

OUR NEW IDENTITY IN CHRIST

1 Peter 2:1–12

Key Verse: 2:5

"...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."

Do you know who you are? Many would say, "Of course!" But who am I, *really*? Some try to find their identity in their ethnicity or culture. Some look at what they like, what they're good at, or what job they have. Some just accept what others tell them about themselves. But these things leave us with a flimsy sense of self. In today's passage Peter tells believers who we are in Christ. It's our true identity, the most important one we could ever have. And it's not just personal; it's an identity we all *share*. What is our identity in Christ? How can we grow in it? And why do we need it? May God speak to us through his word.

First let's look at who Peter was writing to. Look at 1:1. "Peter, an apostle of Jesus Christ, To those who are elect exiles of the Dispersion in Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia..." It's a first glimpse of their identity. "Elect" means chosen by God, but "exiles" means resident aliens in a foreign land. God chose them, but people alienated them because their beliefs and lifestyle were just so different. In Israel's history, "the Dispersion" meant the scattering of the Jews to the nations (cf. John 7:35). But Peter says that in Christ it now means Christians who have to scatter due to persecution. These people had to flee their homes. They'd been grieved by various trials, as if they were being tested by fire (1:6–7). They were really suffering, and they felt so insecure. They may have been exiled from Rome. Most likely, they were not Jews but Gentiles (1:18; 4:3). Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia Minor and Bithynia were all in modern-day Turkey, north of the Taurus Mountains, on the Great Plateau, and along the Black Sea. Turkey's Black Sea coastline covers about 1,000 miles and was an ancient place with a complex history. And those who fled here were very diverse. But Peter says they were all "elect exiles." They shared a common identity that God had chosen them and that they were not at home in this world.

Where did their new identity come from? Look at 1:2. "...according to the foreknowledge of God the Father, in the sanctification of the Spirit, for obedience to Jesus Christ and for sprinkling with his blood..." It's a brief statement loaded with some key gospel truths. God the Father chooses. God the Spirit sanctifies. And we obey Jesus the Son and accept his blood. These are all essential. Our Christian identity becomes clear when we accept this gospel of God. We accept God's choosing grace, his Spirit's work, and this new covenant relationship to obey Jesus as Lord, through his blood shed for us.

And there's another aspect to our new identity. Look at 1:3–4. "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! According to his great mercy, he has caused us to be born again

to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, to an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled and unfading, kept in heaven for you..." Peter says we gain our new identity when we're born again. It gives us a living hope in heaven. This new birth and new hope are what form our new identity. We can't have this new identity just because we were born into a Christian family, or by forcing ourselves to accept it, or if someone else pushes us into it (John 1:13). We gain our new identity when we simply receive Jesus. When we do, we're born of the Spirit and receive a living hope. It's so simple. This new identity doesn't eliminate our personality or our ethnic and cultural perspectives. But it gives us a totally new outlook on life, as well as a new life direction.

Peter urges us to grow in our new identity. He said in 1:22, "Having purified your souls by your obedience to the truth for a sincere brotherly love, love one another earnestly from a pure heart..." Such earnest love flows out of this new identity in Christ. Peter urges us to practice brotherly love (2:17). In 3:8 he says, "Finally, all of you, have unity of mind, sympathy, brotherly love, a tender heart, and a humble mind." This kind of love doesn't come easily. Read 2:1. "So put away all malice and all deceit and hypocrisy and envy and all slander." These dark things come from our sinful nature, and they really poison love. "All malice" means wishing for bad things to happen to others. "All deceit and hypocrisy and envy" means pretending we like others, while being jealous or even working against them. "All slander" means all kinds of gossip and backbiting. All these things destroy trust. And trust is essential to love. If we don't learn how to love, we won't grow in our Christian identity. If we're always sizing each other up, pointing out flaws and dismissing each other, we can't even be friends, much less brothers and sisters. And what if we know all the right things about being a Christian, but have no love?

