

Therefore, rid yourselves of all malice, all deceit, hypocrisy, envy, and all slander. ²Like newborn infants, desire the pure milk of the word,^[a] so that by it you may grow up into your salvation, ³if **you have tasted that the Lord is good.**^[b] ⁴As you come to him, a living stone—rejected by people but chosen and honored by^[c] God— ⁵you yourselves, as living stones, a spiritual house, are being built to be a holy priesthood^[d] to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ. ⁶For it stands in Scripture:

**See, I lay a stone in Zion,
a chosen and honored^[e] cornerstone,
and the one who believes in him
will never be put to shame.**^[f]

⁷So honor will come to you who believe; but for the unbelieving,

**The stone that the builders rejected—
this one has become the cornerstone,**^[g]

⁸and

**A stone to stumble over,
and a rock to trip over.**^[h]

They stumble because they disobey the word; they were destined for this.

⁹But you are **a chosen race,^[i] a royal priesthood,^[j] a holy nation,^[k] a people for his possession,^[l] so that you may proclaim the praises^{[m][n]} of the one who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light.** ¹⁰Once you were not a people, but now you are God's people; you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.

Living Stones

Sacsayhuaman looks more like a fortress than a temple. It's just North of the Incan capital city Cuzco. It was constructed over 500 years ago and I would have loved to have seen it in all of its glory. The complex is massive and the most impressive part is the size of the stones. It's hard to miss, but many of the stones have been removed and used for the foundations of other buildings. The impressive remaining rocks at the archaeological site are there simply because they are too big to move. These rocks weigh up to 360 tons and they are so tightly fit together that they are still standing. It's no wonder the Incan Masons were able to work wonders with rocks. One stone in Cusco is so intricately carved and fitted even though it has 12 angles. I have problems when it comes to compound miters in wood. I can't even imagine carving 12 angles on a single stone and having them all come together perfectly. Sacsayhuaman was more impressive than Machu Picchu. It was massive. It's stood the tests of time. It's a solid foundation. Rocks tend to last a long time which is why Isaiah writes, "Trust in the LORD forever, because in the LORD, the LORD himself, is an everlasting rock!" (Isaiah 26:4)

Peter picks up on the same theme when he quotes from Isaiah, "*Therefore the Lord GOD said: "Look, I have laid a stone in Zion, a tested stone, a precious cornerstone, a sure foundation; the one who believes will be unshakable"*" That's a special rock. The temple mount in Jerusalem is another rock I'd like to visit but it's a dead rock. There isn't much that remains other than the Wailing Wall. The temple was pushed off its foundation. That means the site here on earth where God made his dwelling is no longer there and Peter tells us why. The rock that Isaiah refers to doesn't refer to a place but to a person: Jesus. He is the stone rejected by men yet honored by God. He is the one who breathes life into dead stones. he is the one who builds his church and that cannot be shaken.

But it doesn't feel as if this building is much of a structure. We're a small group, easily shut down by the government. The church doesn't look like much. When we look around we soon realize that it's not just the church but everything in life is uncertain, even the most solid investments in life fail. There isn't much we can cling in this world, not even life itself is unshakable but there is one thing, a solid rock upon which we can build our hope and future as living stones.

If you haven't noticed by now there are a lot of rocks in our lesson. There are some stones to stumble over and others to build on. The word "stone" occurs six times in five verses, and "rock" appears once, seven references to a

rock from Peter aka Rocky – the apostle. While we may see stones as obstacles, for the first century Jew would have seen “stone” as the temple in Jerusalem, however it’s interesting to note that the Septuagint, in pre-Christian times, translated Isaiah’s passage, “The one believing in him will not be shaken.” This stone laid in Zion was associated with the Messiah. As Jesus taught he shifted the focus from a place (the temple) to a person (his body).

Jesus is the rock. He is the stone upon which the church is built. *“Tear this temple down and in three days I will rebuild it.”* Jesus was speaking about himself. Jesus is the new temple who establishes Jerusalem. Whoever believes in him, will not be put to shame. That means they will be honored. These new believers to whom Peter writes are now beginning to understand the implications of what it means to be a part of this building. There is a purpose.

But stones don’t usually do anything. They sit around for centuries. They do nothing. They come in all shapes and sizes. Some are good for skipping and others for smashing. Some can be carved into monuments and others are best used in sling shots. Stones can be used in retraining walls and others are used for various purposes as seen in our 1st reading. Stephen was stoned, killed with rocks. But living stones, “cry out.” Living stones Peter says, *“rid yourselves of all malice, all deceit, hypocrisy, envy, and all slander. ² Like newborn infants, desire the pure milk of the word.”* This lesson used to be read the 1st Sunday after Easter. It’s known as Quasimodo Geniti – like newborn infants. Like newborn infants we are to crave pure milk – unadulterated, unpasteurized milk. Peter calls us living stones. Living stones serve a purpose, *“to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.”*

Rather than a living stone I often feel like a rock just passing time growing moss on the north side. We are alive but often we don’t look like it. There are divisions among us. We don’t always get along with each other, let alone love one another as Jesus calls us to love. We look around and the structure which God has created us to be doesn’t look so unshakable. It looks like it’s on the verge of collapse. So the living stones scatter among the fields or sit in disarray among the world.

