

Commitment to the Cornerstone

WEEKLY BIBLE STUDY

3rd in a four-part series

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Joshua 24:14–15 (Common English Bible -- CEB)

¹⁴“So now, revere the LORD. Serve him honestly and faithfully. Put aside the gods that your ancestors served beyond the Euphrates and in Egypt and serve the LORD. ¹⁵But if it seems wrong in your opinion to serve the LORD, then choose today whom you will serve. Choose the gods whom your ancestors served beyond the Euphrates or the gods of the Amorites in whose land you live. But my family and I will serve the LORD.”

1 Peter 2:1–10 (CEB)

Therefore, get rid of all ill will and all deceit, pretense, envy, and slander. ²Instead, like a newborn baby, desire the pure milk of the word. Nourished by it, you will grow into salvation, ³since you have tasted that the Lord is good.

⁴Now you are coming to him as to a living stone. Even though this stone was rejected by humans, from God’s perspective it is chosen, valuable. ⁵You yourselves are being built like living stones into a spiritual temple. You are being made into a holy priesthood to offer up spiritual sacrifices that are acceptable to God through Jesus Christ. ⁶Thus it is written in scripture, *Look! I am laying a cornerstone in Zion, chosen, valuable. The person who believes in him will never be shamed.* ⁷So God honors you who believe. For those who refuse to believe, though, the stone the builders tossed aside has become the capstone. ⁸This is a stone that makes people stumble and a rock that makes them fall. Because they refuse to believe in the word, they stumble. Indeed, this is the end to which they were appointed. ⁹But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people who are God’s own possession. You have become this people so that you may speak of the wonderful acts of the one who called you out of darkness into his amazing light. ¹⁰Once you weren’t a people, but now you are God’s people. Once you hadn’t received mercy, but now you have received mercy.

Commit to the Cornerstone. It is that simple!

Last summer. We took a look at the story of Joshua, the man that God chose to lead his people into the promised land. As they prepared to settle in the land, Joshua puts a challenge before the gathered Israelites. Are they really ready to commit to the Lord and to no other god? Will they commit to serving him faithfully?

Joshua’s challenge is as apt now as it was then. This is Commitment Sunday at St. Andrew, the occasion when we all have the opportunity to come forward and concretely express our own commitment through the giving of our tithes.

Most of us live pretty cushy lives. That was not the case for the believers Peter addresses in his circulating letter. These Christians in Asia Minor live on “the margins of respectable society” and who have “become victims of social ostracism, their allegiance to Christ having won for them slander, animosity, reproach, scorn, vilification, and contempt.”¹ These Christians are paying a steep social, economic, and personal price for placing their faith in Jesus Christ. What would you say to them about commitment? What would they say to us?

Peter begins his letter by reminding them of God’s great mercy. The believers have been given “a new birth into a living hope” and “into an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading.” The joy of salvation is theirs, Peter writes. Then, Peter urges them to live disciplined and holy lives, perhaps knowing that in times of stress, anxiety, and fear it is often God who goes first, pushed aside by the crises of the moment. In this week’s passage, Peter calls on these believers to long for

¹ Achtemeier, P.J., Green, J.B., & Thompson, M.M. 2001. *Introducing the New Testament: Its Literature and Theology*. Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans

spiritual nourishment and embrace their new identity as God's chosen and holy people, knowing always *why* God has called them to his family.

God's people, a holy people

Peter writes to Christians who feel like aliens and exiles in their own lands. Echoing God's word brought by Moses, Peter encourages them by reminding them of their place among God's people. Like the ancient Israelites, these Christians *are* a "royal priesthood" and a "holy nation" upon whom worldly power and holy purpose converge.² They have been called out of the darkness for a reason, a purpose. Peter states this purpose simply: Christians are to proclaim God's mighty acts.

What kind of people does it take to proclaim God's mighty acts, to build for God's kingdom?

Eugene Boring identifies five imperatives for the believers in Peter's first and second chapters. They are to:

1. live in the *hope* of Christ's return,
2. be *holy*, living a life set apart for God's service,
3. *live in reverent fear*³ of God, rather than living for the oppressive culture in which they find themselves
4. *love*, which is the unselfish caring for others, and
5. *long for* spiritual nourishment so that they might *grow*.⁴

These are people well-equipped to "proclaim God's mighty acts." Peter tells the them that they are to rid themselves of all malice and pretense, envy and hurtful talk. Like babies at their mothers' breasts, these Christians are to drink the milk of God's kindness so that they might grow to maturity and wholeness, having received a

"A living stone . . . like living stones"

In 1 Peter 2, from which today's passage was drawn, Peter piles image upon image, metaphor upon metaphor. Peter begins by comparing the Christians to newborn infants who need "pure, spiritual milk" to grow up. What is that milk? Jesus, of course.

