

Sunday 29th July 2018
Living stones and a Holy Habitation

Part 1. Living Stones

The Bible is a book that uses pictures and examples from everyday life to express spiritual truths in understandable language to anyone who has their eyes opened by the Holy Spirit. Paul in the book of Romans says that there is a clear revelation of the power and glory of God in creation, yet few see it. There are people who can stand on the sea shore in a force 9 gale, with the waves crashing in like white horses galloping, and yet all they see is spray, they do not see the beauty and power of God represented in them. Others can stand on the top of a mountain and watch a spectacular sun set, and not be struck dumb in worship.

Jesus talked about farming and trees and crops, and fishing, and all sorts of illustrations that people were familiar with. The Bible uses other metaphors which are often much more than bare metaphors, such as the Body, the Temple, the family, the army, and so on when speaking about the community of God's people. One of the most powerful metaphors is comparing the gathered people of God to a bride dressed for her wedding day, the groom being Christ.

In this passage in Peter, augmented with Ephesians, we have the idea of a temple, and a body used to tell us something very basic, but also very profound and wonderful. Most things that are wonderful are also challenging or costly, or require great application. Only one person wings the Olympic 100m every four years, so application and seriousness is required!

In these passages, the idea of a building is used to tell us something about each individual believer, their relationship to each other, and the purpose of it all.

1 Peter 2.4-11 begins by telling us that Christ is the foundation stone of the building which is in process of being constructed. You will probably remember the prophecy that said that the stone which the builders rejected has now become the corner stone. If you don't know that one, well Peter quotes it, and a cross reference Bible will direct you to Psalm 118. This is all about Jesus and His statement that He would build His Church, and He has been doing this generation after generation around the world again and again.

One valuable thing about reading books about missionaries, especially those of long ago, is to see the work they did in foreign locations, and then to trace what has happened since. The Church of Jesus Christ has grown and encompassed the globe many times, as each generation rises and passes. Missionaries from the UK are largely responsible for the Church in South America, China, Africa and India. In fact, wherever you go, there are connections with the UK. There was a minister in Colombia who was simply referred to as 'The Scotsman!'

As I said last week, all of life is about Christ. Anything of value is about Him, but every generation has many who are content to collect fool's gold. We all know that we take nothing out of this world as regards property and money, yet most of us try to do so. Even the memory of us, and our reputations soon fade and are lost. My grandparents, on my mother's side of the family, died before I was born. I have a couple of very old and stern looking black and white photos of them, but I have no other records or memories of what I was told about them. I can't even remember their names. Have you ever visited a city, say, like Edinburgh? There are lots of statues in the street, and even more in the Museum. How many have you ever been interested in or recognized? Probably not many. In contrast, Christ is remembered in detail, have you ever pondered that? Only what relates to Christ is lasting and true, hence the importance of what we are told in these passages.

The thesis of these two passages is very simple. Anyone who has ever played with Lego or seen it done has an adequate understanding of what Peter and Paul are teaching us! The thesis is this, living stones are being built into a living structure, and this living structure is for the habitation of God by the Holy Spirit.

Now, isn't that simple enough, but it is also immensely profound, breath taking and wonderful. We who believe are to be the home of God!

There is a Hotel in the South of Ireland called the Butlers Arms Hotel. It was once a great hotel for fishermen who came from all over the world to fish for the silver sea-trout that used to swarm up a short river and into Lough Currane. There are photographs on the wall of some of the famous people who visited. There is, or used to be a picture of Alfred Hitchcock holding up one of the smallest fish I have ever seen. Charlie Chaplin was a regular, as were Royalty of several nations. However there will never be a building such as Christ builds, who has God in residence, and that residency will become permanent. No wonder king David longed to be even a door man in such a residence!

1. What is a living stone?

There is a clear play of words here. Peter has the Temple building in mind, but that is not the focus. People tend to get excited about things that are not going to last. Do you remember Roger Bannister? He was the man who ran the first sub-minute mile a load of years ago. Nobody thought it could be done until he did it, and the films of him show him almost collapsing at the end of his record breaking run. Today, many, many athletes run sub-minute miles and think nothing off it. People were in awe of him, and rightly so, but today it is a thing of historical interest, but the record is no more.

