



## The Unchangeable Consistency of Change

### 1 Peter 2:2-10

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In this season of Easter, we are making our way through the First Epistle of Peter as we consider how to maintain the Easter proclamation of God's justice in the midst of a changing world. For all that is different today from a political, social, and cultural perspective, how does the apostle's teaching guide us in faithful living?

We should take great encouragement in the words of the apostle, as the First Epistle of Peter was written to a population of Gentile Christians who were already some 40 or more years removed from Christ's resurrection. The original audience of this text was already dealing with changes in the socio-political environment from the days of Christ, and the author is addressing their lived reality as they are facing the challenge of maintaining faithfulness amidst a changing world.

Though our society, empirical leaders, forms of government, and cultural challenges are quite different than those living around the Mediterranean Sea in the late-First Century, our purpose remains the same, to do as the apostle stated in 1 Peter 1: "to prepare our minds for action; to discipline ourselves; and to set all our hope on the grace of Jesus Christ."

Throughout this epistle letter, the author is offering imperative advice, that is, telling us what it looks like to live faithfully as followers of the resurrected Lord. These are not named as *pre-requisites* to faithfulness; instead, they are offered as the *byproduct* of faithfulness. The apostle firmly believed that, should we have faith in Christ as the resurrected Lord, these imperative statements would be descriptive of the way in which we live and encounter the world.

Today's text offers two imperatives (i.e., statements of expectation) and one proclamation of truth that stems from the first two imperatives.

The first imperative comes in verse 2, "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."

If you've ever been around a newborn infant – and I mean, *newborn* (not a six-month old, I mean *new* newborn) – you know they generally only want two things: sleep and food. They sleep until they are hungry, and then they wake up to eat. And eating takes so much energy for them that they often go back to sleep after they have finished eating. (And yes, I know that newborns need more than sleep and food, they also need diaper changes ... but sleep and food are primary.)

In this text, the apostle is writing to the people of faith as if they are *new* newborns. Many of those to whom the letter was written were new to the faith. These are Gentile Converts – people who have never had a faith in the God of creation before; they have not previously devoted themselves to the Lord and Savior of creation. Yet, now, as a people of faith, the apostle says, like a newborn infant, there is one thing we should long for: the pure, spiritual milk, so that by it we might grow into salvation.

Though the Biblical text is filled with the title “Father” for God, it is also packed with the imagery of God as mother. Scholar Lewis Donelson remarks, “Milk in the ancient world, to state the obvious, did not come from bottles; it comes from women. Thus God is portrayed in this text as a mother suckling her babies.”<sup>i</sup> This remark stands as a reminder of the One who gifts us life; it is a proclamation that true life stems only from God, who is the provider of salvation.

For a polytheistic society that claimed allegiance to a number of different gods, including the god who was Caesar (the inherited ruler of Rome), the text is a reminder that in a world that is ever changing, in a world that will offer many different promises for how to receive life, there is but one author of life: God, who is Lord. God, the mother of us all, is the one who provides the pure, spiritual milk, which nourishes us into our salvation.

And then, as soon as this imperative is made regarding the seeking out of the constant life-giving presence of God as if milk from a mother, the apostle reminds us that God is not stagnant. Though God may be ever-present as our life giving source, this does not mean God is unchanging.

The apostle, in quoting Isaiah 28, writes, “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.”

In the early 1950s, the Charge Conference of Washington Street Methodist Church made the decision to construct an education building – which stands today on the south side of the church, gutted and under what feels like an eternal construction project. On September 12, 1953, the cornerstone of that building was set in place by the Ancient Free and Accepted Masons of the Alexandria-Washington Lodge, No. 22. If you walk outside today and turn right to look at the corner of that building, though it is slightly veiled by the scaffolding that has been there for over a year, the cornerstone still stands.

Cornerstones have a specific purpose in architecture. They are the stone that helps maintain the integrity of the structure, for the cornerstone sets the angle at which the walls are built. The cornerstone is usually the most square of the stones on a building, and as such, it provides the 90 degree angle around which the front and side walls are built, and it provides the correct angle for which the building is constructed upward.

The apostle, in referencing Christ as the cornerstone, acknowledges that Christ is not only at the foundation of our faith, but that, as any cornerstone is, Christ shapes our faithful being. Christ is

the one who sets for us the correct angle of our faith's structure. Christ sets the foundation and structure that gives shape, purpose, meaning, and mission to the body of Christ – that is us, the Church.

But the author says that Christ, as the cornerstone of our existence, is unlike the cornerstone of the building next door. In verse 4, the apostle writes, "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.

The structural integrity of a cornerstone is that it never changes. That block next door hasn't changed since it was set in place on September 12, 1953. It's gotten dirty, and it's been washed. It may have been chipped around the edges, and thus lost some of its visual appeal. But its purpose remains the same: it is the foundational block upon which the rest of the building stands.

