

# RE-ENVISIONING CHURCH

SERIES: FLOURISH: HOPE IN A  
STRANGE LAND



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1 Peter 2:4-10  
Fourth Message  
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*1 Peter 2:4-10*

A few years ago, there was a commercial with a man who came across an old, rusty, battered sports car in the back of a used car lot—an old Mustang or something like that. This car was in rough shape. Most people would have walked right past it, thinking it was just a pile of junk. But when this man saw the old sports car, he stopped and stared. The scene shifted to a daydream, a vision of what this car could be. In this vision, the car was in impeccable condition—shiny paint job, clean leather seats, polished chrome accents—and the man was behind the wheel, cruising down the highway as the engine purred.

I am not a car guy. If I came across that old, beat-up car, I would have kept right on walking. But this guy knew something that I didn't. When he looked at this car, he didn't just see it for what it looked like on the outside—a rusty hunk of metal. Instead, he knew what was on the inside. He didn't just see the car for what it was in the moment; he saw it for what it was designed to be and what it could be again after he got done working on it.

When some people today look at the church, all they see is a rusty, old hunk of metal; an old institution from days gone by that's ready for the junkyard. *Don't let that thing on the road; it's dangerous! It's gonna hurt somebody.*

Even those of us who are a part of the church might not always think so highly of the church. Maybe we've been hurt by the church. Maybe we've been let down by the church. Or maybe we think we don't need the church.

In recent years, The Barna Group published research on a growing segment of the population that they identify as those who “love Jesus but not the church.”<sup>1</sup> In 2017, this group made up 10% of the American population, up from 7% in 2004. One in every ten people fall into this category. According to Barna, these people self-identify as Christian, say that their faith is very important to their life, believe the Bible, and by-and-large have orthodox views about God, but still, they have little to no interest in being involved in the church.<sup>2</sup> Some of these people have

been hurt by the church, but most just think they can get along in their faith just fine without the church—that the church doesn't add anything to their relationship with Jesus. A rusty, old institution ready for the junkyard.

If that is your vision of the church, you need to re-envision the church. Like that man who saw past the rusty exterior of the old sports car, you need a new vision of the church that takes you past the surface, beyond the first glance. You need to see the church the way that God sees it. This doesn't mean that you ignore the mess or you overlook the pain that you have experienced in the church. But it does mean that there is more to the church than first meets the eye. We need a vision of the church that doesn't only see the church as it is but sees it for what it was created to be and recognized what God is doing in and through the church today. We need a fresh vision for the church, and the passage that we are going to look at today in 1 Peter 2 is going to give us that vision.

Last week, we looked at the end of chapter 1 and the beginning of chapter 2 in 1 Peter, where we got a series of instructions on how we are supposed to live in this world so that we might experience a life of flourishing. In today's passage, Peter takes us past these instructions to remind us of our identity and our purpose. Who are we? Not who am I, but who are we, collectively as the church? And what is our purpose in this world? These are the questions that we are going to answer together this morning. Taking our cues from the text itself, we are going to spend 90% of our time answering the first question—who are we—because it is our identity as the church that actually shapes our purpose.

## The Place Where the World Meets Jesus

**1 Peter 2:4-5:**

**As you come to him, a living stone rejected by men but in the sight of God chosen and precious, 5 you yourselves like living stones are being built up as a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.**

Right away, we see that our identity as the church is rooted in the identity of Jesus himself. Jesus is referred to as a “living stone,” and we are also “like living stones.” This stone imagery runs through most of our passage, so let’s dig into this a little more.

In the first century, the stone metaphor was a commonly-understood reference to the Messiah. The Old Testament uses this metaphor at several points, and Jesus himself says that he is the “stone” that the prophets prophesied about.<sup>3</sup> This stone is both rejected by men and yet to God, this stone is chosen and precious. This description describes Jesus perfectly. He was not only rejected by people; he was crucified by them. At that moment, it looked like Jesus has lost. But, like the man who saw the rusty, old sports car, God also sees beyond the surface. Though Jesus was rejected by men, to God, he is chosen and precious.

As Peter writes to the church that is scattered throughout Asia Minor, facing their own rejection and persecution by men, and as he writes to us as we face our own type of rejection and persecution as followers of Jesus, he wants us to know that our rejection is not unique. Jesus himself was rejected. Our rejection is not unique, nor is it a sign of God’s displeasure. For just as Jesus was chosen and precious to God, so too are we.

