

The Church in Exile (2:4-10)

Well good morning, great to have you with us. If you have a bible, turn with me to 1 Peter, chapter 2. That's where we'll be for our time together today. If you're here with us for the first time, let me just briefly catch you up so you know what's going on. We are on week 5 of a teaching series where we are just walking straight through the book of 1 Peter in our bibles. This book was actually a *letter*, written by a guy named Peter to followers of Jesus spread across the ancient world. And in the letter, **Peter's main purpose is to help these followers of Jesus figure out how to interact with the society around them.** For most of them, the culture they found themselves a part of was not super friendly to the way of Jesus, and in many cases was actually suspicious of it, and so Peter wants to help them learn how to respond to that type of environment.

And we're also trying to learn from his instructions. To be sure, our society in most places is not nearly as *hostile* to Christianity as theirs was, but there's still plenty we can glean from his instructions. If you follow the news or social media at all, you probably are aware of quite a few examples of Christians not relating well to the society they're a part of. So **we're letting Peter teach us, just as he taught these early Christians, how to live faithfully and helpfully and missionally in the society we're a part of.**

And in *today's* passage Peter is going to turn his attention to talking about *the church*. Even though that *word* "church" isn't found anywhere in this passage, it's clear that that's precisely what he's talking about. He's going to get into specifically what the purpose of **the Church is in a cultural setting like the one they found themselves in.**

Now I should probably stop and clarify that when I say this passage is about "church," I *don't* mean it's about *what we're doing here today*. That is some people's understanding of church: that it's this once or twice a week thing that I do, either because I feel like I'm supposed to, or because it makes me feel better about myself as a result, or whatever the reason might be. But *this*, according to the bible, is not church. It's something that the church *does*, but it's not church in itself. It also isn't about this sort-of spiritual organization that dispenses religious goods and services to people. I think that is also some people's understanding of the church—that it's sort of like a drive-thru window where you get your Jesus for the week and go on about your life.

But Peter is actually not talking about any of those things in this passage. Each of those views of the Church carry a *fragment* of truth: **at City Church**, this *event* that we do on Sundays (the Gathering) is an absolutely *vital* piece of who we are—it's massively

important. **We also sincerely hope that we are providing things of *value* to you that help you grow in your relationship with Jesus.** I personally hope you like the teaching here—I probably care about that a little *too much* at times. So it's not that those things are *completely off*. But at the same time, **neither of those things *fully capture* what the *Scriptures* teach us that church is.**

The *church*, at least according to *Peter*, is a group of people who represent God to the world. And Peter is going to insist today that **the Church is not this optional thing over here to the side that we can choose to participate in or not—but rather that the Church is absolutely *central* to our relationship to Jesus, and *central* to God's purposes in the world.** And today's passage is meant to drive all that home.

So we'll frame up what Peter says today in three sections (feel like I've been doing a lot of three point teachings in this series lately—maybe I'm slowly becoming a Presbyterian pastor? Idk). But three sections: *the purpose of the church*, *the foundation of the church*, and *the ministry of the church*. First up, let's talk about...

The *Purpose* of the Church

Right off the bat, Peter gives us a word picture for understanding the *purpose* of the church. Take a look with me at v. 4 of chapter 2:

*[4] As you come to **him**, a living stone rejected by men but in the sight of God chosen and precious [so obviously that's talking about Jesus], [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.*

Now let's stop right there for a minute. Peter says that the Church is a "spiritual house." And then he says that this *house* is built *out of* followers of Jesus, which he calls "living stones." Now, just a little bit of bible nerdism if you're up for it. That word "house," in the original language, is an *interesting* word. Because it actually has at least *two* different meanings. Sometimes it means exactly what it sounds like in that passage—a *house*. As in, the physical structure that people live in. But it can *also* be translated as "household." As in the *group* of people—the *family*—that lives *in* the house. Which raises the question: which one does Peter mean *here*? Is he talking about a *house*, or a *household*? Well I would suggest that the answer to that question is "yes." I would bet that Peter actually means to communicate *both*. It's sort of a play on words.

