Living Joyfully in a Hostile World

By Richard L. Dresselhaus

The night was late, and our hearts were crushed as we slowly gathered to face the sudden death of two teenage girls from our youth group. The car had skidded out of control, and within hours, both had died — talented, beautiful, but suddenly gone.

Huddled together in the hospital chapel, we could do little but express our grief: “Why?” “It can’t be.” “This is a bad dream that will pass.”

What helped was that we were together — youth, couples, classmates, family, and friends. As news scattered, the crowd grew. We had drawn together to give support and find support.

The point is clear: When life tumbles in, we really do need each other. There is strength in relationship, power in association — just being together, declaring together our mutual confidence in God.

So it would have been for the first readers of our text. They too were huddled together in houses, caves, and other out-of-the-way places hoping and praying that the raw hand of the vengeful emperor would not reach them.

This setting of fear, restlessness, uncertainty, and perplexity would have contextualized the text. Here were devoted followers who must lean on one another to find the courage to maintain their faith.

Just what are the attributes of this bond that binds the hurting together? What is the nature of those interlocking relationships that make the weak strong? How are we to describe the incredible association that transforms vulnerability into invincibility? How can we explain what draws tight the cords of inner courage that will neutralize even the blood-chilling threats of an insane and demonic emperor?

The answer is wonderfully found in our text. Peter pondered deeply the inner workings of God’s Spirit. He reached back to collect inspiration from the prophets and enriched his thoughts with metaphors and symbols drawn from his day. Then he dared to project for the people of God an identity that releases within them the courage to stand for truth and press on for righteousness.

Listeners will find a point of identity with this text. Suffering, uncertainty, fear, persecution, threat — in one form or another, this is the grit of life. No one is exempted. The text, set against the drama of its day, is irresistible, strikingly relevant, and incredibly contemporary.

While your special creativity will present a rich variety of central themes, you may wish to consider the following: How every Christian can find strength for the journey by living in relationship with other believers. You will develop the thesis that life together bridges the deep valleys and the hurtful places in our lives. By weaving the message around this central theme, you will reach out a hand of healing and hope to those who are at that very moment struggling to cast off the crushing pain of a present crisis. They will leave rejoicing that you, their pastor, have found for them a liberating truth in Scripture. Their hurts will be lighter and their spirits gladdened as they depart the place of worship. Once again, a bridge has been built between the text and the listener. Preaching has worked.
Enlightened by a New Association

1 Peter 2:4–10, NIV

An Interlocking Relationship

As you come to him
↓ the living stone —
↓ 1. rejected by men
↓ 2. [but] chosen by God
↓ 3. [and] precious to him —

You [also] are being built into a spiritual house (like living stones)
↓ to be a holy priesthood
↓ offering spiritual sacrifices
↓ acceptable to God through
Jesus Christ

A Reliable Perspective

“See,
I lay a stone in Zion
↓ 1. a chosen cornerstone
↓ 2. a precious [cornerstone]
↓ the one who trusts in him will never be put to shame”
(ISAIAH 28:16).

A Consequential Distinctive

Now
1. To you who believe
↓ this stone is precious
2. [But] to those who do not believe
↓ “The stone the builders rejected has become the capstone” (Psalm 118:22)
and
↓ “A stone that causes men to stumble and a rock that makes them fall” (Isaiah 8:14)
They stumble
↓ because they disobey the message —
↓ which is also what they were destined for

A Motivating Identity

But
You are
↓ 1. a chosen people
↓ 2. a royal priesthood
↓ 3. a holy nation
↓ 4. a people belonging to God
↓ that you may declare
↓ the praises of him
↓ who called you
↓ out of darkness into
his wonderful light
(Once you were not a people, but now)

You are the people of God
↓ 1. once you had not received mercy
↓ 2. [but now] you have received mercy
An Interlocking Relationship
What is the strong statement in these opening verses? The outline identifies it for you: “You... are being built up into a special house.” The preceding is introductory — the invitation to come to Christ, the living Stone. The following is definitive — for establishing a holy priesthood capable of offering acceptable spiritual sacrifices.

What do we make of this? An unraveling of the metaphor holds the key. Just as a house constructed with masonry is supported by interlocking patterns, so is the relational fabric of the body of Christ. No stone stands alone. Strength is found in relationship. The spiritual house stands strong because each living stone occupies its assigned place — a helpful illustration of the network that unites the body of Christ.

The application is powerful. Each stone is vital. Value is found in relationship. Strength is expressed in unity. Life and ministry flow out of association. Acceptable sacrifice has a corporate dimension. I doubt you will have any difficulty focusing on these points of practical truth.

A Reliable Perspective
Peter pushed the metaphor even further — moving from superstructure to cornerstone. The meaning is clear. That cornerstone is none other than Jesus Christ — chosen, precious, trustworthy, honorable.

Recently, I stood at the corner of the temple mount just south of the western wall within the perimeters of the old city in Jerusalem. The cornerstone was enormous — some 30 feet in length. Now, as then, the visitor is profoundly impressed.

Why? Why are the stones incredible and unusually large at the corner? The answer is obvious: Here is the beginning of the pattern. Direction and elevation are set right here. If you miss it at the corner, the rest of the structure will be flawed, the sense of symmetry destroyed.

The challenge is too compelling to miss. Christ must be laid as the cornerstone of life. He sets the pattern. The structures of life find their definition in Him. Strength and courage are His to dispense. We stand on Christ, the solid Rock. That is the message. It is His place at the corner that gives a perspective for life that is reliable.

A Consequential Distinction
It is time now for choice. Peter presented the options: If you believe — He is precious. If not, He becomes the rejected Capstone and the Rock of offense. Peter reached back to the Psalmist and the prophet to help measure the gravity of wrong choice. This intersection is one through which all must pass — a choice all must make.

There is a theological turn here that calls for clarification. How is it that Isaiah spoke of a “stone that causes men to stumble and a rock that makes them fall”? Was the prophet speaking prescriptively or descriptively? Does the stone produce the stumbling? Does the rock produce the fall? Or was the prophet instead looking at the condition of a chosen people who had turned aside in unbelief and in so doing caused themselves to stumble and fall? The latter is a preferred understanding.

A second question surfaces: What is meant by “a people destined to disobedience”? Again, was Peter speaking prescriptively, as if God authors unbelief, or descriptively, that this is the inevitable result of unbelief? Again, the latter is a preferred understanding. Here is a people destined to unbelief only as a result first of disobedience.

Do not allow the interpretive questions to obscure the apparent, for here is a solemn call for right choice. To believe is to discover that He is precious. To disobey is to stumble and fall. The distinction is of eternal consequence.
A Motivating Identity
The apostle concluded with the strongest possible words of affirmation. What reassuring news for a people in peril. Chosen. Royal. Holy. Belonging to God. Recipients of mercy. Peter threw this benediction of blessing squarely into the face of a hostile emperor. By clarifying their identity, a new spirit of hope was born.
But it did not stop there. The apostle placed ministry assignment next to affirmation. Now you are to “declare the praise of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light.” With preferred position comes the privilege of service. Blessed to bless. That is the challenge.
Now back to where we began. In our life together, we discover strength for the journey. We too — in our peculiar setting in time — are called to a new association, to a relationship together that will help us stand against the perils, threats, pains, and uncertainties of our lives. Bonded together, built up in Christ, at rest on the chosen Cornerstone, committed to obedience, secure in His mercy — in this we stand.
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