Next, Peter builds on the stone imagery. Just as Jesus is a living stone—the living stone—so too, we are like living stones. We are not living stones lying in a field somewhere with no apparent purpose. Instead, we are part of a divine building project. We are “being built up as a spiritual house,” Peter says. The word used here for house (*oikos*) can be used to refer to a physical building or the family that lives inside that building. It can also be used to refer not only to your house, but to God’s house—the temple—and that is the image that Peter wants to bring to mind here. We, as followers of Jesus, are building blocks in the new temple of God. That is quite the statement because even a cursory read of the Old Testament reveals the incredible importance of the temple. The temple was the place where God dwelt. Yes, God is everywhere all the time, but in the Old Testament, God concentrated his presence in the temple in a unique way. So to say that we, the church, are the temple is to say that we are, collectively—not as individuals, but as a community, as the church—the place where God dwells. God lives, God resides, God’s presence dwells in us, the church!

That is not to say that God does not dwell within us as individuals. He absolutely does. In 1 Corinthians 6:19,

Paul tells us that our bodies, as individuals, are temples of the Holy Spirit.

But there is also another sense in which we, collectively, function as the temple of God, the dwelling place of God. This is who we are.

Peter goes a step further and says that we are a holy priesthood. The priests were those people who God had called to serve in the temple. They were the ones who led worship in the temple and who offered the sacrifices for people’s sins. They were mediators between God and his people, and their purpose was to lead people into the presence of God.

So, as Peter establishes for us our true identity as the church, he says we are the temple. We are priests. We are those who offer sacrifices. In other words, we are the place where people meet God. We, together, as the church, are the place where people meet God.

People used to have to go to the temple to meet with God. They used to have to go through the priests to get access to God’s presence. No more. We are the temple. We are the priesthood. The Spirit of God lives in us, and so we are the place where the world meets God.

People look for God in all kinds of places. They try to find him through meditation. They try to find him in “mother nature” or in “the universe.” They try to find God in themselves. But the place that God has designed for people to meet him is the church. It’s us.

Do you want people to meet Jesus? Do you long for your friends, your neighbors, your coworkers, your classmates, your family members to meet Jesus? Invite them to church. Invite them to your Connect Group. Invite them into your community. Your family. Your home. That’s where people meet Jesus. That’s where Jesus meets people. Through us. The church.

## **Don’t Stumble Over Jesus**

God’s plan to meet the world through his people did not start with the church. It began with Israel, the first “people of God.” From the very beginning of Israel’s history, God made it clear that their role was to bring the nations to God. When God called Abraham, he promised to bless him and to bless all the world through him. When God made his covenant with Moses, a passage that Peter quotes at the end of our passage, he calls them a “royal priesthood,” meaning that they were to function as a nation that brought the other nations in the presence

of God. The temple itself was constructed with a “court of gentiles,” so that the nations would have a place to come meet with God and to be included in his people.

But Israel failed. They got caught up in their special status as God’s people that they didn’t want anyone else to come and join them. They failed to be the place where the world meets God. Peter wants to make sure we don’t make that same mistake, so he goes back to the Old Testament story. He pulls together a series of three quotations, all having to do with the “stone” in order to give us a warning. But it is a warning that also gives us hope.

### **1 Peter 2:6-8:**

**For it stands in Scripture: “Behold, I am laying in Zion a stone, a cornerstone chosen and precious, and whoever believes in him will not be put to shame.” 7 So the honor is for you who believe, but for those who do not believe, “The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone,” 8 and “A stone of stumbling, and a rock of offense.” They stumble because they disobey the word, as they were destined to do.**

Peter is quoting from three Old Testament passages: Isaiah 28:16, Psalm 118:22, and Isaiah 8:14, respectively, to make his point. In this collection of quotations from the Old Testament, the stone is the common theme. In each case, the stone represents God or his salvation or his coming Messiah. In citing these passages, Peter is identifying Jesus as the fulfillment of these prophetic passages. He is The Stone. He is not just any stone. He is The Stone—the Cornerstone. In the ancient world, the cornerstone was the first and most important stone that was laid in a building project. It was a massive stone, and it served as the foundation for the entire rest of the structure. This is who Jesus is in God’s plan of salvation. He is the foundation, the anchor, the lynchpin. He is the one on whom God’s entire plan of redemptions rests. Without Jesus, there is no salvation. Apart from Jesus, there is no other way to be saved. He is it!

And yet, not everyone believes in Jesus. A thousand years before Jesus was born, God predicted that not everyone would believe in him. This was true in Jesus’ day. It was true in Peter’s day. And it’s true in our day.

By quoting these Old Testament passages, Peter is reminding us that we should not be surprised when people reject Jesus or when they reject us because of

Jesus. He goes further to say that those who accept Jesus are honored and precious to God, but those who reject him are walking into judgment.

