

God's Spiritual House

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If my memory serves me correctly, a few weeks ago we heard in a sermon that people spend billions of dollars trying to find out what they want to do with their lives (but I cannot remember who gave the sermon).

I, for one—like many other young boys, at least in my neighborhood—was going to be an NBA star and play basketball for the rest of my life. For whatever reason, I cannot really figure out now, I just loved to play basketball. Now, we lived within walking distance of the elementary school, as well as another block away there was the community center, of which both had basketball courts. And on any given day, if you wanted to find me, that is where I would be, bouncing a ball. If I had my chores done and was not pulling weeds somewhere or raking leaves—I had to do that too. Still doing it.

Now, about the time I began trying out for my high school team, my dad was searching for a new church. He had begun to question many of the doctrines of the Baptists and the Christian churches and the various other ones we had been attending. And lo and behold, he found one. But there was a problem in this new church. You could not play basketball on Friday night or all day Saturday. Now, needless to say, my NBA career never got off the ground.

But there was still hope in being able to play the game that I loved, for it just so happened on the very first service that we attended right down here in Walterboro, South Carolina, a young guy came up to me eagerly and he said, "Do you play basketball?" I thought, *Wow, maybe this is God's church. They have a basketball team!* From then on, I was able to play basketball pretty much as long as we were in the Worldwide Church of God. And actually got to play on the same men's team with Mike Ford and Randy McIver back when we lived in Atlanta. As big as those guys were, we consistently had a pretty good team, at least in the church.

Since my NBA career was over before it really got started, I did go to a local college and take several aptitude tests to see what I might be interested in and find a career that suited my interests. As it turned out, I scored the highest in police and detective work. Well, since it was frowned upon once again that you have a job where you had to carry a gun, I had to move on down the list. While I did not go into agriculture, which was my next highest interest score, I would later find myself in the landscaping business where I have been working for the last 36, going on 37 years.

Now, I do not know how many times I have asked the "what ifs." And I am sure many of us have done the same thing. If I had only done this, maybe it would have been better, or if I had not it would have worked out differently. My dear wife always reminds me that God has you right where He wants you. And I am pretty sure she got that little saying from her mother.

But looking back at the many different twists and turns in our lives, I can see so many times where God did indeed do this or that to direct our paths. And many times I would have to argue that God indeed put us right where He wanted us. Unless of course I was kicking against the goads, which I have done before.

Let us begin in the Bible with a set of scriptures that we are familiar with, back in the book of I Peter chapter 2. As I was trying to find a starting point in the first two chapters of Peter, it seems a little difficult, or it was for me. It seems more like a sermon from the get-go, and I do not really know why there is a chapter break here. But let us begin reading in chapter 2, and we will read the first nine verses.

I Peter 2:1-9 Therefore, laying aside all malice, all guile, hypocrisy, envy, and all evil speaking, as newborn babes, desire the pure milk of the word, that you may grow thereby, if indeed you have tasted that the Lord is gracious. Coming to Him as a living stone, rejected indeed by men, but chosen by God and precious, you also, as living stones, are being built up a spiritual house, a holy priesthood, to offer up spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ. Therefore it is also contained in the Scripture, "Behold, I lay in Zion a chief cornerstone, elect, precious, and he who believes on Him will by no means be put to shame."

Therefore, to you who believe, He is precious; but to those who are disobedient, "The stone which the builders rejected has become the chief cornerstone," and "A stone of stumbling and a rock of offense." They stumble, being disobedient to the word, to which they also were appointed. But you are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, His own special people, that you may proclaim the praises of Him who called you out of darkness into His marvelous light.

Now in verses 5 and 9, Peter mentions the priesthood. And this just is not any priesthood. This is a holy priesthood, a royal priesthood. And these priests are to offer up spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ. Can we consider that this is a job description? I have to admit becoming a priest was not on any of my aptitude tests, and I can assure you that it never crossed my mind. Growing up in a predominantly Christian society, when I think of a priest, I think of someone in a long white robe who never gets dirty and walks around swinging some sort of incense candle and mumbling some sort of Latin phrase that I do not understand. Maybe I am thinking of the Catholics.

It is believed that I Peter was written to those called of God in the northern part of Asia Minor, and they were being greatly persecuted by those around them who had rejected the truth regarding Jesus Christ. One article also suggested that by this time the Romans were no longer tolerating Christians or tolerating the followers of Christ, and they were part of the persecution. Many of these people were newly converted, and Peter was really blasting it out to them of how special this calling was.

Hence the list we find in verses 4, 5, and 9: As living stones, a chosen generation, a spiritual house, a holy priesthood, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own special people. Let us take a closer look at some of these and just maybe we get a better understanding of what Peter is trying to do.

