

1 Peter: Living Stones

by Rev. Dr. John C. Tittle

Prayer of Illumination

Gracious and Holy God,
as we read now your Word to us,
give us the wisdom to discover You,
the intelligence to understand You,
the diligence to seek after You,
the patience to wait for You,
eyes to behold You,
a heart to meditate upon You,
and a life to proclaim You,
through the power of the Spirit of Jesus, our Lord. Amen.

Background

Peter is one of my favorite characters in the New Testament.

What a story he has! An uneducated Galilean fisherman becomes the revered and honored hero of the faith by millions over the last two thousand years and counting. One of the world's most magnificent churches is named after Peter—the Basilica of St. Peter in the Vatican. Home of the Pope. Peter also makes it into the famous jokes about the pearly gates. We feel a closeness to this hero and martyr of the faith because he's so...*human*. So like us. I'm glad it's Peter waiting for us! Jesus gave him the nickname The Rock, which could even be translated Rocky. Yo Jesus!

When we read about Peter in the gospels, he's cast in a rather unfavorable light—and we love it because we can relate with Peter. He's impetuous and often comes across as a well-meaning, but confident, buffoon who has an uncanny knack for getting things wrong.

He's the disciple who had the guts to walk on water...but ends up sinking because of his fear and doubt. He earned Jesus' most stinging rebuke when he said to Peter, "Get behind me Satan." And it was Peter who denied Jesus three times. Peter who dove into the water in his birthday suit to greet Jesus after his resurrection.

And now we have the Peter of 1 Peter—*what a transformation!* He's learned his lessons! He's now the faithful apostle and elder of the church—a Rock.

With deep faith, Peter reminds us that following Jesus in no way guarantees a trouble-free life—that in fact Jesus has a way of making life *more* complicated. Yet, in the midst of hardship, we have hope because we can cast all our cares on God—he cares deeply for us.

And in the end, Peter didn't deny Christ—he was bold to the very end. Church tradition says he was crucified in Rome—asking that he be crucified upside down because he wasn't worthy to die exactly like his Savior Christ did. That's so... *Peter*. Thank you, Peter—you give us modern day bumbling disciples hope!

Let's read now from ...

Scripture: 1 Peter 2:1-10 (NRSV)

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

Come to him, a living stone, though rejected by mortals yet chosen and precious in God's sight, and 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. For 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.”

To you then who believe, he is precious; but for those who do not believe,

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

and

“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.

But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people, in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness 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.

***The grass withers and the flower fades,
but the Word of God endures forever.***

SERMON – 1 Peter: Living Stones

The mature Peter takes almost a mothering role in our passage. There are all different kinds of “mothering” styles, both human and spiritual.

There are “helicopter moms,” who are ever hovering, ever watchful to intervene at a moment’s notice for incoming danger or enemy that might come against their child. Helicopters are about safety, sheltering, and detailed planning. But as studies and experience show, what this approach protects the child from is growth, resourcefulness, and resilience.

There are also “tiger moms,” moms who relentlessly and ferociously push their kids to be the best in everything. The problem is these tiger moms make no room for their kids to be ... *kids*. God let the Israelites wander in the wilderness for forty years in order to “get the kinks out.” True spiritual growth takes time. Mentoring a soul is different from micro-managing a soul.

The pendulum can swing in the other direction with “loosey-goosey” mothering where there are no parental parameters and everything and anything goes. The child is entirely on their own to make up their own mind about any issue or decision. They’re thrown to the wolves, with little training or equipment.

And then there are Rock of Gibraltar moms who have been a rock to us through the growing years. Who wisely weened us from mother’s milk and then taught us about the bedrock foundations of faith in Jesus Christ—our Chief Cornerstone, the Rock of Ages, our Solid Rock—the building block of our faith.

In our morning’s reading from 1 Peter 2, we see how the church has the sacred task of mothering us. Peter even gives us some motherly advice.

In verse 1, we’re reminded of mom’s stern warning to behave and to watch your mouth. Rid yourself of relational brattiness—childish behavior and cruel words that tear apart the fabric of love in the family of faith.