Peter wants to make sure that we understand that our status is determined by our response to Jesus. Right in the middle of what is perhaps the most glorious passage in all of the New Testament when it comes to describing our identity as the church, Paul wants to remind us that our status in the sight of God, which is the only status that matters, is determined by our response to Jesus. If we believe in him, then, like Jesus himself, we are chosen and precious to God. We receive honor, not shame. We are saved from God’s judgment and lavished with God’s grace and love. But, if we reject Jesus, God’s judgment is coming for us, and there is nothing we can do to escape it. We can’t be good enough to earn our way to heaven. We can’t be sincere enough in our devotion to another religion. Our status, both here in this life and for all of eternity, is determined by whether we accept Jesus by faith or reject him.

This is a hard message for people to hear in our pluralistic, politically-correct culture. It’s uncomfortable to talk about Jesus as the only path to salvation. It’s uncomfortable to talk about the judgment and hell and eternal separation from God that awaits everyone who rejects Jesus. This wasn’t a popular message in Peter’s day, and it’s not a popular message in our day.

But, friends, this is an important message. It’s the most important message imaginable. This is not a message of hate. It’s a message of love. God has not arbitrarily devised a condition for salvation that most people will never discover, like a secret handshake that you need to be let into his special club. Instead, he has created a way of salvation where there was no way, and he did it by sending his own Son, Jesus, to die for you. For me. For us, the church. For the whole world.

What do we do with this message? If you have not yet placed your faith in Jesus, I want to invite you, I want to encourage you to do that today. Turn to Jesus. Open your heart to him and accept the free gift of life that he is offering you today.

For those of us who have already placed our faith in Jesus, for those of us who are already his people, let’s not presume on the favor of the Lord. Let’s not make the same mistake as Israel in thinking that our status of honor and favor is something that we deserve. We don’t deserve God’s grace. That’s what makes it grace! Our relationship with God and our status as his people

is not about what we have done; it's about what Jesus has done for us!

## The People to Whom God Has Shown Mercy

As Peter continues, he is going to reveal in glorious detail what exactly Jesus has done for us.

### 1 Peter 2:9-10:

**But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light. 10 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.**

Wow. Don't you just want to sit in those verses? Don't you just want to marinate in the richness of this new identity that is ours in Christ? This is who we are as the church. We are a "chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for God's own possession, that we may proclaim the excellencies of him who called us out of darkness into his marvelous light. Once we were not a people, but now we are God's people; once we had not received mercy, but now we have received mercy."

In these verses, Peter takes a long list of descriptions and titles and promises that are given to Israel in the Old Testament, and he applies them directly to us, the church.

Several titles come from Exodus 19, where God makes his covenant with Moses and with Israel as a nation. Just before God gives the Ten Commandments, he says to Israel, "Now therefore, if you will indeed obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession among all peoples, for all the earth is mine; and you shall be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation" (Exodus 19:5-6).

As you can see, Peter takes everything that is said of Israel, and he applies it to the church. We are a kingdom of priests, a holy nation, God's treasured possession. Some of this echoes what Peter said back in verse 5, where he called us holy priesthood and temple. The point there was to establish that we are the place where people meet God. We are the mediators between God and the world, and we are given the responsibility of leading people into the presence of God. Now, he builds on that by including another idea, that of royalty. We are a royal priesthood.

In ancient Israel, there were no two positions of higher honor than the priest and the king. By design, no one could fill both offices. Priests were from the line of Aaron, and kings were from the line of David. You couldn't be both priest and king. Until Jesus. Jesus was the only person who was both priest and king together, both a ruler of God's people and an intermediary between God and his people. But, as those who have been adopted into the family of God through Jesus, we have been given both royal and priestly status. We have been given the highest honor imaginable besides that of Jesus himself. We are God's treasured possession.

My wife and I work hard with our boys on the concept of sharing. It turns out sharing doesn't come naturally to two- and four-year-olds. I did find it somewhat comforting when I read in one parenting book that we shouldn't expect kids to share regularly until ages 4 or 5. But still, we are working on it. I frequently find myself saying things like, "Give that truck back to you brother." or "Your turn with the blocks is done." or "No, once you've put your food in your mouth, we don't share it anymore." There are a lot of rules about sharing.

But there is one situation, besides sharing food that's already been in your mouth, in which we don't make our children share. Each of our sons has a special stuffed bear. These bears go everywhere with us. They've been to the Midwest, the East Coast, and Hawaii. They've been on road trips and plane flights. These bears are tucked under an arm, getting slobbered on, at every nap and every bedtime.

