

DON'T TRY TO STAND ALONE**1 PETER 2:4-10**

Do you remember the incredible story of the Quecreek coal mine in western Pennsylvania from a few years back? Nine miners were trapped for three days 240 feet underground in a water-filled mine shaft. Early in their ordeal, the nine men decided they were either going to live or die as a group. The 55 degree water threatened to kill them slowly by hypothermia. When one miner would start to feel overwhelmed by cold, the other eight would huddle around him and warm him up. When someone else got too cold, the favor was returned. After being released from the hospital, here's what one miner told reporters. "Everybody had strong moments. But any certain time maybe one guy got down, and then the rest pulled together. And then that guy would get back up, and maybe someone else would feel a little weaker, but it was a team effort. That's the only way it could have been." Those nine miners faced incredibly hostile conditions together – and they all came out alive together. What a marvelous picture that story is of the kind of support you and I receive from Jesus and those who follow Jesus!

The group of Christians to whom Peter, one of Jesus' original twelve disciples, wrote a letter were a discouraged bunch. They were facing formidable storms in their lives – the primary one being of persecution for their faith in Jesus. Nobody was killing them or putting them in jail yet. That would happen a few years into the future. But when Peter wrote this letter, you could definitely lose your job for being a follower of Jesus. Or your kid might well get beat up at school for being from a Christian family. You could very well be scorned, ridiculed or hassled simply because you believed Jesus was the way, the truth and the life. It was getting harder and harder to be loyal to Jesus for these relatively new believers much less stand strong in the face of this persecution. In the part of Peter's letter that we want to consider together today, God makes it plan that following Jesus is not supposed to be a lonely, isolated, or individual experience. Yes, trials and troubles are a fact of life for all of us, to be sure. But God never intended you to stand strong alone. He does not ask or expect you to stand strong alone. The storms in life are just too big and your strength is just too small. Let's read now the passage we want to concentrate on today. Here's Peter's first point....

YOU MUST BE BUILT ON SOMEONE SOLID.

If those Christians back then and there were going to stand strong, they had to be built upon Jesus. And if you're going to stand strong in the storms of life when they blow – and they will blow! – you must be built upon Jesus. Now, Peter uses a very interesting image or metaphor for Jesus to get his point across. Jesus has many names in the Bible which all point to some aspect of His character or ministry. In the passage we just read, Peter quotes some verses from the Old Testament. He compares Jesus to a stone. He says Jesus is like a living stone there in v. 4. Comparing Jesus to a stone may seem a little odd to us today, but once you understand how big buildings were put together back in the first century, then you can better appreciate the point Peter's trying to make. Back then, really big buildings – like a temple, for instance – were made mostly of stone. Cement hadn't been invented yet, so the stability of these massive buildings depended on the stones being cut exactly right and then fit together very

closely and firmly. Jesus is compared to a very specific kind of stone here. He's like either a cornerstone (v. 6) or a capstone (v. 7). What's that? A cornerstone – or a capstone – was a massive stone intricately cut, beveled and angled so that it could then be strategically placed in the upper corner of a building to bind all the walls together firmly like a giant jigsaw puzzle. If you were going to build a strong, stable building in the ancient world, you needed a great cornerstone or capstone.

So, what's Peter's point? First, Jesus is essential. A cornerstone or a capstone wasn't a luxury or an option; it was absolutely necessary. So is Jesus. Peter admits that many people rejected Jesus. They nailed Him to a cross, cursed, and killed Him. Ironically, the One humanity rejected, God considered essential. Jesus is essential to God's plan and purpose. For any human being to enjoy a relationship with God depends on who Jesus is and what Jesus did. I think this was a favorite thought for Peter, because years earlier he said to the Jewish leaders who had conspired to kill Jesus, "For Jesus is the one referred to in the Scriptures, where it says, 'The stone that you builders rejected has now become the cornerstone.' There is salvation in no one else! God has given no other name under heaven by which we must be saved." (Acts 4:11-12 NLT)

Jesus is essential because He is exclusive. I think you know that many people have big problems with this concept. Most people today believe that what's important is that you believe in some kind of god - some kind of higher power - but they resist the idea that there's only one way to a relationship with God. I can almost guarantee that your relatives, neighbors and friends who don't follow Jesus believe that He is not essential. That's why our culture is all about offering a who's who or a what's what of alternatives to Jesus. Just believe in something! But, of course, just wanting something to be true doesn't make it true. You may believe that people can get to God through a hundred different pathways, but the truth is that Jesus is the one and only way to God.