So, what do we do with these sinful tendencies in us? Peter says to put them away and replace them with something positive. With what? Read verse 2. "Like newborn infants, long for the pure spiritual milk, that by it you may grow up into salvation..." "Long for" means to have a strong desire or yearning. Peter says to "long for the pure spiritual milk." What is that? In one sense, it's the word of God broadly. In another, it's the gospel of Jesus specifically. Verse 3 says, "...if indeed you have tasted that the Lord is good." Like a newborn, we may pull away from the pure spiritual milk because we're not yet used to it. We need to develop a taste for the word of God, and for the deep gospel truths. In verse 3, the word "good" can also mean "kind." It's telling us we need to get a taste of the Lord himself—longing to have fellowship with him, longing to be close to him. The word of God, the gospel of Jesus, and fellowship with God himself, are the pure, most healthy and nourishing spiritual milk that enable us to grow up in our salvation. As Apostle Paul once said, "And now I commend you to God and to the word of his grace, which is able to build you up and to give you the inheritance among all those who are sanctified" (Acts 20:32).

Peter tells us another way we grow in our new identity. Read verse 4. "As you come to him, a living stone rejected by men but chosen by God and precious to him..." Our growth happens as we come to Jesus the living Stone. He died for our sins and was raised on the third day to give us eternal salvation. He's alive and still able to help us, even now. He's our rock of salvation (Ps.95:6). Quoting Old Testament prophecies, Peter twice calls Jesus the "cornerstone" (6,7). In architecture, the cornerstone is the first stone laid in a building, which serves as a

reference point for the whole structure. Likewise, Jesus is our living Stone and our cornerstone. He's our key and foundation for Christian life and community. We can't build without him.

In verse 4 Peter tells us to "come to him." What does he mean? In verses 6–7 he says to "believe in him." As we study the Bible, we need to be listening to God until he reveals to us that Jesus is our Messiah. When we truly believe in him, we become a stone on which God can build his church in our time (Matt.16:15–18). But after our confession of faith in Jesus, we need to keep coming to him every day. We come to him for his grace and his help. We come to him in prayer for ourselves and for others. We come to him just because we love him. It says when we come to him, we will not be put to shame; we'll be honored by God (6b–7a). What's more, when we come to Jesus, we become willing to go through what he did. And what is that? It says he was "rejected by men" (4). It wasn't just that somebody told him, "No." His rejection led to great suffering and a most humiliating death. As we come to him, we embrace his rejection and all his cross. We're willing to be rejected and suffer unjustly, as he did.

In 1 Peter, the word "suffer" is repeated 17 times, far more than any other book in the Bible. It says that through faith in Jesus, we endure sorrows while suffering unjustly (2:19). It says we do good and suffer for it and endure (2:20). It says we're *called* to suffer, following in his steps (2:21). It says that in light of Christ's suffering, our thinking about sin changes, and we cease from sin (4:1). It says we rejoice insofar as we share in his sufferings (4:13). It says we suffer in resisting the devil, waiting on God's grace to restore, confirm, strengthen and establish us (5:8–10). Jesus our living Stone gives us his resurrection life and enables us to endure suffering beyond our abilities. So Peter says in verse 5, "...you yourselves like living stones..." He's telling us something wonderful: as we come to Jesus, the living Stone, we actually become like him. Read verse 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." Here Peter is taking our identity one step further. What's he saying?

First, in our new identity in Christ, we all get closer. Peter says in verse 5 that we are living stones being built up as a spiritual house. Think about it. As we share the same faith in Jesus, and as we share in Christ's sufferings and his resurrection power, we cannot *but* get closer. Our faith in Jesus and our sufferings bind us together like kindred spirits. We come together in Christ in "a spiritual house" built of "living stones." This "spiritual house" isn't a building; it's a family, a community. What a comfort it is in a world where we feel like exiles! It's where God dwells among us by his Spirit (Eph.2:22). His presence binds us together and makes our community "spiritual" and "holy." It's what makes joining very different people into one spiritual house possible.

But many disconnected people, randomly thrown together, can't form a spiritual house. In fact, in a house, if the stones are disconnected, the place is weak and unstable. So, we all need to get truly *connected* to each other in Jesus. If we're at church for other reasons, only because we *have* to, or if we're always trying to keep a safe distance, it won't happen. As we come to Jesus, we need to allow God to bring us *close* to those who have faith in him and who suffer for him. Some gravitate toward each other because they have the same background, know the same

people or share the same experiences. But let's pray that in this new year, God may bring us really close to each other in Jesus.