On one level, he *is* referring to a new *house*, a new “**structure**” where **God’s presence resides and is put on display to the world**. No doubt in his mind is the idea of the *temple*: the physical structure where God himself resided in the Old Testament. **For people back then, the temple was *the place you went to encounter God***. That was pretty much the only option. But by using this word with a double meaning, he’s actually making the point that *followers of Jesus*—the “family” of God—*are now that place*. **We have now become what the temple *used to be*: the place where people encounter God**. In other words, **God’s presence no longer resides in a *place*, but rather in a *people*: God’s people**.

And these two different ideas, I think actually work in *tandem* with one another. In other words, **we can only be a *house*, if we are becoming a *household***. **We can only become a temple where God’s presence lives, if we are living life *together* as a *family***. Karen Jobes, who I think is one of the *best* commentators and scholars on the book of 1 Peter—she puts it like this, commenting on this passage:

*The imagery of the living stones being built into a single unit implies that **the significance and purpose of the individual Christian cannot be realized apart from community with other believers**. Coming to Christ means coming into relationship with others...*

Do you see what she’s saying? So in our day, we’ve sort of created this new category of being a Christian where being a part of a church is at best *optional*, if not completely unnecessary. So the belief is “I’ve got me and my personal, relationship with God, and that’s really all that matters. And if I decide that I need a little bit of extra help with that relationship, the Church is *available* to me. But it’s not *necessary*.” That, I think is the *functional* belief for a lot of American Christians. But according to Karen Jobes and according to Peter, that’s not how it works at all. To be a Christian, in her words, “means coming into relationship with others” through the church. In other words, **the Church is not this nebulous, nameless entity that is just there to help *me and my individual relationship with Jesus***. **Rather, the Church is God’s representation on planet earth, and my *individual relationship with Jesus* really only finds its *purpose* when it becomes a piece of *that* puzzle.**

So as I was thinking about this, it made me remember one time that I was with my son Whit at a Tennessee football game. (Non-sports fans in the room: hang with me. This isn’t a sports analogy, it’s a *band* analogy. So don’t let me lose you.) But we were standing near the Ped Walkway and a little before the game starts, the marching band

comes by playing Rocky Top on their way into the stadium. And what I don't think I had thought about until that particular day is that when the band plays Rocky Top, every instrument doesn't play the melody. They actually all play bits and pieces of the melody. If you just listen to *one instrument's part*, it usually doesn't sound much like Rocky Top at all. It just sounds like some random melody. And I realized that because when the flutes came by, Whit, my son, turned around and asked me "dad, why aren't they playing Rocky Top?" Because it didn't sound like it. But **when you put all the instruments together, each plugging in their part to the overall arrangement, *their individual part* becomes what it was made to be.** And to me, that's a picture of **how our individual relationships with Jesus work. My individual relationship with God really only makes sense when it is plugged into the big picture of the church: the house that God is building, out of living stones. Does that make sense?**

And then to drive all this home, Peter reiterates a *similar* point in a *different* way. He uses yet *another* word picture (because apparently his English prof never taught him *not* to mix metaphors). He also calls followers of Jesus a "priesthood." If you're following along with our bible reading plan, we actually read all about the priesthood a couple weeks ago in Leviticus. One primary role of the "priesthood" in the Old Testament was to represent God to the people around them. They were this *select* group of people who were chosen to do that. But what Peter is saying *here* is that now ***all of us—not just a select few of us, but every single follower of Jesus—is now a part of that priesthood. We are now all called to represent God to the people around us.***

So listen, practically whether you are an accountant or a mechanic or a student or a stay-at-home parent or a graphic designer—**whoever and whatever you are, if you're a follower of Jesus, you are *actually* a part of God's plan to make himself known to the world.** You just happen to also work as an accountant, or a stay-at-home parent, or whatever it might be. Are you following that? *This is what you were made for. This is your purpose, alongside every other follower of Jesus—to make him known through our life together. You were designed to be a part of the spiritual house God is building.* But let's keep moving. Next, we find out about...

The *Foundation* of the Church

So if we together are going to represent God to the world like a spiritual *house* would, what should that house be *built on*, exactly? What's that house's *foundation*? That's what Peter transitions into next. Take a look with me, picking it back up in v. 6:

[6] 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**...”