Here is what we tell our children about their bears: Your bear is your one special toy that you get to have whenever you want. You can choose to share him if you want to, but you never have to share him, because he is your one special toy.

When I hear that we, the church, are God's special possession, that we have been given the place of highest honor, I think of these bears. I think of the affection that my children have for these bears. I think of their desire to take them everywhere and do everything with them. To tuck them under their arms and hold them close. Could that be the way that God feels about us? I think so. We are his treasured possession. We are the objects of his affection. We are the recipients of his kindness and love.

Peter cements our special place in God's sight by taking another passage first directed at Israel and now applied to the church, this one from Hosea. Once you were not a people, but now you have become my people.

Once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy (1 Peter 2:10; see Hosea 1:6, 9, 10; 2:23).

As the church, we are the place where people meet God. We are the people to whom God has shown mercy.

This is a very counter-intuitive attribute to boast about as a core part of our identity—people who have received mercy. It's not much to boast about, is it?

*Hey, I heard that you got a promotion. Congrats! Yeah, I didn't deserve it at all. I haven't met any of my performance goals this year, I dropped the ball on that big project, and "working from home" really means sleeping in and watching lots of Netflix. I probably should be getting fired, but I have received mercy!*

It doesn't sound very good, does it? At least it doesn't make *us* sound very good. But that is the whole point. We are not very good. We are broken. We are sinful. We are in such desperate need of God's mercy that we don't even know how much we need God's mercy. Do you know what that's called? Pride. We think we are better than we are. That's sin. And God hates it.

But we are the people to whom God has shown mercy. He did not leave us in our sin. He did not leave us in our brokenness. God came down to earth as a man. He came to his people, and they hated him. They rejected him, they killed him, and as he hung on that cross, the stone that the builders rejected became the cornerstone. He took us who were not his people—we were nobody!—and he made us his people. He took us—we who were so broken that we didn't even know we needed him—and he showed us mercy. He took our sin, he took our punishment, and he paid our debt. And he exulted us to the place of highest honor. We are the people to whom God has shown mercy. Thank you, Jesus!

## What is Our Purpose?

I said at the beginning that I was going to take 90% of our time to answer the question: Who are we? Peter has laid out the answer for us: We are the place where people meet God, and we are the people to whom God has shown mercy.

There is another important question that this passage answers: What is our purpose? Let's look again at verse 9. After laying out for us in breathtaking beauty who we are as the church, he tells us how our identity gives shape to our purpose. Why have we been given such honor and privilege? "... so that we might proclaim the

excellencies who called us out of darkness and into his marvelous light."

The two main facets of our identity as the church come together to give shape to our shared purpose: We are the place where people meet God, and we are the people to whom God has shown mercy *so that we might shout from the rooftops and tell the world how amazing our God is*. We don't boast about ourselves. We boast about Jesus! This is our mission. This is our purpose. Our job as the church is to draw attention to the excellencies of Jesus by telling the world of all of the wonderful things that he has done for us!

What has Jesus done for us? Well, for one, Peter says that he has called us out of darkness and into his wonderful light.

2020 has been a year of challenging times. For many of us, I know it has been a year of dark times. I've experienced that darkness myself and have cried and prayed with many of you in your darkness as well.

The darkness that we have experienced this year—the darkness of a pandemic, racial injustice, depression and anxiety and isolation, uncertainty created when our President tests positive for COVID-19 a month before the election—all of this darkness is but a shadow of a darkness that goes even deeper: the darkness of living life in rebellion to God. The darkness of a broken relationship with our Creator.

But, praise be to God, Jesus has called us out of that darkness and into his wonderful light! He has rescued us from our sin. He has healed us from our brokenness. He has restored our relationship with him. He has filled us with hope. He has given us joy. He has become our peace. He has shown us love.

Our purpose, as the place where people meet God and the people to whom God has shown mercy, is to proclaim the excellencies of him who called us out of darkness and into his wonderful light. We must boast about Jesus.

## Catch the vision

I'm not sure what your thoughts about church were before listening to this sermon. I don't know about the pain or the hurt that you have experienced from the church. The church is not perfect. Far from it, the church is full of broken people. But we are broken people who have found healing in the arms of a God who loves us

more than we will ever know, and now we just want to tell the world about how great he is.

I hope that's a vision you can catch.

## Endnotes

1. David Kinnaman and Rosanne Stone, Meet Those Who “Love Jesus but Not the Church”, *Barna*, <https://www.barna.com/research/meet-love-jesus-not-church> (accessed 9/30/2020).
2. Ibid.
3. Mark 12:10–11; Matt. 21:42–44; Luke 20:17–18