In Mark 13 verse 1, the disciples comment on the magnificence of the Temple building, on the great stones used in its construction. Some of you will remember that in the OT, the stones were shaped elsewhere and were such that they fitted together even more

snugly than Lego bricks do so today. The difference was that the Temple stones weigh many tons!

Jesus reply seems quite scathing. He tells the disciples that none of these building that they are in awe of will survive. It is a way of letting them know that He is not in awe of a Temple made by the hands of men!

2 Samuel 7 verse 11 is the account of David desiring to build a house, a Temple, for God. The end of the encounter is that even if David's line builds a temple, God will build a house for David. This is a reference to the Messiah coming from David's descendants. David rightly regards this as an utterly astonishing privilege and blessing. However, while David has a physical structure in mind, God is promising him something much greater than bricks and mortar. God is promising a people, a family, and a nation. Much better than any building.

There is another very powerful reference to all this in John 2 verse 19. It is very cryptic to the ears of the disciples and the Jews who were demanding a sign from Jesus. The setting is the Temple court, and Jesus refers to the Temple, but not the one built of stones in which He is standing. He refers to His body as the Temple and says that if this temple is destroyed, he will raise it again in three days. His listeners thought He was speaking about the temple building whereas He was speaking about His body which would be crucified, dead and buried, but raised on the third day.

These Scripture show that the physical temple is not in view here, but a mystical, spiritual building which has Christ as its corner stone, Christ as its architect, Christ its builder, and the building is of flesh and is for the habitation of God.

Men build cathedrals and Churches 'to the glory of God.' God builds a Church of living stones, of people who are born again, of people who are indwelt by the Holy Spirit, people who are spiritually alive. The difference is that which exists between a brick wall, and a new born child. They cannot be compared, the living child is of infinite value above any wall, even the grand designs of the Kremlin, or the lofty shining sky piercing buildings in the Arab cities.

There is a Hymn of Isaac Watts that refers to this vision,

Lord of the worlds above,
How pleasant and how fair
The dwellings of Thy love,
Thine earthly temples, are!
To thine abode
My heart aspires,
With warm desires
To see my God.

Here earthly temples are other Christians. This is how we should use our Hymn books. They are little commentaries on truth. How sad that we sing these songs with so little understanding. If you cannot afford much, after you get a Bible, get a good Hymn book. Look for a second hand copy of the Redemption Hymnal. This is one of the best collections of hymns you could own. Read them one by one, day by day, and it will do your soul good!

So far, so good. Peter is speaking about what a living stone is, a Christian, a believer in Christ, one who is depending only on the Blood and Righteousness of Christ for acceptance by God.

What does a living stone, a sincere Christian look like?

If we can't be clear about this than we are in trouble. If there are not indicators, than how can we know if we are a living stone or a dead one? Some families, but not all have family traits. I had a school friend who had the reddest hair you can imagine. (he is now totally bald!) Guess what, when family were born, they were little red heads too! There was a family likeness.

The true and simplest answer to this question is that living stones look like Christ. However, not every family has children who look like their fathers. Also, growing to become Christ-like takes time, and not all grow at the same rate or degree. Each of us is assigned a different degree of faith and so growth differs.

The Scriptures are very practical, and are keen to enable us to know where we stand. There are quite a few passages in Scripture which we can use to examine ourselves. The most searching is of course the Beatitudes. There is another which is also testing. The book of Acts is the record of the birth of the Church, the beginning of the building of this living Temple, and it records the life of a people who turned the world upside down. In Acts 2 verse 42, we are told the manner of life that these first Christians lived. I hope we all know this verse off by heart, because it is the mandate of the Church in every generation. When Christians have given themselves to these things, the Church has been normal, and/or in revival.

Acts tells us that the new Christians devoted themselves to the Apostles teaching, fellowship, the breaking of bread and to prayer. It is interesting what is not included in this list. Many have commented that evangelism is not in this list, so it must be incomplete. However history has demonstrated time and time again in every generation and where-ever in the world, that when Christians do these things, the church is added to and multiplied just as in acts. You see, when the bush burns, Moses draws aside to see it. When the Church is ablaze, people come to its heat and light. This has ever been the way. When the living stones are living, people will take note. Wesley said once that when the preachers are on fire, people will come to watch them burn!