Then, Peter urges the Christians to come to Jesus, a "living stone." This stone has been evaluated by the world and found wanting, rejected and tossed aside. But, in truth, this living stone is precious beyond measure, chosen by God for God's purposes. Too much of the world is simply wrong about Jesus.

And as Jesus is the living stone, so are Christians "like living stones." We participate in the life of Christ. We are called to the imitation of Christ. Earlier in the letter, Peter quotes from Leviticus: "You shall be holy, as I am holy." We, like living stones, are being built into a house, a "spiritual house," of which Jesus is the cornerstone (v. 6). Those who reject the cornerstone stumble and fall, but those who respond in obedient faith are "a chosen people, a royal priesthood."

In his commentary on 1 Peter, David Bartlett writes, "the difference between Christians and non-Christians is not that we see different things, but that we see the same things differently. Those who believe and those who do not both see Jesus Christ, the rock. For believers, that rock is the cornerstone or the capstone of their lives as individuals and in community. For unbelievers, that rock is simply to be rejected. What makes the difference between the two ways of seeing is faith."

²Not only are there many direct quotations of the OT in the New Testament, there are countless allusions and echoes. When Peter calls the believers a "holy nation" it is a loud echo of Exodus 19:6, but there is a very important difference. Moses brings a promise from God that is conditional: "If you obey my voice and keep you my covenant . . . *you shall be* for me a priestly kingdom and a holy nation. . . ." In contrast, Peter simply states a fact: "You *are* a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation . . ." The covenant-keeping has been done for us by Jesus!

³Living in reverent fear of God means to live always aware that God is God, that there is an aspect of God's holiness that lies beyond rationality and morality. Rudolph Otto coined the word "numinous" to describe it. It is the "awesome-filled" overpoweringness of God. It is energy. It is urgency. It is thunder, fire, and the "sound of sheer silence." It is why God can never be our "buddy."

⁴These are from Boring's study notes in the *New Oxford Annotated Bible* (3rd Ed.).

foretaste of God's full mercy. Peter urges them to be like "living stones" built into a spiritual house, a house of strength that rests upon Jesus Christ, the cornerstone and foundation of this house. Peter writes, "Therefore, prepare your minds for action; discipline yourselves; set all your hope on the grace that Jesus Christ will bring you . . . love one another deeply from the heart" (1:13,22). Later in the letter Peter writes, "Like good stewards of the manifold grace of God, serve one another with whatever gift each of you has received . . . whoever serves must do so with the strength that God supplies . . ." (4:10-11).

In much of his letter, Peter paints a picture of a people, God's people, who can do the work of the kingdom, who can "proclaim God's mighty acts." Christians are to be unified and disciplined. We are to love one another. We are to serve one another. Peter reminds us that we are to be agreeable, sympathetic, and humble. We are not to retaliate when wronged. . . . And we are to remember that we are part of something big. In a word, we are to be fully *committed* to the purpose for which God has saved us.

Something Big

Read through any company's annual reports over the years and you'll find a common theme. Every year is "momentous" and "without precedent." Every year, according to the reports, management is faced with difficulties and challenges that have never been seen before. Listen to politicians and pundits. Even theologians and teachers. It seems that we always want to believe that we live in momentous times, perhaps the most important period in our nation's, or company's, or church's history. Why? Why is it so important for us to believe we face challenges greater than anyone has faced before us?

It is because we all want to be part of something big. We want to be part of something that transcends the ordinariness of our daily lives. We need to believe that our lives and our work really matter. If we are going to commit, we want it to be for something that will really count.

Thus, it is all the more odd that many Christians so easily marginalize "church." Church becomes a place to see friends for a while on Sunday morning, or a place where we come to learn a little more about how to be nice or how to be happy, or a place to which we turn in tough times – but certainly nothing BIG.

But in today's passage, Peter blows out of the water all attempts to marginalize church and faith. Christians, he writes, are a people chosen and formed by God so that we might proclaim God to the world, so that all those who are blind to God's "mighty acts" might see the truth.

Re-read verses 9 and 10. If Peter's words don't make your heart race at least a bit, then perhaps you've yet to experience the passion and even the sense of purpose that ought to mark believers. A few years ago, we embraced a vision to call us all be passionate servants of Jesus Christ. Why? So that we may effectively proclaim God to the world in what we say and in what we do – in who we are.

We are living through threatening times, albeit much more so for some than for others, but all of us feel the pressures and anxieties. Peter wrote to encourage Christians who were being persecuted and shunned. He sought to strengthen their resolve by reminding them of their true identities. They were the people of God, God's colonists as it were, who would never be abandoned by God and whose purpose could never be diminished. We are no less the people of God, chosen for a purpose larger than ourselves.