Why? Like the Jews of Jesus’ time we’ve often associated the promise with a place and not with the person. We’ll put our hope and our future on the passing things of this world and when they don’t pan out as planned we feel betrayed. If only we’d realize that this rock is a person: Jesus, and placing our hope in him means we will be honored by God and yet rejected by the world. You may receive a barrage of verbal abuse designed to put you to shame, to discredit your character and shame Christians as moral deviants who are intolerant, bigoted, and old fashioned for our beliefs.

We’re living stones, while rocks have served many different purposes a Christian serves one: give glory to God. We look more like rocks than we’d like to admit.

But we have Jesus’ promise, *“Not even the gates of hell stand a chance.” On this rock I have built my church.* How? With man it is impossible but with God it is possible. Without Christ, without his word and a confession it all falls apart. Just as the temple fell apart in 70AD. Jesus said, *“Tear down this temple and I will rebuild it in 3 days.* His body, his temple would be destroyed on the cross. That same temple would be raised up to new life. We may build buildings and places but God alone builds the church a people for himself. He lays the foundation.

That foundation is his Son. He was rejected by man, cast aside and considered not fit for life in this world. Jesus was put to death taking our shame upon his shoulders and there he died so that we might have life. What humanity rejected, God selected and honored. To unbelievers, Jesus is a stone over which they stumble. How do you react when you trip and fall? I’m not exactly happy. I usually curse the object over which I’ve fallen. Believers regard Jesus as a precious cornerstone. Peter’s words explain that those who reject Jesus in unbelief are destined to have Jesus as a stumbling stone and not a cornerstone. Unbelievers set their course for eternity by their rejection of Jesus. They will be put to shame.

But God honored his son by raising him from the dead and overturning the judgment made against him. He honored his son by putting him in the highest position at his right hand where he will come again to judge the world.

God continues to honor us. Jesus sends out the Holy Spirit to gather dead rocks and breathe into them the breath of life. God is the builder. We are the stones. He takes dead lifeless people and he brings them to life. He then brings us the promise, You will not and cannot be put to shame in the Christian life if you believe in the Rock, that is Christ. This belief is not in a Christ Jesus who is distant, in a faraway land. No, the temple Christ inhabits is His own body and His body has been expanded to include both Jew and Gentile in the Church. Christ is in His body, the Church, and the Church is in Christ. We need look no further away than one's baptism or their participation in Holy Communion to be reassured of this reality.

The Church may not look like much but it never has. Its like the story of a Spartan King bragging to a visiting monarch about the Walls of Sparta. But when the visiting king arrived he saw no such walls to speak of. So he asked, "Where are the renowned walls of Sparta?" The Spartan king pointed to the men, his army, and said, "These are the walls of Sparta, every man a brick." Where is the Church of which God boasts "Unshakable"? It doesn't look so strong or mighty. It's here. Every person a part of it, not a brick, but a chosen and precious person. A living stone. Each living stone has a role to play and each stone is connected and supported to Christ for the building up of one another.

Living stones are not lying about in isolation or scattered about in disorder in the fields. They are selected by God, built into his temple which is now the place of God's earthly dwelling by the Holy Spirit, a place of true worship and acceptable sacrifice. Notice a, "Spiritual sacrifice," is different from the physical and pagan sacrifices. These spiritual sacrifices: be that praise, honor, or a holy and righteous life. It's the behavior that flows from a transformed spirit, no longer dead but living.

You have the same access to God as the OT priest. You have been specifically selected and chosen. You are part of the priesthood. You are living stones, far from dead. You can hear and respond that Jesus has sought us out, shed his blood, set us free. He has forgiven our every failure to proclaim his praises and now we sing his praises. He bestows on me the joy and honor of proclaiming to you, "Your sins are forgiven," so you in turn can proclaim that message to me, because I need to hear it too and you are living stones.

I'm sure I'll see many more dead stones in my life. Machu Picchu was fun, Sacsayhuaman, Moras Moray, and many others. But they're just that, "Dead stones." Whether a massive cathedral, a church, or a fortress they will fall but for now they serve a purpose. That purpose is to be used for God's glory as we bring the dead to life by creating living stones who cry out and give glory to God. Our Rock: our refuge, our strength. The one who does not change or decay, go back on his promises but he provides hope and a future. To him be the glory. Amen.