

The Christian Job Description

Sermon Series on 1st Peter

1 Peter 2:4-10

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Introduction

To listen to the reading of Peter's letter and come to this part about the Living Stone, Corner Stone and living stones is, at first, quite strange.

Startling to the modern ear.

However, a good case can be made that Peter now incorporates an early Christian hymn utilizing very well-known Messianic passages from Isaiah and Psalm 118 to describe a crucial outcome of the work of Jesus the Christ.

A hymn, strange to our ears, but very familiar to the early Christians.

Why, at this point in his letter, does Peter bring in a song?

What does a song do? Among other functions, a song is like poetry and art.

When we have something inexpressible, beautiful, and awe-inspiring, we quite often turn to art, poetry and song to express the otherwise inexpressible.

So, what is Peter trying to say here?

In our first sermon on Peter's letter the Christians were addressed as aliens, strangers in a strange land, refugees and foreigners - believers facing an identity crisis

In the second sermon Peter reminded them of their calling to be holy. Holy, with the meaning of set apart from common use to the unique use of the living God.

Then, in last week's sermon from Paul Stevens, (Peter's letter was not being addressed), Paul, none-the-less again talked about Christian identity, about identity in our normal vocation be it at the factory, office, home or recreation and central to that identity an understanding of not just 'who' we are but, "whose" we are.

Which is another take on "holy," set apart, in the midst of our normal daily life, to be God's person for our times and places.

Now, in our third sermon on Peter's letter, Peter takes us deeper into the Christian identity.

Such is the beauty and goodness of it; he uses a song to do it.

And in so doing he artistically portrays the Christian job description.

Verse 5: you also, (Jesus Christ being the living corner stone) are living stones, being built into a spiritual house or a temple of the Spirit. What does this mean?

Do you remember the legal charge that got Jesus crucified?

Matthew's Gospel, 26:59ff **The chief priests and the whole Sanhedrin were looking for false evidence against Jesus so that they could put him to death.**

But they did not find any, though many false witnesses came forward. Finally, two came forward and declared, ‘This fellow said, ‘I am able to destroy the temple of God and rebuild it in three days.’

Exactly, the Gospel tells us. Jesus Christ, in his person, has replaced the Temple of God – meeting place between God and his people, that had existed since the days of Moses.

The Temple is now Jesus Christ and all his people and within that Temple we are the priests.

That is our Christian job description!

What does Peter say: . . . **be a holy priesthood, offering spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ. . . . But you are . . . a royal priesthood.**

Priests . . . I think our first reaction, given all the bad press about priests, is ‘Oh no!’ I cannot identify as a priest, . . . Lord, give me some other job description.

But setting aside our prejudice, think about the attractiveness of the good priest.

Text

Think about Peter’s original audience. They lived in a world of priests and temples. Certainly the Jews among them, had in all likelihood gone to the temple in Jerusalem, whenever possible, to deal with sin and to worship God. They would have known many good priests.

So now, when Peter sings a hymn about the new Temple, consisting of Christ and his people, it would have struck a chord of wonder and joy in their hearts.

Peter raises several important matters:

First, in agreement with the metaphors of the Apostle Paul, Peter sees Christ alone as the cornerstone, the defining and empowering center, to the new Temple.

In contrast with the regulations of the Old, it is now only in accordance with the life and ministry of Jesus Christ that the function of the Temple is expressed.

Second, when Peter talks about ‘living stones’ (that’s us) he uses a particular word for stone. This stone is not the common rock laying out in the field, rather it is a stone that has been worked on, formed and shaped, in order to fit within the larger building.

The people of Jesus only experience the wonder of the Temple of God as they are cut and chipped away into a form suitable for the mission of Christ.

Third, the stones are chosen by God. In the New Testament world, you could only identify as a priest if you were born into a priestly family. It was not your choice, rather the choice was made by God through the circumstances of your birth, over which you had no control.

The importance of identity through God’s choice is that behavior (living into the identity) is fundamentally powered by relationship, not just self-effort. Let me explain.

I am in relationship with Carol and due to the nature of the relationship I joyfully behave in a certain manner. In fact, the relationship empowers my behavior.

There are certain things I do and certain things I do not do as a result of the relationship. In fact, the relationship is expressed in my behavior.

My identity is rooted in the seen and unseen relationship with Carol. Likewise, my identity as a Christian in relationship with Jesus Christ powerfully forms my identity.

Finally, Peter tells us the outcome of who we are and what we do:

It is expressed in verse 9 **But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God special possession, that you may declare the praises of him who called you . . .**

Peter takes words first spoken by God to Moses right before he ascended the mountain and received the 10 Commandments. Words expressing God's desire to be present and active in our world through a nation of people who exhibit his goodness and beauty and love and all he is.

The words in our verse – **declare the praises** can be translated **express the virtues** –

God is looking for some people who, through Jesus Christ – the embodiment of God – will help everyone around them to see the attractiveness of the living Creator God

And how we actually do that is as priests. **Chosen people** describes God's work of calling people to know and relate to him; **holy nation** describes the organization of these people in the midst of our world; **royal priesthood** describes the vocational function.

What is a good priest?

Application

First, someone who functions with a team, not simply as an individual. How else do the stones get shaped and formed?

We get a picture of this with Zechariah, the father of John the Baptist. Here is the record: **In the days of King Herod of Judea, there was a priest named Zechariah, who belonged to the priestly order of Abijah . . . Once when he was serving as priest before God and his section was on duty, he was chosen by lot, according to the custom of the priesthood, to enter the sanctuary of the Lord and offer incense** (prayers of the saints).

The priest only functions within the greater regulatory structure of the priesthood.

Finally, to understand the job description of the priest I will read an account. This story is over 3,000 years old, however, given the reverence with which the Torah, the Old Testament Scripture was held among the Jewish people, we can be assured this story continued to represent the ways of the priest even up to the days of the New Testament.

Read 1 Samuel 1:1-20 Here are the dynamics of the priest's job.

Somebody comes across your horizon who is looking for God – perhaps a mild kind of looking, perhaps a wild and desperate looking.

Hannah was weeping bitterly, in great anguish and deep trouble, pouring out her soul.

Somebody comes across your horizon who wants forgiveness for their mistakes & their sins.

Eli the priest and his sons would have first encountered Hannah and her family as they brought animal sacrifices, according to the Law of God, to atone for their sins and bring them into right relationship with the living God.

Many in our culture no longer even understand what sin is. But everyone sins and is sinned against, and it weighs on people. They may not even understand why they are downcast in their soul. But they are, and they want relief.

Somebody comes across your horizon who wants to worship God.

Hannah and her family offering sacrifices was certainly worship but that was not all. Being at the Tabernacle (the forerunner to the Temple), offering prayers, hearing the Scriptures taught and singing songs were also a part of worship.

These activities were an outlet to the human person for their need (no matter how deeply buried and shared by all) to know and worship their Creator, the living God.

Somebody comes across your horizon who deeply needs to hear: **Go in peace, and may the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ grant you what you have asked of him.**

Here is the ultimate priestly task. Upon acknowledging that it is only through the sacrificial action of Jesus Christ that anybody can enter the presence of God

The priest stands and intercedes – face to face with somebody seeking God and face to face with God in the person of Jesus – bringing the two together. And being able to speak what is so terribly needed: **Go in peace, and may the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ grant you what you have asked of him.** This is the Christian job description. Remember, Hannah's grief went on 'year after year' and there must have been many prayers at Shiloh. But at the right time and in the right place, with the intercession of the priest, God acted.

Go now and may we all live into our calling, our identity. Amen.