When you look at the original languages, Peter is also using a laundry metaphor here, lovingly nagging us to “Do your laundry!” In other words, peel off your dirty clothes of malice, deceit, insincerity, competition, and gossip, throw them in the washer, and have them scrubbed in God’s baptismal waters.

And take a bath while you’re at it too—and don’t forget to wash behind your ears so you can listen clearly to God’s Word to you in the Scriptures.

Peter moves us from the laundry room and bathroom to the kitchen. Drink your milk—it does the body good. For crying out loud, be like newborn babies who desire—yearn for—crave—the pure spiritual milk that flows from Christ.

From the moment that we confess a faith in Jesus Christ, the church becomes our source of spiritual sustenance, our “mother’s milk.” Don’t just inhale it or wolf it down, but savor it, enjoy

it. Taste and see that the Lord is good. In fact, the early church would bring this home by sometimes having the newly baptized drink a cup of milk as soon as they came out of the waters.

The pure, spiritual milk of God's word gives us the spiritual vitamins and nutrients to grow into salvation—so we won't be stunted in our spiritual growth. But we've also got to remember that God loves us too much to coddle us as little infants who only look cute, soil our diapers, and cry all the time. Like Peter, we too are to grow and mature in our faith. To move on from bottles and sippy cups to forks, knives, chop sticks, glasses, mugs, and plates. To grow into our childhood and be childlike, but not be childish or infantile.

Peter switches gears and moves us from the kitchen to the workroom, reminding us that we need to play well together and share our building blocks.

There's a children's song that says:

*We are building every day,
at our work and our play:
Not with hammer, blow on blow,
Not the timber sawing so;
Building a house not made with hands,
Following Father's perfect plans:
Little builders all are we,
Building for eternity*

Christ Jesus is the chief cornerstone and foundation stone—holding together and upholding our home and the house of God. Jesus is the living foundation stone that all other stones rest upon. Set yourself close to him—lean upon him. Lay down your life in his hands. Whoever believes in him will not be disappointed or put to shame. He's our rock and our strong tower.

Did you happen to notice our bulletin picture? These are Lithops, also called "living stones" or "flowering stones"—a type of succulent plant native to South Africa. They were accidentally discovered when a person picked up what they thought was an unusual pebble, and upon closer look, turned out to be a plant!

Lithops look like living, breathing, colorful stones. When they flower, the "stone" breaks open and flowers. By God's grace, we are living Lithops, God, our Divine Gardner, watered our hearts of stone—and faith flowered from our broken-open hearts. It's the miracle of grace and God's goodness.

Immanuel, we're the church—the church is the people, not the building. And so as living stones, Peter says, "let's come together." This is the time to gather stones together, not cast them. In other words, let's not go at this alone. We need each other.

Let's allow ourselves to be built by God into a spiritual house—to be a sanctuary for others to come to be fed, nurtured, and sent out into the world.

As Peter beautifully reminds us of who we are, saying:

“... you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s own people, in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light.” *1 Peter 2:9*

—Mother church reminds us who we are, and where we came from, and where we need to go. To live up to the family name. To be a chip off the old block.

In the rural parts of New England, you often see rock walls that line the land and forests. In some places these stone walls are so common that you almost don’t see them—they become part of the terrain. In Susan Allport’s classic history of stone walls in New England and New York, *Sermons in Stone*, she notes that at the time of the federal fence survey, New England and New York State had more miles of stone wall than the United States has miles of railroad track *today*.

How these omnipresent stone walls were built is a fascinating story. The rocks were pushed up to the surface thousands of years ago when the glaciers churned and pushed up pieces of granite and limestone. Fast forward to the colonial and revolutionary periods, where farmers stumbled across these stones as they were clearing their fields. At first, they randomly cast away the rocks, but later the farmers used these stones to build walls establishing property lines.

Today, the stone walls speak of the grit and tenacity of their builders centuries ago who raised up property lines stone by stone. Day in, day out, one stone over two, two stones over one, they built one of the great wonders of the world.

In the same way, God transforms us from good for nothing throw away stones, into beautifully layered stones that cry out God’s praises and are living monuments to God’s mercy throughout the centuries.

Let us, God’s living rocks, cry out God’s praises!

Amen.

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