

First Peter: Hope for Temporary Citizens of Earth
“What It Means to Be the House of God”
1 Peter 2:4-10

Take a first look.

I. Hope is not a solitary experience. When God calls us to Himself through Jesus Christ, He calls us to come *together*. To be born again includes being born into a spiritual *family*.

II. We belong together just like the bricks in the walls of the great temple built by Solomon centuries before Christ. This is the picture we will explore today. Together in Christ, we *are* the Temple of the Holy Spirit, the new House of God. This is not a building on the corner of Seventh and Chestnut, or even on the temple mount in Jerusalem. It is the company of believers united by God’s Spirit and faith alone in Jesus Christ. The true Church (the usual translation of the Greek term, *ekklesia* [ἐκκλησία]), is the company of “the called-out ones,” a living temple being built up by God, one brick at a time.

III. Peter recognized that our hope is a *shared* hope, not an individual one. He probes what it means as Christians to *be* the House of God, the Temple of the Holy Spirit.

Take a closer look at 1 Peter 2:4-10.

I. TO BE THE HOUSE OF GOD MEANS TO HAVE A STRONG FOUNDATION.

1. *Jesus is the Living Cornerstone of the spiritual house, which is the Church.* vv. 4, 6a. The House of God is only as strong as the Cornerstone. As the cornerstone of the spiritual temple of God, Jesus does at least two things for the Church:

a. *His presence gives the structure its identity.* The cornerstone was placed in the most prominent location of the ancient building and usually had some identifying mark or inscription on it. Everyone who looked at the building saw the cornerstone and knew what kind of building it was. So it should be with the Church.

A—It is Christ who gives the Church its identity—not the pastor, not the programs, not even the name by which the local church calls itself. The more Christ is central in the teaching and emphasis of the Church, the more it is truly the House of God.
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I—My friend Keith Hixson was the pastor of the Family Christian Center (Assembly of God) in Ellensburg for a number of years. He has been retired now for several years and lives in Walla Walla, Washington. He told me an interesting story about the time he was serving as pastor of a church in Newport, Washington. A local Mormon bishop asked if he could attend a meeting of the local Ministerial Association. The president said he could come as a guest. During that meeting, he asked one of the pastors to tell what he believed about Jesus. The man gave a basic explanation: the only-born Son of God, second Person of the Trinity (Father, Son, and Holy Spirit), who took on a fully human life which He lived without sin, died for the sins of the world, and was raised to life again on the third day. Then, he asked each other pastor in turn, “Is this what you believe about Jesus?” Every pastor said, “Yes.” He then said, “You all agree on who Jesus is.... I was taught that every church had a different Jesus. I believe in a different Jesus. So I guess I don’t really belong here.” He did not try to come back.

The point here is simply: the Church is identified by Jesus Christ, whose character, actions, and teachings are reported in the New Testament of the Bible. Any other “Jesus” is not the One Who gives the Church its true identity.

b. As the Cornerstone, Jesus gives the structure its security. The “capstone” is probably not the right picture here. A capstone was placed at the very topmost place of the peak of the roof, more as an ornament than anything else. The words here are “the head of the corner,” meaning the large stone at the most important corner of the building that anchors it permanently.

A—The security of the Church does not rest with its buildings not its conventions or popular human leaders, nor with its theologians or historical figures. It stands because of Christ alone.

I—I picked up a copy of the *Spokesman Review* one time that had a feature article about the famous cathedral located in Spokane, Washington (I believe it was ¹⁰The Cathedral of St. John the Evangelist, a cathedral used by the Episcopal Church). I was interested to read about the history of this large and ornate building. The rector of that cathedral was obviously very proud of its beauty and fame. It showed in everything he said. But I took issue with one major claim he made. He said (I paraphrase), “The endurance of the Church is due to its magnificent buildings. Without these, the Church would have ceased to exist centuries ago.”

What!?! Without buildings the Church would cease to exist? On the contrary, it is not the buildings, but Christ alone, who holds the Church together. He is the anchoring Stone on which everything else is built. For three centuries after Christ, Christians met in homes, in the open air, or even in the underground burial grounds called catacombs. Many Christian pastors and others gave their lives for the faith. The message of Christ has reached around the globe, one person and one people-group at a time, with and without buildings.

Buildings are one of the tools at the disposal of Jesus for the purposes of building His Church. But the Church, *the true House of God, is the company of believers in Jesus.*

2. For believers this Living Stone is precious, truly because He brings eternal security. vv. 6-7. “The one who trusts in Him will never be put to shame.”

A—If we have put our faith in Christ alone, then we will “never be put to shame.” He will not let us down. He will hold us together when nothing else can.