Second, we "are being built up." Elsewhere, the Bible urges us to build each other up.¹ But here it suggests that as we come to Jesus, God builds us up. God shows us our place. God helps us see ourselves rightly. Twice Peter says that Jesus the living Stone is "chosen and precious" (4b,6). It implies that we, "like living stones," are also "chosen and precious." It's a wonderful part of our new identity. Seeing ourselves as "chosen and precious" really builds us up. We also need to see each other as "chosen and precious." We need to see how precious each one of us is as a living stone, instead of despising each other for whatever reason, or treating each other as irrelevant and expendable. As we come to Jesus in the new year, may God build us up in this godly way of thinking.

Third, we are becoming "a holy priesthood." Read verse 5b. "...to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ." Notice how Peter repeats in verse 9 that we are a "royal priesthood." We're "royal" and "holy" because we're serving the Holy God our King. Peter is not talking to special people; he's speaking to all believers. So, are we all becoming a holy and royal priesthood? Be honest. Many think it's okay to just live a nominal Christian life. Just believe in Jesus quietly, live my own life, and go to church on Sundays when I can. But God thinks differently. God wants to work in us and among us to grow us all as a holy priesthood together. What is a holy priest? It's not about outward appearances or learning how to talk with spiritual-sounding words; it's about a task. A priest is a mediator: he brings the holy God to people, and people to the holy God. This can be done anywhere, any time. Jesus is our great high priest.² As we grow like him, we want people to know God and to bring them to God. As a priesthood, we all pray and work together for this common goal. We bring each other, our families, our children, our Bible students, and our coworkers, to God in prayer. We pray for our city, our campuses, our nation and the lost world. And we share God's word with all those God allows us to. Being a holy priesthood is another key element of our new identity in Christ. Let's pray that in this new year we all can grow together as a holy priesthood.

Fourth, we "offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ" (5b). What are these spiritual sacrifices? In verse 9b Peter says they are to "proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light." Telling people about God and his "excellencies" is the first spiritual sacrifice God wants. What are these "excellencies"? In Jesus, God calls us out of our darkness into his marvelous light. No matter how dark or lost we were, in Jesus God is able to bring us into his marvelous light. In his light we're set free from the sickness of sin and evil, doubt and despair, meaninglessness and hopelessness. Hallelujah! It's so *excellent!* We need to *proclaim* it, tell people about it. As a holy priesthood, sharing what God has done for us needs to be our lifestyle. Usually, we might think of holy priests as self-righteous and intimidating. But not these priests. Read verse 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." Our new identity in Christ as holy

¹ Rom.15:2; 1 Cor.8:1; 10:23; 14:4,12,26; 2 Cor.10:8; 13:10; Eph.4:12,16,29; 1 Thess.5:11; Jude 1:20.

² Heb.3:1; 4:14; 9:11.

priests is nothing but God's mercy to us. Holy priests of Christ are driven by a personal sense of God's great mercy.

There's another spiritual sacrifice acceptable to God. As Apostle Paul hinted, God wants us all to participate "in the priestly service of the gospel of God, so that the offering of the Gentiles may be acceptable, sanctified by the Holy Spirit" (Rom.15:16b). God wants us all to help people who currently don't believe to receive the good news of Jesus, so these people can become an offering acceptable to God, sanctified by the Holy Spirit. Basically, this spiritual sacrifice is evangelism. As we grow in simple gospel faith, we can do it. And there are yet more spiritual sacrifices. Hebrews 13:15–16 says: "Through him then let us continually offer up a sacrifice of praise to God, that is, the fruit of lips that acknowledge his name. Do not neglect to do good and to share what you have, for such sacrifices are pleasing to God." Praising God, doing good and sharing—these are all spiritual offerings acceptable to God. God wants us to get active in serving him and others.

In verses 11–12 Peter urges us to live out our new identity as holy priests. He has already urged us to be holy (1:15–16). Now he tells us directly to abstain from the passions of the flesh, which wage war against our soul. He also tells us to keep our conduct among non-believers honorable. People need to see not hypocrisy but our good deeds, until they are moved to repentance.

In conclusion, why do we need to know our new identity in Christ? First of all, our new identity helps us change from our old ways into truly loving and kind people. Our new identity keeps us from being swayed by our sin, by our suffering, and by the world. Our new identity makes us willing to suffer for Jesus. Our new identity helps us see ourselves from God's point of view, how valuable each one of us is to God. Our new identity helps us see our life's purpose, to be a living stone in his spiritual house, bringing to God many spiritual sacrifices acceptable to him. Our new identity helps us live like a holy priest among non-believers. Read verse 5 again. In the new year 2024, may God help each one of us grow together in Jesus our living Stone as a holy priesthood.