Now they are not in any particular order, but we will begin with living stones. Is there anything that we can refer to that could be more lifeless than stones? They do not do anything. They just sit there. However, they are used throughout the Bible in some ways we might not necessarily relate to too often. They are used as witness to covenants. Moses was told to speak to the

rock. Joshua refers to stone as witness hearing all the words of the law declared that day. Although the stones might seem lifeless, they are a symbol of permanence. The law of God was written on tablets of stone twice, and the children of Israel were to set up large stones upon entering the Promised Land on which they were to write all the law. So perhaps the law was written on stone at least three times, maybe more.

Well, here in Peter, what better person to write about stones or living stones than Peter, whose name means rock or stone, which in turn means strength and stability, which we can easily see from rocks or boulders or stones. Now what about living stones? Let us read verse 4 again in chapter 2.

I Peter 2:4-5 Coming to Him as a living stone, rejected indeed by men but chosen by God and precious, you also [that is us], as living stones, are being built up a spiritual house, a holy priesthood, to offer up spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.

Peter here is referring to Jesus Christ as the living stone chosen by God and compares those to whom he is addressing as precious living stones also chosen to be a part of His house. Do we believe that we have been chosen by God the Father, just like it says for Christ here in verse 4, to be His dwelling place? Very few people in the entire world who have ever lived understand what this really means. Do we?

I think most of us who have been in the church for a long time understand this. But for our newer people, if you think you found God, you are mistaken. He found you. There used to be a bumper sticker years ago. Probably most of you do not remember it, I think it was back in the '70s. And it said, "I found it," and it was a take on some church that they found God.

No, brethren, we do not find God. God the Father does the choosing of whom He desires to be in His house. And of course I am referring to John 6: 44 where Christ says "No one can come to Me unless the Father draws him." Another bit of advice to our newer people, you might want to hold off trying to convince your extended families that God chose you over them or any other of your acquaintances; they might just try to have you committed.

Now we live in an area where there is a lot of stones lying around and quite a few structures have been built by people picking up these stones. But brethren, Peter is trying to get these people to understand that they are not just any old field stone lying around. They are God's precious living stones chosen to be a part of His house. And not only to be a part, but a *living* part of His house. We have not been called just to warm a pew, as they used to say way back when I attended the Baptist Church.

As Peter continues again, we find the word chosen, as in a chosen generation. And again we find that what is being referred to is an exclusive group. When we speak of a generation in our time, more often than not, we think of a set time period. Now, depending on the source, a generation can be 20, 25, or even 30 years, and I am sure some will say more or less. The Internet suggests that generations are changing so fast that they are getting shorter. I have no clue how they judge such things.

Now if we take 20 years and divide it into 6,000 years since creation, we find that perhaps the chosen are just 1 in 300. That number may not seem that impressive, but when we consider it has been estimated, depending, of course, on which source you read, there is around 115 billion people that have lived on earth since creation, the living stones, the chosen generation seems rather small. Now maybe this is where the number 144,000 comes into play. Do not quote me on it. That is just for comparison.

But if you divide 115 billion into 144,000, you come up with a very small percentage of all who have ever lived. It is so small, I do not even know how to properly quote the number. Now, I did seek advice from at least four of our distinguished graduates here and I did not get a whole lot of help, but I got a lot of laughs. But I will give it a shot. If you divide 115 billion into 144,000, that comes out to be 0.00000125. That is 1 in 800 million. If this number is remotely close, that is a very select generation chosen by God the Father.

We might even make the number smaller considering how many people have ever lived by referring to Matthew 22:14 where it says, "Many are called, but

few are chosen." That is a very sobering scripture, brethren. But on the other hand, if we understand God's truth and what He is working out, there is no greater group to be called into since the beginning of time.

Now this leads us to the next one, which is a spiritual house. What is a spiritual house? I do not know about you, but I am not sure I could even begin to fathom what a spiritual house would be like. We live in such a physical state how can we begin to understand what is involved in building a spiritual house? I worked for several years in the construction industry and I have a pretty good understanding of what is involved in building a physical house. But what about a spiritual house? Where do we begin?

Well, there is good news. It might not be as difficult as we might make it. And in reality, the building of this house is well underway. Our wise Master Builder has chosen the chief cornerstone. And as we just saw, He has chosen the living stones of which He is going to finish the structure. Now, while the building of the spiritual house might be difficult and it might be very hard work for us, we have been given the tools necessary to do the job.

First, we have been given access to God by the offering of His Son as the sacrifice for our sin. He has graciously provided this blueprint right here that we can delve into to receive direction and the materials list. It is all here.

Now let us go to a very familiar set of scriptures over in Ephesians. You better hold your finger there on Peter because we are going to come back. But let us go to Ephesians 2, verses 19 through 22.