I—Here is a statement of just this, attributed to an anonymous Confederate soldier, written during the Civil War:

“I asked God for strength, that I might achieve,
I was made weak, that I might learn humbly to obey.
I asked for health, that I might do greater things,
I was given infirmity, that I might do better things.
I asked for riches, that I might be happy,
I was given poverty, that I might be wise.
I asked for power, that I might have the praise of men,
I was given weakness, that I might feel the need of God.
I asked for all things, that I might enjoy life,
I was given life, that I might enjoy all things.
I got nothing I asked for—but everything I had hoped for.
Almost despite myself, my unspoken prayers were answered.

I am, among all men, most richly blessed.”¹

History shows that the Civil War was used by God to bring countless thousands to faith in Jesus Christ in both the North and the South. “Almost despite myself, my unspoken prayers were answered.” Is this not the testimony of the life, and the lives of Christians linked in the Church? He holds us together. He brings meaning out of the chaos of human experience. He gives us a perspective that stretches into eternity, even when we can’t see much past this present moment.

3. *For unbelievers, this Cornerstone is a cause of stumbling.* This is the flip side of the story. This Cornerstone is not moving. Either you are joined with Him in faith, built together with other “living stones,” or you trip over it to your own harm.

A—Be assured that believing in Jesus Christ is the central issue of the Christian movement. Heaven or hell, life or death, peace or despair are at stake.

I—A pastor named Walter L. Wilson was talking one day with an atheist who said to him, “I don’t believe, Dr. Wilson, what you are preaching.” Wilson replied, “You have told me what you do not believe; tell me what you do believe.” “I believe death ends all,” was the atheist’s reply. “So do I,” said Wilson. “You do?” “I certainly do! Death ends all your chance of doing evil; death ends all your joy; death ends all your projects; all your ambitions; all your friendships; death ends all the gospel you will ever hear; death ends it all for you, and you go out into everlasting darkness. As for myself, death ends all my wanderings; all my tears; all my perplexities; all my disappointments; all my aches and pains; death ends it all, and I go to be with the Lord of glory.”²

II. TO BE THE HOUSE OF GOD MEANS TO BE UNITED TO REPRESENT CHRIST HIMSELF. v. 5

1. *Christian believers are also living stones in this spiritual house.* Have you noted the paradox in this expression, “Living stones”? A stone is dead material, but the members of the true Church of Jesus are alive. They are filled with His life. As He places us side by side with other believers, we express more fully what it means to be the House of God. The House is His company of genuine believers, who are brought to life by His presence in their lives.

2. *The House of God is being built over a process of time.* He says, ‘you ... are being built.’ Notice the use of the present tense here. This building project is *a process carried out over time that is going on right now.*

A—We must not despair that all of our family members or neighbors are not believers today. God is still at work, in ways large and small, to bring people to Himself and place them into the walls of the Temple of God.

I—A few years back, the North American Mission Board and the International Mission Board of the SBC produced a bulletin insert entitled, “Your Church on Mission with God.” In one issue, there were two stories that spoke to my heart. Story one: “Eating her lunch one at home one day, North American missionary Karen Pressley sensed an urgency from God to stop eating and go check her mailbox. ‘Wait, Lord,’ she thought. ‘The mail doesn’t

¹ *Chicken Soup for the Christian Soul*, p. 356.

² Reference library of illustrations.

come for another hour or so.’ Instead of returning to her food, Karen obeyed God’s prompting, and walked outside. As she opened the mailbox, a neighbor called out to her, ‘Can you help me?’

“Karen went to the woman, who was obviously distraught, and learned that she was just moments away from committing suicide. ‘She had stepped outside for a moment to see if there was anyone outside to help her,’ Karen said. ‘We talked and prayed together. Instead of taking her own life, she found new life in Christ.’”

And story two: “‘Does God love me?’ the man asked. Southern Baptist chaplain John Lewis looked into his pleading eyes and answered the man’s uncertainty. ‘You bet He does! Just let me show you in the Scriptures how much.’”

“Chaplain Lewis shared the gospel with the patient, who was near death and needed to know that he would share eternity with Christ.

“‘I prayed with the man as he accepted Christ, and he later died,’ said John. ‘God has placed me as a hospital chaplain to help people know that in the midst of pain, God is present and so dearly wants a relationship with them.’”

My friends, God often places one of His people between the lost and eternity. Perhaps He has placed us between our lost family members, friends, work and school mates and death. He can make living stones out of the most seemingly dead human hearts. He is the only One Who can!

3. *The House of God, the Church, represents Christ as a holy priesthood.* Here, Peter speaks of the essential character of the Church. The House of God represents Him in the world. Here is the point: *the Church is the visible expression of the presence of Jesus in the world.*

a. *As the company of God’s priests, all believers may offer up to God prayer on behalf of other people.* One of the roles of the priests was to bring the petitions and sacrifices of the people and present them to God.

b. *As the company of God’s priests, all believers may offer up to God people whom they have brought into the House through witness.*

A—Whenever we pray for another person, we are fulfilling the priestly role of the Church—representing the people before God.

Whenever we tell the story of Jesus, we are fulfilling the priestly role of the Church—representing God to the people.