Now if Jesus is essential to having a relationship with God, how much more important is He to your life and mine when we're dealing with all those different storms that blow in and threaten to destroy us. When the going gets tough, it's very important to have a solid and sure foundation under your feet. I'm reminded of Jesus' story of the man who built a beautiful home on some sandy soil. When the storm winds came up and began to blow, the house fell down with a great crash. In the same story, Jesus told of another man who built his home on or into solid rock. Storm winds came up and beat against that house as well. But there was a difference. That house stood strong. Why? The foundation. It was built on rock. Jesus' point then was Peter's point here. If you're going to build a life worth living, Jesus is essential. If you're going to be able to stand strong when those inevitable storms of life blow up and blow in, Jesus is essential.

But Peter makes a second claim here. Jesus is reliable. He quotes the Old Testament where it says, "...and anyone who trusts in him will never be disgraced" (1 Pt 2:6 NLT) and applies that to Jesus. A cornerstone or a capstone was selected, cut, and then fit into the building because it was deemed reliable and trustworthy. It would do the job. It would accomplish the mission and purpose of holding the building together. In the same way, Jesus can and will hold your life together if you put your trust in Him. Jesus

is absolutely trustworthy, faithful, and reliable. When you build your life on Him and in Him, you will never be disgraced or put to shame.

Perhaps you've heard the story of the young paratrooper who was learning to jump. He was given the following instructions. First, jump when you're told to jump; second, count to ten and pull the ripcord; third, in the unlikely event that it doesn't open, pull the second chute open; and fourth, when you land, a truck will take you back to base. So, up went the plane to the required height with the novice paratrooper in it. Men started to peel out of it and the young paratrooper jumped out when he was told. He counted to ten and pulled the ripcord. The chute failed to open. He proceeded to the backup plan. The second chute also failed to open. "Bumber!" he said. "When I land, I suppose the truck won't be there either." You never have to worry that Jesus is going to be there to catch you or that, like a bad parachute, He'll fail to open. Jesus offers the only real, absolute, and total security this life has to offer. You cannot do better than to build your life on Jesus.

Peter makes a third point I don't want you to miss. Jesus is unavoidable. If a builder in Peter's day and time decided not to use a specific cornerstone or capstone in his building, and it had already been hauled to the worksite, it became something of a problem. Why? First of all, because a cornerstone was so huge – so massive – it became this enormous obstacle at the worksite. Everyone had to figure out how to get around it. It was very much in the way. You were constantly bumping into it. Secondly, because it was uniquely cut and designed to fit a specific place in your building, you couldn't just stick it somewhere else in the structure. Peter saw in this reality from ancient construction a parallel spiritually to your life and mine. "...'He is the stone that makes people stumble, the rock that makes them fall.' They stumble because they do not obey God's word, and so they meet the fate that was planned for them." (1 Pt 2:8 NLT) Jesus becomes an obstacle if you don't follow Him. In a sense, you stub your toes on Jesus every day. You bump up against and into His truth constantly even when you reject it. God will try and get your attention by making Jesus unavoidable in your life. If you reject Jesus and His rightful place in your life, you'll trip, stumble and fall into a lost eternity. If you reject Jesus, He becomes an obstacle you can't avoid. God doesn't want or expect you to stand strong alone. You can't do it. You must be built on and into someone strong. That Someone is Jesus. Here's Peter's second point...

YOU MUST BE BUILT INTO SOMETHING STRONG.

In v. 4, Peter calls Jesus the living Stone, but look what he says there in the next verse. "And you are living stones that God is building into his spiritual temple." (1 Pt 2:5 NLT) What's he talking about? He's talking about the Church – not a literal building with walls, doors, and windows – but people everywhere and anywhere who have put their faith and hope in Jesus as Savior and Lord. There's a profound change going on in our culture. It used to be that most people went to church, or at the very least had some familiarity with a church, even if they didn't have a personal relationship with Jesus. But there's a growing percentage of people in our culture who have had absolutely no exposure to any church at all. It's not that they're angry at or hostile to this or any

church. It's simply that the church is completely irrelevant to them and their everyday lives. It's not even on their radar! That may explain why when you invite a friend or neighbor to come to church with you, you get this kind of blank, uncomfortable look in response. Church is an unfamiliar experience to a growing number of people and many feel intimidated about even showing up here. Now, don't give up on inviting people to church; just be aware of the challenges! Here's something else I've learned. When a person becomes a follower of Jesus, he or she doesn't automatically understand the value of the church. Yes, they may now understand the value of a personal relationship with God or of following Jesus, but it can still be a mystery to them why getting vitally connected to this or any church is all that important.

