

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*? It’s not just a young person’s issue; at every phase of life, human beings grapple with this question. Is my identity in my ethnicity or culture? Can I find it in what I like to do, or what job I’ve had? Should I just accept what others tell me about myself? Any of these possibilities seem to leave me with a flimsy sense of self. In today’s passage Apostle Peter tells believers who we are in Christ. It’s a new identity, the most important one we could ever have. And this identity is not just personal; it’s something 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 of all, who was Peter 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...”¹ The Christians who fled to these places were very diverse. If we can get past all these unfamiliar place names, we get a first glimpse at 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” refers to the scattering of the Jews to the nations (cf. John 7:35). But most likely, Peter’s audience were not Jews but Gentiles (see 1:18; 4:3). So in Christ, “the Dispersion” now means Christians who’ve been scattered due to persecution. It’s likely these people had been exiled from Rome (5:13). They 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 feeling so insecure. 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 key gospel truths. They were “elect exiles” because God the Father chose them, God the Spirit sanctified them, and they had committed to obey Jesus the Son and accept his blood. All these truths are also essential in having a clear Christian identity. To live with this new Christian identity, we need to accept God’s choosing grace, his Spirit’s work, and this new covenant relationship to obey Jesus as my Lord, through his blood shed for me.

¹ 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.

There's another aspect to Christian 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 Christian identity begins when we're born again. It gives us a living hope in heaven. This new birth and living hope are at the core of our new identity. We don't have such an identity just because we were born into a Christian family, or by forcing ourselves to accept it, or if someone else tries to drill it into us. Our Christian identity becomes authentic when we simply receive Jesus. When we do, we're born of God (John 1:12–13). We receive a living hope. It's a work of God, and 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.

In this letter Peter urges us to grow in our new identity. But how? 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..." It explains more about how our new identity in Christ grows. In this letter Peter mentions "brotherly love" three times (1:22; 2:17; 3:8). In 3:8 he says, "Finally, all of you, have unity of mind, sympathy, brotherly love, a tender heart, and a humble mind." Yet such love isn't automatic. Read 2:1. "So put away all malice and all deceit and hypocrisy and envy and all slander." These dark elements come from our sinful nature and really poison love. "All malice" means wishing for bad things to happen to others. "All deceit and hypocrisy and envy" means pretending that we like others, all the 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. Peter is saying if we don't learn how to love, we won't grow in our new identity in Christ. 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. What if we know all the right things, but have no love (1 Cor.13:2)?

So, what do we do with these sinful tendencies within 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. We need to "long for the pure spiritual milk." But what is that? Broadly speaking, it's the word of God. Specifically, it's the gospel of Jesus. And in verse 3 Peter adds, "...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. So we need to develop a taste for it. But what is it? In verse 3 it's not conceptual; it's "the Lord" himself. And it's something specific about him: he's "good." In Greek this word can also mean "kind."² Through gospel-centered Bible study we get a taste of the Lord himself—especially his kindness to us in Jesus.³ As we taste this, we long to have fellowship with him, to be close to him. The word of God, the gospel, fellowship with our

² "Good" in Greek is *chrestos*; see Ps.34:8 (in the Septuagint [Greek Translation of Old Testament–LLX], it is Ps.33:9); see also Johannes P. Louw & Eugene A. Nida, *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament based on Semantic Domains*. Volume 1, pg. 749.

³ Rom.2:4; Eph.2:7; Titus 3:4; see also 1 Cor.13:4.

Lord Jesus, his kindness: these are the pure and healthy spiritual milk that nourish us to grow up into salvation (cf. Acts 20:32).⁴

Peter says more about how we grow up 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...” Real 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 (e.g. Ps.95:6). Quoting Old Testament prophecies, Peter twice calls Jesus the “cornerstone” (6,7).⁵ In architecture, the cornerstone is the first stone laid in a building, which serves as a reference point for the whole structure. To come to him means to make him our key and the foundation for our Christian life and community. We can’t build anything of value without him (1 Cor.3:10–15).

So Peter urges us to “come to him.” But what does this mean? In verses 6–7 he says “believe in him.” As we study the Bible, we need to listen to God until he shows us that Jesus is our Messiah; then, like Peter himself, we become a stone on which God can build his church (Matt.16:15–18). After confessing our 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. People may be critical and oppose us. But Peter says that when we come to Jesus, we will not be put to shame; we’ll be honored by God (6b–7a). Even more, we’ll be willing to go through what Jesus did. And what did he go through? It says he was “rejected by men” (4). It wasn’t just that somebody told him, “No.” His rejection led to intense suffering and a most humiliating death. As we come to him, we embrace his rejection and all his cross. We’re ready to be rejected, to suffer unjustly, as he did.

In 1 Peter, the word “suffer” is repeated 17 times, far more than in any other book in the Bible. Peter says that through faith in Jesus, we endure sorrows while suffering unjustly (2:19). He says we do good and suffer for it and endure (2:20). He says we’re *called* to suffer, following in the steps of our Lord (2:21). He says that in light of Christ’s suffering, our thinking about sin changes, and we cease from sin (4:1). He says we rejoice insofar as we share in his sufferings (4:13). He 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 helps us endure suffering beyond our abilities. So verse 5 says, “...you yourselves like living stones...” Peter is telling us something wonderful: as we come to Jesus, the living Stone, we actually become like him: solid, unshakable and life-giving. 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. Verse 5 says we are living stones being built up as a spiritual house. Think about it. As we share the same faith in Jesus, share in his sufferings

⁴ See also Karen H. Jobes, *1 Peter* (Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament, 2005), pp.130–141.

⁵ Ps.188:22; Isa.28:16; cf. Matt.21:42; Mark 12:10; Luke 20:17; Acts 4:11; Eph.2:20.

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 up of “living stones.” This “spiritual house” isn’t a building; it’s a family, a community. What a comforting place to be 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. Many disconnected people, randomly thrown together, can’t form a spiritual house. 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 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 people gravitate toward each other because they have the same background, know the same people, or share the same experiences. 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.⁶ 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. We should never be 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. But it’s not just rhetoric. Are we all really 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 to use 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. The place it’s done is not important. It can be done anywhere, any time. Jesus is our great high priest.⁷ But as we come to him, we too want people to know God; we too want to bring people 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.

⁶ 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.

⁷ Heb.3:1; 4:14; 9:11.

Fourth, we “offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ” (5b). What are these “spiritual sacrifices”? Verse 9b says they are to “proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light.” God wants us to be telling people about his “excellencies.” 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 he sets us 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, it should be our lifestyle. 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 be helping people who currently don’t believe to receive the good news of Jesus, so that *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 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. Basically, God wants us all to get active in serving him and others. Not spectators, but active servants.

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

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, it helps us change from our old ways into truly loving and kind people. It keeps us from being swayed by our sin, by our suffering, and by the world. It makes us willing to suffer for Jesus. It helps us see ourselves from God’s point of view, how valuable each one of us is to God. It 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. Especially, it helps us to live and grow together as a holy priesthood 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.