Because of the permanency of stone, and because of the natural structure of stone, the words "living" and "stone" don't usually go together. It would not make sense for the cornerstone of a building to be a living entity, for things that are living are not stagnant. Living things evolve, adapt, and change over time. Even the oldest of trees around the world today, which are nearly 6,000 years old, look very different today than they did at the time they first took root. Living things adapt and change, and aren't usually considered good foundational blocks.

That the author indicates Christ as the cornerstone, as the foundation of our faith, is a living stone ... well, that should tell us something about the structure that God is building. If our foundational structure is a given its shape by a living stone, even as solid as the structure is with stone at its base, by the nature of all things living, the shape of the structure is bound to change, grow, and become something greater than it was before.

In the building process, we, as a people of faith, we are called to build ourselves upon that living stone, and as such, are also said to be "like living stones," that we might be built into a spiritual house. If our foundational stone is living, then we too must be living so that we might be molded, shaped, and formed into being God's holy priesthood – those that speak, witness to, and represent the physical presence of Christ in the world.

So, our first imperative is to drink the pure, spiritual milk that we might grow into salvation. We are not called to be stagnant, but to allow what God provides to change us. From the first day we claim faith in Christ, we become a people of growth who change and become something different than we were before.

And second, we're called to come to Christ, who, as the cornerstone of our faith, is a living stone, upon whom God builds a spiritual house. And that house is built with us as the blocks, who are also living stones, so that God might continue to form a holy presence in the world.

After those two imperatives are laid out, there is a proclamation of truth. The apostle writes, “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.”

In this statement of truth, we find the greatest witness of God in the midst of a changing world.

The biggest changes in human history have come when groups of people have sought to differentiate themselves and hold power over others. Every major war, whether a civil war focused in a single nation, or a global war, which put at odds multiple nations, has centered around the power of one people against the freedom and liberty of another people. It doesn’t matter if we’re talking about The Crusades of the 11<sup>th</sup>, 12<sup>th</sup>, and 13<sup>th</sup> Centuries, The French Revolution in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, The World Wars of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, or even the ongoing Israeli-Palestinian Conflict today – wars are always about the power of one people against the freedom and liberty of another people.

In the Biblical witness, in this text which calls us to be built upon the living stone of Christ as our foundation, we are told that, as people of faith, we are first and foremost God’s people.

Douglas Harink says it this way, “[The author] issues no general call to become a Christian and then, as a subsequent and perhaps optional move, for individual Christians to join together into a voluntary association that might serve and promote our projects of being individual Christians. Quite the contrary! In biblical logic the sovereign precedes the people and elects and creates the people; the people precedes the person; the person is constituted as such *by* the sovereign *through* incorporating the person into the people.”<sup>ii</sup>

I know, that’s a mouthful, so I’m going to read it again: “[The author] issues no general call to become a Christian and then, as a subsequent and perhaps optional move, for individual Christians to join together into a voluntary association that might serve and promote our projects of being individual Christians. Quite the contrary! In biblical logic the sovereign precedes the people and elects and creates the people; the people precedes the person; the person is constituted as such *by* the sovereign *through* incorporating the person into the people.”

What Harink is highlighting is that there is no structure, there is no building, there is no holy people where we, as individual Christians, exist separate from or outside the body of Christ. We are first and primarily a people who are the people of God. Before we are individuals of the greater body, we are first part of the collective: “the people precedes the person.”

First Peter says, “once you were not a people.” That is, there was a time, a time prior to your having faith and being part of the faith, when you were individuals. At such a time, it made sense for you to think individually, and to worry about power and freedoms, because you were only worried about yourself. “But now you are God’s people.” Now, you don’t get to think

individually any more, because, as a people of faith, you are part of something greater than yourself. You are God's people – living stones – part of an ever changing and ever growing spiritual house, that is given its structure, its foundation, its purpose, its mission, and its strength by Christ, who as a living stone, is the cornerstone of our very being.

The body will change ... the church will change ... for people will come and go. Our collective makeup will shift. But that doesn't hinder the work of God, because our being as God's people is as a living witness, built upon a living cornerstone. Our corporate existence is no stagnant and unable to change, but as God's holy people, as a royal priesthood, we are continually molded, shaped, called, pushed, and pulled to witness to the work of God's mercy and grace in the world.

So hear this good news, it doesn't matter how much the world changes – it doesn't matter how drastically different the world looks today than it has in the past – God is still providing the pure, spiritual milk that allows us to grow in the grace of God; God is still molding us as the be a holy people, built upon the foundational truth of God in Christ; and God is still empowering us as the people of God, as the body of Christ, as the Church to witness and declare there is a greater love, a greater promise, and a greater way where life and love, mercy and grace, peace and truth

abound. So join in the corporate celebration and let us declare that while once were not a people, we are now God's people, who share in the grace of God's mercy. Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> Lewis R. Donelson. *I & II Peter and Jude: A Commentary (The New Testament Library)*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010.

<sup>ii</sup> Douglas Harink. *1 & 2 Peter: Brazos Theological Commentary on the Bible*. Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2009.