Why *is* this or any church important? Why's it important to be a vital part of a church? Part of the answer has to do with standing strong in the storms of life. You can't do it alone. You need Jesus to be your foundation, your cornerstone, and your capstone. But one important way you actually experience the presence of Jesus is through His people – the Church – the community of people who trust in, love, and follow Jesus. If you cut yourself off from God's people – I've heard estimates as high as 20% of American Christians have no relationship with a local church – you cut yourself off from one of the primary ways to experience Jesus in all of His fullness, power and greatness this side of Heaven. Perhaps you've been tempted to say to yourself, "You know, I know it's important to have a personal relationship with Jesus, but the church – take it or leave it!" Or you might have a friend that subscribes to that opinion and you've wondered what you can say to help him or her value the church. I believe Peter offers several compelling reasons why you need to have your life built into a church – particularly if you want to stand strong in the storms of life.

The church provides identity. Peter says here, "... for you are a chosen people. You are royal priests, a holy nation, God's very own possession...." (1 Pt 2:9 NLT) Why is that remarkable? Those were descriptions that referred to the nation of Israel taken from the Old Testament. Most of the Christians to whom Peter was writing this letter were non-Jews living in what is now the country of Turkey. Peter transfers those labels or descriptions from the nation of Israel to these brand new non-Jewish followers of Jesus. What's he doing? He's giving them a new and wonderful identity they hadn't had before. He's conveying upon them dignity and significance. He's attributing value to them that they didn't know they had until then. He's giving them spiritual roots.

Some of you old-timers like me remember a popular TV mini-series entitled "Roots" that aired for the first time way back in the 1970s. It traced the history and heritage of Alex Haley, an African-American author. The story described how his African ancestor, Kunta Kinte, was enslaved and brought to America. It chronicled the abuse Kinte and his descendants suffered and how they maintained their dignity despite cruel humiliation until they were finally freed. "Roots" turned out to be more than an interesting story. It became a powerful event in the life of our country particularly for African-Americans. It provided them a sense of new dignity and a new appreciation for their history and heritage – their roots. It made them newly self-conscious of where they had come from, who they were, and who they wanted to become.

This is what Peter is doing for these new Christians. This group was terribly discouraged, disorganized, and disconnected. To borrow from Peter's analogy from the world of construction, each believer felt like a lonely, isolated brick that had no relation to anything or anyone else. But Peter says that God is bringing them together brick by brick, stone by stone, to make a new spiritual building for His glory, built on the foundation of Jesus. What does this have to do with us today? God is still working out His mission in this world – it's compared to a spiritual building here – and He needs you to take your place in that building. When the storms of life blow in on you, it's powerful stuff to remember that you are one of God's chosen people. You matter. You're significant. You're essential. Each and every stone – or follower of Jesus – is in God's plan and purpose. Each "brick" has a strategic purpose. And as we get and stay connected together, He helps us accomplish His plan for the world. Getting your heart and mind into and around that truth will help you to stand strong in life's storms.

Why *is* this or any church important? Why's it important to be a vital part of a church? The church provides community. You're never called, asked, or expected to go through life being a single, solitary brick, so to speak. God wants to put us together with other believers so that we create a spiritual building or structure where God Himself dwells in a spiritual sense. If you're a disconnected Christian, an isolated Christian, a lonely Christian, something is profoundly wrong. By definition, to be a follower of Jesus means you are automatically connected to God and to God's people.