So Jesus is the “cornerstone” of this “house” that we’re being built into. For those of you who were around last year during our *Church is a Family* series, you may remember us talking during that series about what a *cornerstone* is. But for those of you who weren’t here, here’s the idea. Basically, when you began construction on any type of building, you would have a stonemason chisel out something called a *cornerstone*. That cornerstone would be put in place *first*, before anything else, and served as a guide for the rest of the structure. So **if the angles on the cornerstone were off, the angles of the whole structure would be off. If the proportions of the cornerstone were off, the proportions of the whole structure would be off.** The cornerstone was the reference point for the entire building.

So part of Peter’s point is that if we are going to get this thing called the “Church” right, the *cornerstone it’s built on* has to be right. And the “right” cornerstone, Peter says, is Jesus. **The Church has to be built on Jesus, or the whole thing is going to be off.** Which means here at City Church, we don’t want just our *songs* to be about Jesus, we don’t just want the end of our *teachings* to be about Jesus—we want *every single aspect of our church* to be motivated and modeled after Jesus. **We want to love like Jesus loved, we want to speak like Jesus spoke, we want to accept people the way that Jesus accepted people. We want our church to be built—not on a style or a preference or a certain philosophy of doing things—but rather on Jesus, who is the true cornerstone of the church.**

So here’s one thing that I think the Spirit has been doing in me as I’ve poured over this passage. I feel like he’s been saying to me, on repeat, *the church is built on Jesus, not on us. The church is built on Jesus, not on us.* So, on a personal level, this is something I have to check *myself* on often: I want to always be sure that I’m not building City Church around *me*. Now, in some ways, it would be easy for me, as one of the *leaders* of this church, to do that, right? It would be easy for me to build it all around what I want or what I think a church should be. And just to be completely candid with you guys, plenty of pastors out there do exactly that. So we make a conscious effort to fight against that tendency here. That’s *one* of the reasons that nobody here is the “Senior Pastor” of City Church. Nobody gets to call *all* of the shots in our church. I am one of the leaders *in* authority at City Church, but I’m also *under* authority. I’m under the authority of our *other*

pastors, I'm under the authority of our teaching team, who gets to tell me what I should and shouldn't say on Sundays. I also *place* myself *under* the authority of several other pastors in our city. Those are a few of the ways *I* try to guard regularly against building our church around me and my preferences. So I felt like the Spirit was wanting me once again to examine my *own* heart about what I am building the church on. To ensure that I'm not building the church on me, but on Jesus.

But *additionally*, I felt like it was worth putting that same question before *all* of us as a church family to consider: are there any ways that *you* are tempted to build the church around *you*? I think it's really easy for us, when we come around a new church or community of believers, to start thinking to ourselves, '*hmm...this church doesn't seem to be built to my personal specifications. To start thinking, 'well, this isn't how I would do this, and that isn't how I would do that, and I would do small groups differently and I would do discipleship differently and I would do preaching differently or worship differently.*' And before long, we begin being frustrated by all the things in that church that are just a *few degrees off* from how *we personally* think church should be done. But with all the love in my heart for you, can I just tell you the reason that things in the church aren't built to your specifications? Do you know why that is? Because **you aren't the cornerstone. You are not the measuring tape by which to measure a healthy community. The picture you have in your head isn't the standard.**

And listen: it's *such* a good thing that the church *isn't* built on you, *or me* for that matter, because you know what would happen if the church was built around *us*? Things would get *real* goofy, *real* fast. *You and I* are not good *cornerstones* to build things on. We might have some good ideas and some good suggestions and some good things that God is stirring in us *for* the Church. But we also have biases, and blindspots, and shortcomings, and sinful tendencies that shape the way we see the world. **Jesus doesn't have those same tendencies. Which means we're much better off building the church on Jesus, and not on us.**

(Now, real quickly: I'm not talking about right and wrong things in a church, okay? So I don't mean, like, you're a part of a church and you think sin is bad and they don't really think sin is all that bad. If that's the case, you get out as fast as you can. I'm talking about *preferences*. I'm talking about things that aren't black & white, but gray. Things where they go about things *this* way, and you would go about things *that* way, but those are both faithful, biblical ways to go about church—they're just *different*. That make sense? In *those cases*, we may need to learn that we are not the cornerstone. The Church is not built around *us*.