God has bestowed a great mercy on us, calling us to him and to his purposes. We at St. Andrew must never pull back in the face of tough times, but always push forward. We must strive to hear God's voice and let him lead us with renewed purpose. Like those believers long ago, we can hear Peter calling us to be a people of deep faith pursuing a holy purpose with love, joy, discipline, humility, and courage so that we may extend to others the mercy that God has extended to us. *Commit!!*

God's Chosen People?

Few topics are as perennially confusing to Christians as what we mean by "God's chosen people." And it can be emotionally charged, especially in light of the Christians' treatment of Jews over the centuries. But the best place to begin is seeking to understand what the biblical writers meant, particularly two Jews, Peter and Paul.

When God chose Abraham, God set about to form a people who would be his people. God would teach them what it meant to be his people. They would be a holy people, set apart for God's work. They would love God and love one another. Abraham's family would become the nation of Israel and, later, the people known as the Jews.

But what changed with the arrival of Jesus? Most Jews rejected Jesus as their Messiah and the movement, the Church, became overwhelmingly Gentile. So much so that Judaism and Christianity became like two rivers flowing away from one another.

But Paul and Peter were both Jews. Indeed, Paul was a Pharisee. Had Jesus given birth to a new "chosen people?" Were their fellow Jews who rejected Jesus still "God's chosen," still the elect of God? What does Peter mean when he called the community of believers, "a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people?"

In his letter to the Christians in Rome, Paul had to deal with these questions as he strove to unify the Jewish-Christians and the Gentile-Christians. What constitutes the people of God? A shared ethnicity? A common faith in God? How are the formerly pagan Gentile-Christians to see the failure of the Jews to keep the covenant they had made with God? Can the Jewish-Christians expect that the Gentile-Christians will keep the Jewish food laws, the Sabbath, the rite of circumcision, and so on?

For Paul, and in the end for Peter as well, this Jesus movement was not about "Jews converting to Christianity." Paul could never have thought in those terms. Paul didn't see himself as having a new religion, but a reconfigured one – reconfigured around Jesus Christ. Though Paul was missionary to the Gentiles, his hope was that his fellow Jews would yet come into the family of Christ, that the broken off branches would be rejoined to the tree. Paul's heart was broken over the fact that so many of his fellow Jews rejected Jesus, thereby removing themselves from God's people, at least for awhile. For, at the same time, Paul believed that God would figure out a way to get them back in.

In the midst of God's work among the Gentiles and the unbelieving Jews, Paul wrote that the Gentile Christians must not see Israel's "stumbling" as reason for any feelings of superiority. The Gentiles' salvation is bound up with Israel's. There is not one covenant (the new) which replaces another (the old) and there are not two covenants running alongside each other. There is one God, one Lord, one Spirit, one baptism . . . one covenant for Jew and Gentile alike.

For Paul, with the coming of Christ, there is one and only one badge of membership in the people of God: *faith in Jesus Christ*. This is the badge that identifies God's "chosen people." This and none other.

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

1. How committed are you to the purpose to which God has called? How is your commitment expressed? Do you think your friends and family would call you committed to Christ? What part does your giving play in our commitment? What holds you back from making a commitment to tithe? How about the giving of your time? How and where do you serve?
2. Peter's purpose in today's passage is to help the suffering believers see that they are part of God's larger purposes and, by doing so, help them to rise above their day-to-day struggles and fears. It helps to know that you have a purpose. Indeed, few books have been more popular in recent years than Rick Warren's, *The Purpose Driven Life*. Peter speaks of our purpose as proclaiming God's mighty acts. But that is probably not the end of the discussion. You might reflect upon and discuss your own understandings of our "holy purpose" as disciples of Jesus Christ. How might this purpose shape our lives as individuals and as a community of God's people? What ought to be the purpose of St. Andrew? Martin Buber, a 20th century theologian spoke of "worldly power and holy purpose." How can our holy purpose shape our use of worldly power? What are the dangers in our exercise of worldly power? How can we guard against these dangers?
3. Look back over the last year. What are five ways in which you have "proclaimed God's mighty acts?" What do you think Peter means by the phrase? How have you seen others make such proclamations – in word and in deed?

Daily Bible Readings

Before reading each passage, take a few minutes to get a sense of the context. Your study bible should help. Jot down a few questions that come to mind from your reading of the passage.

<p>Monday, Exodus 19:1-6 The passage echoed in 1 Peter 2:9-10</p>	<p>Tuesday, Acts 7 Stephen proclaims God's mighty acts in his words . . . and in his death. How deep a commitment did he make?</p>
<p>Wednesday, Luke 19:1-9 How is Zacchaeus proclaiming God's mighty acts? What is he ready to commit to his new-found Lord?</p>	<p>Thursday, Ephesians 4:1-16 A passionate church is unified and mature.</p>
<p>Friday, Galatians 5:13-26 A passionate church lives by the Spirit.</p>	<p>Weekly Prayer Concerns</p>