Many followers of Jesus live under the mistaken assumption that they can get all their spiritual needs met by attending one worship service a week. Now our worship gathering may indeed be the single most important thing we do as a church, but it was never meant to satisfy your need to be a vital part of a spiritual community – to experience a web of caring, supportive relationships based on and in Jesus. We have adult Bible classes here on Sundays. You've been hearing about 7-8 small groups in our church that meet at different times during the week. They're open to anyone and everyone, but probably 50% or more of our congregation doesn't attend either a Bible class or a small group. Another way you experience community is working together with other people in the church in a specific ministry. That's just another way you get to know people and they can get to know you. In coming months, as we become more intentional about creating a discipleship culture in our church, we hope to see more one-on-one or one-with-two discipleship opportunities spring up and flourish. There are a whole host of great results that come from being a part of God's community, and not the least of them is that when the storms of life blow in on you, there's this whole network of supportive, caring, prayerful spiritual relationships that will help you stand strong. And when other people struggle, you can return the favor and help them to stand strong.

I can hear the push back already. "Pastor, I just don't have time for that. I just want to come on Sunday, hear a Bible message, sing a few songs and then get out the door as quickly as possible." OK, but I predict what will happen. Some great storm will blow up and into your life and then you'll wonder why the people of the church don't care about you. They don't call you. They don't send you cards. They don't seem interested in you. And sometimes, let's be honest, this or any church doesn't do as good a job at caring as

we should. But here's what else I know. Most people who feel that the church just doesn't care about them have never taken the time or made the effort to get relationally and spiritually connected at a deep level. Whose fault is that? May I make a simple suggestion? If you've been in this church six months or more, you need to do more than just attend one worship service a week. Start going to a Sunday Bible class or a small group. Find a ministry to serve in. And don't just do it for the church's sake. Do it for your own sake! Do it because you're a whole lot better off when you're connected with and plugged into God's people.

Why *is* this or any church important? Why's it important to be a vital part of a church? Finally, the church provides mission. What's the purpose of your life? Why are you here taking up space on the planet this morning? My friend, you can either pursue a successful life or a significant life. This world wants you to pursue its version of a successful life. God wants you to pursue His definition of a significant life. I believe Peter provides that definition right here, "...for you are a chosen people. You are royal priests, a holy nation, God's very own possession. As a result, you can show others the goodness of God, for he called you out of the darkness into his wonderful light." (1 Pt 2:9 NLT) Jesus is the living Stone. In this passage, we are called living stones. Jesus also called Himself the Light of the world. He also called us to be the light of the world. Jesus has a mission. You and I are called to a mission, a task, a work, a kind of service that is so big, so far-reaching, so life-changing that your mind will never be able to fully grasp it. But if you will let it grasp you – get a hold of you – it will change your life.

Mission! Mission involves everything I do for and unto God: worship, thanksgiving, talking to and listening to Him, obeying Him, confession, change as the Holy Spirit reveals my need to change. Mission also includes what I do for fellow followers of Jesus: encouragement, service, listening, confrontation, using my gifts in ministry. Mission certainly includes what I do for those who aren't Christians yet: praying for them, developing an authentic friendship with them, inviting them to church when appropriate to do so, being the light of Jesus shining into their lives. How does that old saying go? "Only one life 'twill soon be past; only what's done for Christ will last!"

How does mission help you to stand strong in the storms of life? When you know your life matters to God, you know that life's storms have a God-given purpose. When you know that God wants to use you somehow in the lives of people for an eternal purpose, you begin to realize that by standing strong you give other people courage to stand when their own storms blow up. Standing strong is a part of your mission. When you're a part of something so colossal and so wonderful, you realize that your temporary storm – as painful and distressing as it may well be today – can't really compare with what God has given you in the past, is giving you today, and will give you in the future.

"The Storm on the Sea Of Galilee" is the title of one of Rembrandt's most prized works. It was stolen from a Boston museum in 1990 and has never been recovered. It's been valued at more than \$3 million dollars. The work was the only seascape by Rembrandt, but there's a mistake in it. Or, is it a mistake? When you look very closely at the painting there's an extra person in the boat. There should have been Jesus and His

twelve disciples which makes a total of thirteen, but there are fourteen men in Rembrandt's painting. For years people marveled at the "mistake" that he'd made. Upon further examination it was discovered that the extra person was Rembrandt. He had intentionally painted himself into the picture along with the others. It wasn't a mistake at all. We all face storms on the seas of life. Storms are going to strike us because that's just the way life is. There's no exemption for any of us. And we all get frightened by life's storms. The question is are we in the boat with Jesus and His disciples – His people. Before and during life's inevitable storms, why not paint yourself in the boat with Jesus and with His people!