So, just as a way of examining *yourself* in this regard: let me ask, is your mindset towards church, "man I have so many things to *teach* this church. There are so many things they can learn from me about how to do things better"? Or...do you have a mindset of "man, I bet I can learn a lot of things from the people in this church that I *need* to learn. Sure, I might have some thoughts and input too, and maybe we'll get to that eventually. But first, I'm going to take the posture of a *learner*, of a *servant*."

And here's the thing: **having Jesus as our foundation creates precisely that posture.** Because Jesus *himself* took that posture. He, even though he was the author and sustainer of all things, took the posture of a *servant*. He took the *lowest* position. He *humbled* himself. Philippians 2 would say that he humbled himself to the point of "becoming obedient to death, even death on a *cross*." In other words, it would be *impossible* for someone to take a lower position and a more humble posture than what Jesus took in his time on earth. And Philippians goes on to say that it was **because Jesus took that posture, that God then exalted him as the "name above every name."** His *humility* led to his *exaltation*. And if that was the posture of Jesus, surely it should also be the posture of all who claim to know and follow him. And specifically it should be the posture from all of us *towards* our involvement in the church. That's part of what it means for Jesus to be the cornerstone: his posture is the foundation for ours.

So Peter in our passage then goes on to point out just that: that **it was actually Jesus' humility—specifically, his willingness to endure even rejection—that led to him becoming the cornerstone of the Church.** "The stone that the builders *rejected*, has become the cornerstone."

Now just very briefly: can you imagine the relief, the help that brought the first century church? These ancient followers of Jesus who were currently being ostracized and rejected by the society around them. For Peter to say to *them* that they serve a savior who was *similarly* rejected? Peter says "**just like God built his church on the savior that the world rejects, he will also build his church out of the people that the world rejects.**"

Okay, last up...

The Ministry of the Church

Finally, Peter talks some about what we might call the “ministry” of the church. In other words, how does the church *go about* fulfilling its purpose, at a practical level? For that, look with me at v. 9:

*[9] But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, **that** [and here’s the part I want us to home in on...] [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.*

So here in the final couple verses, Peter makes the point that though *Jesus* was rejected, and though we *also* are rejected at times, we *remain* God’s royal priesthood. We are the representatives between God and humanity, and are therefore called to “proclaim the excellencies” of Jesus to the world around us. That is what we’ve been put here for.

I’ve heard it put like this before: *the Church is God’s plan A, and there is no plan B.* **When it comes to making himself known to the world that desperately needs him, God has given that task to the Church.** It’s his one and only strategy. Now that might make some of us ask “but doesn’t God sometimes make himself known *other* ways? Like, what about miracles and signs and wonders? Doesn’t God make himself known through *that* sometimes?” And he absolutely does. But let me ask you: *who* does he normally do miracles and signs and wonders *through*? The *Church*, right? You might say, “well what about through preaching and teaching? Doesn’t he do it *that* way sometimes?” Absolutely he does. But who does the preaching and teaching? The *Church* does. “Well what about *evangelism*? Doesn’t he use that sometimes?” Absolutely. Who does he call to do the work of evangelism? The *Church*. The church is God’s plan A and there is no plan B.

Now listen, when I say that, I don’t mean that a *Sunday event* or a *spiritual organization* is God’s plan A. I mean that a group of *people*, a royal priesthood, a holy nation—I mean *that* is God’s plan A. **A group of people who have been called out of darkness into God’s marvelous light, and see it as their sole task to tell that story to the world around them.** If the world around us is going to *find* the hope that is in Jesus, *that’s* how

it's going to happen. *That's* how it's going to go down. **When it comes to his plan for the world, God has chosen to give his Church the priority.**

