

(24) THE COMMUNITY OF JESUS: 1 PETER 2:4-10

Focus Idea: As communities of Jesus took root in new places, they faced adversity from numerous religious and cultural opponents. To understand (and meet) their harassment and pain, the church grounded their identity in one another and in Jesus Christ.

The Context: Unlike many of the New Testament letters, 1 Peter was not addressed to a specific congregation in a specific town. The list of addressees in the opening verses is long and broad: "To God's elect, exiles scattered throughout the provinces of Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia and Bithynia, who have been chosen according to the foreknowledge of God the Father." Most scholars understand that despite being spread quite widely, these recipients shared a common experience: persecution.

The Characters: The author of 1 Peter is the Apostle Peter, described in detail in previous Core40 lessons.

The Core: As Jesus had predicted, those who would come after him would face hardships, trials, and death. Persecution from the religious authorities had scattered them like seeds beyond Jerusalem (Acts 8:1); to the readers of 1 Peter it seemed like persecution was following them to the ends of the earth. They faced, according to 1 Peter 1:6, "Grief in all kinds of trials."

In order to withstand the forces against them, worshippers of Jesus plunged their lives into one another. The words of Peter – drawn largely from Old Testament imagery – proved a beautiful resource in this endeavor.

Vs. 4-8 borrow language from Psalms and Isaiah to make a profound point about rejection and vindication. Peter describes a construction project in which foremen select stones for their work. Some are stately and strong; a few can be made to fit with effort; some are not worthy to be part of the building and are quickly discarded.

Jesus was a discarded stone, Peter suggests. He was rejected out of hand by the people he came to love and serve. But in an amazing twist, this rejected rock became the cornerstone, the critical piece that provides alignment and integrity to every other stone in the structure. The readers of 1 Peter – many of whom had experienced desolation and rejection themselves – were now being formed with Jesus was into a beautiful building. They were living stones – monuments to God's mighty acts in Jesus and in the world. This image looks back to ancient peoples' tradition of marking great events with standing stones and pillars (see Joshua 4:4-9).

The other primary metaphor Peter employs is that of "royal" or "holy" priesthood. For those of Jewish descent, this description was surprising; in the Old Testament the priesthood was restricted to males of certain age, hair color, and tribal ancestry. Royal honors were reserved for a group even more select. But the people of Asia and Galatia, Peter insists, are being corporately folded into this role.

Peter wants his readers to understand that they are special to God, chosen and rescued by God's mercy, and useful to God. They have specific purposes in the world; they are emissaries of the King sent to sanctify the world. Christians understand that they are not the saviors of the world; Christ alone fills this role. But at the same time, they recognize that they have been joined to him in persecution, witness, and work, striving to help the world to more deeply honor its Maker.