I—The story of Jima, a former witch doctor in Niger, shows this powerful combination well. Several years ago, the IMB released her story in an email update. Jima lived in Swaara Taji, a village on the outskirts of Niamey, the capital city of the West African country of Niger. Here is how she came to be a part of the House of God. “Before I came to know Christ, I sold charms and potions and curses,” said Jima. “I prayed to Allah that he would allow the devil to bring his power into the things I was making and selling. It is Satan who gives power to the fetish.” She told how life was hard, because people wouldn’t always pay her as they would promise. “I was always hungry and had many, many problems because of the work I did. And I never had peace in my heart. I knew what I was doing was wrong, but I didn’t know how to change.”

Enter SBC missionary Sally Womble. Sally was working in the Bafuney Taji Windo (House of New Life) in Dwaara Taji. Though she had greeted Jima as she passed her house, she had never met her. Womble reports, “Then one day in my quiet time the Lord said to go

witness to her.” She called one of the young men who were leaders of the local church there, and they paid a visit to the witch doctor. They told her why they were working in the village. They were taken aback by her reply. Womble said, “She told us that since we had come to the village and started telling the Bible stories, she knew what she was doing was wrong.... That showed me the Holy Spirit was already working on her.”

Jima remembered: “She told me the story of Jesus Christ and promised to come back next week and answer questions. This touched me very much. I wasn’t able to sleep. When they came back, I told them I had no questions. I knew in my heart what she was saying was true. I decided to ask Jesus into my heart as savior.”

Jima began a study of the life and ministry of Jesus and was baptized a few weeks later in the Kuruko Hanna Church. Though she was tormented by evil spirits who were loath to let go of her, she reported that prayer was the answer. Christian friends gathered to pray for her protection. She asked others to lift her up in prayer as well. “Pray that I would grow as a Christian. I served Satan for so long, and he was not happy when I left.”

III. TO BE THE HOUSE OF GOD MEANS TO BELONG TO GOD. vv. 9-10

1. God has chosen His people for Himself. The language of verse nine echoes the Greek version of the Old Testament in Exodus 19:6, where God identified His Old Covenant people in almost the same words as here. The purposes of God for His people have not changed.

This is the status of God’s new covenant people, the House of God: “a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, *a people belonging to God*” who can now “declare [His] praises” (v. 9). All who have put their faith in Jesus Christ on a personal basis are a part of this Company of new life, and they are intended by God to come together in His name for mutual encouragement, the expression of God’s love, and to fulfill God’s mission in the world.

2. As the company of His unique people, the Church must declare His praises. When we express faithfully and consistently His holy presence in our lives, when we come together in love and fellowship, when we venture forth in His name on mission with Him, we declare His praise.

3. This praise centers on His acceptance and mercy.

A—The greatest witness of the Church, as with the individual Christian, is of the mercy of God, accepting us even despite our sin and failure.
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I—The story behind Peter’s words is the story of Hosea. In Hosea’s times, the people of Israel had turned away God, Who had set them free from slavery in Egypt centuries before. They had forgotten and had forsaken Him.

Hosea’s own marriage and family became a foil or a mirror of God’s relationship with His stubborn and rebellious people. Hosea married a woman who had been a prostitute and then who proved to be unfaithful to Hosea. After having children together, she left him. He prayed for her and never quit seeking to persuade her back to his love.

They had given their two daughters symbolic names: one was named Lo-Ruhamah, which means “not loved,” [or “not shown mercy”] and the other was named Lo-Ammi, which means “not my people.” Hosea’s own family depicted in tragic identity and experience the ebb and flow of God’s relationship with His people.

But the message of Hosea was a message of hope. God was compassionate. What was offered in Hosea’s time is true of the House of God, the Church, today. “Once you were not a

people, but now you are the people of God; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.”

I—I wish I could look back on my life and say, “Look how I behaved when I was 17, my dear young friends, and live that way yourself.” Instead, I have to say, “Look how I behaved when I was 17, and see how great the mercy of God is for this poor sinner ... and for you.”

I—Peter knew this firsthand, too. He might have wished that he could look back and say, “Look how faithful I have been to Jesus through all the years, from the time I first knew Him until now, and be like me.” Instead, he had to say, “Look how great the mercy of God is, Who would forgive and use my life and witness, even after I denied even knowing the Lord Jesus three times and even ran away when He was arrested.”

Take it home (applications).

I. HAVE WE RECEIVED THE MERCY OF GOD OFFERED IN CHRIST?

1. We must admit our need of it.
2. We must believe that Jesus Christ took upon Himself the penalty of our sin at the cross.
3. We must commit our lives to Him by inviting Him into our hearts as Savior and Lord and by professing our faith in Him through baptism and life.

II. WE MUST PUT OUR TRUST IN CHRIST ALONE TODAY, whatever we may be facing.

III. WE MUST REPRESENT HIM WELL TO OTHERS THROUGH PRAYER AND WITNESS AND LIFESTYLE.