So let's land the plane here this morning. **If the Church is God's priority, shouldn't it also be ours?** Shouldn't we also give it priority? If the Church being the Church is God's *one plan* for the *world*, does my *attitude* towards the Church reflect that importance? Does my *involvement*—my level of *participation*—in the life of the Church reflect that? Do my weekly rhythms—the things I give my time to—reflect that? As a whole, is your current posture towards the Church reflective of the importance *God* has given it? **God has pushed all his chips in on the Church. Have you pushed all yours in on it too?**

See, I think some of us are only “in” on the church insofar as it doesn't require too much of us. I think some of us are only “in” on the church insofar as it doesn't challenge us more than we want to be challenged. We're only “in” on the church insofar as it gives us the friends we want and none of the friends we don't want. We're only “in” on the church as long as it doesn't infringe upon our preferences or our time or our money. And maybe we're only “in” on the church insofar as we get to define what that church *looks* like according to *our* standards. But to be honest, and I say this again out of love: if we've got a whole list of internal *conditions* for our involvement with the church, that's not really being “in” at all. **That's asking God to build a church around us, when God desires to build a church around Jesus and include us in it.**

Now let me add that I know, **for some of us, maybe we're hesitant towards the church because we've had some royally bad experiences with the church.** Maybe the churches we've been a part of have done some harmful or even horrific things to us and the people we love. That, unfortunately, is way too common of a problem these days. And if that's your story, I want you to know that there's room to be wrestling with that here at City Church. We will do whatever we can to show you that we are worthy of your time and your trust and energy. **Now we aren't perfect—we can't promise that we won't ever sin against you just like you can't promise that you won't ever sin against us—but we can promise that we will strive to be a community built around Jesus.** Which means that when we *do* sin against you, we'll be quick to own it and apologize for it. And if you're willing to shoot for *that* alongside us, we'd love to have you along for the ride, even if it's a difficult process.

But that being said, for *the rest of us* in the room today, my guess is that it's not that so much that we have *baggage* with the church—**it's just that pretty much anything and everything seems more worthy of our time and our energy.** And that's a problem.

Because God didn't intend the Church to be this optional thing off to the side for people with extra time on their hands. He intended it to be *central, front-and-center* to his purposes in the world. **If you have a *relationship* with Jesus, you have a *responsibility* to his Church.**

Now, please do not hear this wrong: **this is not about City Church.** This isn't like my annual sales pitch, and then you're going to walk out into the lobby and we're gonna have sign-up forms to serve on a volunteer team and sign up for online giving. This is not my attempt to guilt you. This is not my attempt to recruit more people to be "cogs" in the City Church machine. That's not my point at all. City Church is a blip on the radar in the kingdom of God. In 100 years, City Church might not even *exist*. **But God's church will still be the plan for making things right in the world we live in.** For bringing the kingdom of God to bear in the here and now.

So the point is *do you want to be in on that?* Do you want to be in on *the thing that God is building?* Do you want to be the temple, the royal priesthood, the holy nation, the people for God's own possession? Do you want to be a part of God's plan to set things right? Because that's what we're after.

Response Time

So we're going to transition in just a moment into a time of response. I don't know—I don't have any way of knowing what the Spirit might be up to in your heart right now.

- Maybe some of this is clicking with you on some level. Maybe you're realizing, through the words in this passage, that you're not all in on the Church like Jesus was, but you *want* to be. And so if that's the case, maybe you want to spend some time next just owning up to that, acknowledging that to God, and then asking him or others what your next steps might be.
- Maybe for you, you're realizing that there is *baggage* in your relationship with the church. And that *that* is the *biggest barrier* towards you being all in with it. And so maybe the best thing for you to do today is to ask somebody to pray over you about that, ask them to help you process through all that in healthy ways going forward.
- Or maybe you came in here wrestling with something altogether different from any of that. Maybe there's just something *massive* going on in your life right now that is just crazy difficult, or crazy overwhelming, or crazy depressing, and you just want to pray about that or have someone pray over you regarding that.

Whatever it is this morning, we want you to have the space to wrestle with it well. So let me pray for us, and we'll have some time to do just that.

[After Prayer] The communion tables are open in the front and the back, the offering baskets will be coming by, and you're invited to stand with us as we sing.