially marginalized people that they are stronger and more wonderful than they could possibly imagine. Today I will highlight three things that make that little church strong and wonderful, because they are also things that make us strong and wonderful.

First, they are strong because they are built on the living stone. They are built on Jesus. Jesus is their foundation. The living stone. That's an interesting image for Peter to choose. A stone. When you think of Peter and stones, what do you think of? Peter's name, right? Peter's name means rock. It's the name Jesus gave to Peter. Did Peter live up to his name? Was he a rock? Not so much. In fact, Peter was the opposite of rock steady. He was kind of all over the place. Peter always talked a good game, but on the inside he was flailing. You see that on the weekend of Jesus' death. Peter boldly proclaims, *'Even if everyone else leaves you, I will never leave you! Look at my faith Jesus! I'm a rock!'* Less than 24 hours later he tells a serving maid he doesn't know who Jesus is, and then he flees the scene in fear and shame. So less of a rock and more like dust in the wind. It's not until Jesus picks him up and puts him back in place, it's not until Jesus plants Peter firmly on the rock of his love (Simon do you love me?) that Peter finds the stability and strength to become a leader in the church. On his own, Peter is dust in the wind. Planted on the rock of Jesus, Peter is stable. Peter is a living stone. Peter finally can live up to his name.

This week I read something written by Dirk Hollebeek on Facebook. Dirk is not a member of LaGrave but many of you know him. He has relatives in this church and we've prayed for him in his long fight against Acute Leukemia and some other diseases. The most recent post was an update from his hospital bed. He's been in and out of the hospital constantly over the last few years. He reflected on a popular statement people sometimes make about God. They say, "The Lord never gives us more than we can handle." Dirk rejects that statement. He says it's completely untrue. He says, and I think he's right, *"every day is more than I can handle. On our own, based on my strength and my brain, every single day I have more than I can handle. Every single day you have more than you can handle. On my own I am dust and to dust I shall return. But in Christ, filled with the Holy Spirit, standing on my Jesus, standing on my cornerstone, my solid ground firm through the fiercest drought and storm, I am held. In him, I am steady. I am a living stone."*

So this little band of Christians are strong because they have Christ as their cornerstone. They also are strong because they are the Israel of God. This

second point is the Bible nerd portion of today's sermon. If you want to understand 1 Peter, you have to know your Old Testament, because when Peter talks about the church's identity and their role in society, he sees them in terms of Old Testament promises. He sees it in terms of God's promises to Israel. He says that specifically in chapter 1, remember? I read it last week. Verses 10-12. All those things that the prophets foretold "*trying to find out the time and the circumstances to which the Spirit of Christ in them was pointing,*" they were all pointing to you! Little church, you are the ones the prophets foretold! I can't go through all the ways that Peter shows how the promises pointed to them, but let me just point out a few. Peter quotes three Old Testament texts in this passage. Two from Isaiah and one from the Psalms. In doing so he says, 'see little church, all along God was planning for you!' In verse 9 he calls them God's chosen people. That's what God calls Israel in the Old Testament all the time. His chosen people. His treasured possession.

Peter also calls them a royal priesthood and a holy nation. That's a very clear echo of Exodus 19:6. Exodus 19:6 is one of the most important verses in the Old Testament. At the foot of Mount Sinai God tells Israel "*you will be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.*" God says you will be set apart among the nations (that's what holy means), and you will be my priests, you represent my name and my righteousness before the nations. Now God uses the same titles to apply to the church. Little church, you are a royal priesthood and a holy nation. I choose you to declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness and into his wonderful light. You, hometown exiles are my treasured possession. You may feel small, but all the weight of my covenant, all the weight of my promises all the weight of my love, is poured out on you.

The church is the new Israel of God. We are the Israel of God. That doesn't mean that the church has replaced Israel, nor does it mean that God has abandoned the Jewish people. Read Romans 9-11. The church has fulfilled the promises God made to Israel. Israel is the original tree planted by God's promises. We church members are branches grafted onto the tree of Israel. And now the people of God have become the great tree with this enormous variety of fruitful branches spreading all over the world. "Don't be afraid hometown exiles, you may be small but all my plans, all my promises, all my Spirit, all my love are in you."

So they are strong because they are God's holy nation, they are strong because they are built on the living stone of Jesus, and they are strong because they are built together. When you read these verses, it's so clear that we are not strong alone, we are strong together as a community. "You are being built into a spiritual house." We are all stones coming together to make one house. We aren't solitary standing stones. We aren't monoliths-individual stones in the middle of a field standing solitary. No, we individual stones are being built into one temple.

Being built. Notice the passive. You are not the builders; God is the builder. He is building you into a temple where his glory lives and shines. In Peter's picture, God is the stone mason and we are individual stones. He takes each of us stones in his hands and builds us together into a temple. Let's think about that more deeply. What did an ancient stone mason have to do to an individual stone so that it could become a part of a building? He had to choose the stone, but then he had to shape it. He had to shape it so that the stones would fit together. They had to fit together really well, especially if you were building a temple. The fit couldn't be loose or casual. They couldn't just sort of fit. In those ancient temples the stones had to interlock perfectly, so that the building would be strong and beautiful. What did you have to do to those stones so that they would fit perfectly? You had to knock them around. The bumps and imperfections had to be chipped off. The mason would take a heavy chisel and then he'd take a hammer, and he would pound away at that stone, bashing on it until all the imperfections were gone, until it was flat. Sometimes that stone had to be pounded on pretty hard before it fit, but the mason would keep pounding till all the stones fit together perfectly. *"And you also like living stones are being built into a spiritual house."*

I wonder what parts of us God has to knock off us before we can fit together. In one hand he takes us. In the other hand he takes the chisel of the Holy Spirit and he starts whacking. What sort of stuff needs to be whacked from our lives before our stones can fit together perfectly? Peter actually tells us. In 2:1 he lists things that things that Christians must be rid of. Notice: all of them are things that destroy community. We need to be rid of them, they need to be chipped out of our lives so that we can fit together. Rid yourselves of: "malice-malicious thoughts kill community. Deceit-failure to love the truth kills trust and therefore community. Hypocrisy, envy, slander. These all destroy community and that's why the Spirit is chiseling them from our lives. These are being hammered out of us because God wants us to be one beautiful temple together. How's our temple fitting together these days? Are there pressures pulling the stones apart. Are there gaps in the masonry? Are malice and deceit and division prying the stones apart? Is there gunk that's dividing us that needs to be chiseled away? If so, let us put ourselves in the hands of the mason. Let's open ourselves up to the chisel of the Spirit, and let him do his work in us. And let us work with him. Let's fight and pray and work for this community. Because when we are one in love, built on our Cornerstone, this temple is beautiful. When his love is in us and moves between us, when his love and grace is so thick in this community that it spills out into the neighborhood with healing power, we are a beautiful building. When we are united in His love this temple makes all the temples of this world look like old sheds.

Lord God. Take us in your hands. Pick up your chisel. Hammer away. We are ready. © Rev. Peter Jonker