Until the Church is like this, there is really nothing else to talk about.

Part 2. Built into a spiritual house.

Living stones are built into a spiritual house, a spiritual temple, and like priests we are to offer sacrifices – thanksgiving, praise and worship are our sacrifices. – offered in the Spirit. It's how our hearts are that counts!

Worship is about the condition of our hearts. It is not about the age of songs, their tunes, whether we have a band, a presenter, a choir, an organ or any other combination of things. Worship is worship because at some point we say 'I love you' to God and mean it. It can take a long time to get there, we can engage our heads, and music can engage our emotions, and all this quite quickly, but to tune our hearts to God is a different level entirely, and this takes time and application. Put it this way, all of us can sing. Some are better than others, but only a few can produce those notes which are outstanding, worship is the outstanding, because it comes from our hearts. As we learn to worship, we will probably be able to enter into it more readily. I suppose that the difference between praise and worship is that when we have worshipped we know we have been changed, we know we have been in God's presence, and other people can see it too!

The picture again is of a building, not a pile of unconnected stones. The Body image helps us here – each stone, each piece of the body in its right place, fulfilling its function so that - Eph. 4.16. Each part, when in its place functions to build the body up. Acts 2.41, 6.1 – added, multiplied – how – the building was built, the Body was functioning, and God was in the midst of them. We tend to think in terms of structures, plans, strategies, and methodologies. God thinks in terms of people. Tozer said it a long time ago – 'Men look for better methods, God looks for better men.'
John Wesley wrote,

'Give me one hundred preachers who fear nothing but sin, and desire nothing but the glory of God, and I care not a straw whether they be clergymen or laymen; such alone will shake the gates of hell and set up the kingdom of heaven on earth. God does nothing but in answer to prayer.'

Quoted by E.M Bounds.

This is not how most church people in the West think today, but I think that John Wesley has a right to be heard given the history of the people called Methodists! Until living stones come together in a living Temple, is it any wonder that the Church in Scotland and the Church of Scotland languishes? It is our responsibility to be revived, to wait on God, to seek God, until our souls are filled with the heavenly fire of the Holy Spirit.

The purpose of the spiritual house

For God to dwell by His Spirit in their midst – this is normal Church and/or revival – this is the cloud and the pillar of fire in the midst of the camp. This is the Shekinah glory coming down as in the dedication of Solomon's Temple and filling the place, this is the descent of the Holy Spirit as at Pentecost – this is what we are called to. Have you ever

read of the events of the Old Testament era? Have you read of the great events of the early Church, the evangelical revivals, the Fisherman's Revival in the early 1900's up and down the East coast, the Revival in the Islands in the 40's and 50's? Does it not create a longing in our souls to see such days again? Do we not long for our unbelieving and lack luster children, husbands, wives, friends, enemies and neighbours to be transformed by a great draft of the Holy Spirit sweeping across our land? Well, all our technology has failed to deliver. Only living stones and a living Church will avail.

Application

1. 1 Cor. Tells us to examine ourselves to see if we are in the faith. Are we in the faith? This is the most important question there is in life. It doesn't matter about our pensions or health. What matters is whether we are on the path to heaven, or still on the road to hell. What is our state, alive, or dead? Have we asked Jesus to be our Lord and Saviour? Are we trusting in our own works or inherent sense of goodness, or on Christ? We sing, 'In Christ alone, my hope is found,' is that true of each one of us, or are we depending on a hope that we have been good enough, or of being a minister, or an elder, or whatever – none of these count, only belonging to Christ will save us.

2. Do we realise, even in part, the high calling to be built into a living structure in which God will dwell? This is the Church, not the bricks and mortar, but people. Do we see Church as important because it is the purpose of God? What is our commitment to our local congregation, a duty or a life?

3. Do we understand the means that God has given to feed the stones and shape the rough cut stones into perfect shapes to build walls – the priorities of Acts 2.42? Real fellowship, not a counterfeit.

4. Where do we stand today as regards these things – are we living? Are we being built? Does the glory of God rest on our assemblies and glow in our breasts? The beginning and way on is repentance and faith.