Ephesians 2:19-22 Now, therefore, you are no longer strangers and foreigners, but fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, having been built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ Himself being the chief cornerstone, in whom the whole building, being joined together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord, in whom also you are being built together for a habitation of God in the Spirit.

Here we see that we have been given many examples of those who have built on the foundation of the saints, apostles, prophets, and of course, the chief cornerstone. And here is yet another affirmation of this great calling because

we are considered of the household of God, being built a habitation for God in the Spirit, a spiritual dwelling. Now perhaps building spiritually might not seem as difficult, but let us just glance ahead here at a couple of chapters and read Ephesians chapter 4, verses 25 to 32.

Ephesians 4:25-32 Therefore, putting away lying, "Let each one of you speak truth with his neighbor," for we are members of one another. "Be angry, and do not sin": do not let the sun go down on your wrath, nor give place to the devil. Let him who stole steal no longer, but rather let him labor, working with his hands what is good, that he may have something to give him who has need. Let no corrupt word proceed out of your mouth, but what is good for necessary edification, that it may impart grace to the hearers. And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, by whom you were sealed for the day of redemption. Let all bitterness, wrath, anger, clamor, and evil speaking be put away from you, with all malice. And be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, even as God in Christ forgave you.

Now this list is not just a list, if you notice, of what not to do, but tells us what we should be doing. Not only does Paul say, do not lie, he says, speak the truth. If you get angry, do not sin and make sure you get over it before sunset. Do not steal. And not only do not steal, but get a job so you can help others. Go to work! Let no corrupt communication proceed out of your mouth, but what is good and may impart grace to the hearers. Do we impart grace?

The Message Bible translates verses 31 and 32: Make a clean break with all cutting, backbiting, and profane talk. Be gentle with one another, sensitive. Forgive one another quickly. Don't grieve God. Don't break His heart.

Now much of what we just read not only says what we should not do, but gives us things that we can do and should be doing. If we begin to master these things, or at least practice these things on a regular basis, just maybe we will continue to contribute to the spiritual house, the habitation that God desires to live in.

How many times do we emphasize what not to do and rarely go the extra mile in doing what is right and true? How many never go the first mile? One thing for sure, building a house is indeed work, and we should not expect anything less from working to build a dwelling place for God.

Now adding one more scripture here in Ephesians before we leave. You do not have to turn there. I will just quote chapter 1 and verse 3. He says, He "has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places in Christ." We have no excuse, brethren, for we have been given all that is necessary to build a proper dwelling place, a spiritual house. Will God want to dwell in what we build?

It seems, in studying for this split, that Peter was well aware of the writings of Paul, and these next two might be an indication of Peter's understanding of the priesthood, as we think Paul wrote about in Hebrews, and there is another section back in Genesis, I believe it is. (If he was indeed the author of Hebrews, that is.)

Now in verse 5, back in I Peter, we find that it says holy priesthood, while in verse 9, it says royal priesthood. Are these two one and the same or is he speaking of two different groups? Is Peter somehow making a distinction between the Aaronic priesthood and the priesthood after the order of Melchizedek? Well, maybe, we really just do not know. It is not clear. What we do know is that after the order of Melchizedek was established, the Aaronic priesthood was changed. And the defining of priesthood, as we find in the book of Hebrews, is another one of those areas that the Protestant world uses to attempt to do away with the law of God, but nothing could be further from the truth.

With the Aaronic priesthood, I think most of us understand that God set apart the tribe of Levi to serve as priests, which was the highest responsibility given to any tribe to serve the Tabernacle of God. In order to serve as priest in that time, one must be born into that family line just like the royal family we find ruling England. You have to be born into the family.

Looking at the two words that Peter uses to describe these priests, we find the words holy and royal. Now *Strong's Concordance* identifies them this

way. "The word holy used here means chaste, pure, clean, dedicated, and consecrated." From the Greek word used here for royal we find that it means kingly or sovereign foundation of power. It can also refer to belonging to or property of the king.

In order to add to the idea of the exclusivity of the priesthood, let us go back to Numbers 1, verses 47 to 53. We will find an episode here with the Levites. As the book of Numbers begins, we find that God orders the children of Israel to be numbered, which includes all the tribes except the Levites.

Numbers 1:47-53 But the Levites were not numbered among them by their father's tribe; for the Lord had spoken to Moses, saying, "Only the tribe of Levi you shall not number, nor take the census of them among the children of Israel; but you shall appoint the Levites over the tabernacle of the Testimony, and over all its furnishings, and over all things that belong to it; they shall bear the tabernacle and all its furnishings; they shall attend to it; and they shall camp around the tabernacle. And when the tabernacle is to go forward, the Levites shall take it down; and when the tabernacle is to be set up, the Levites shall set it up. The outsider who comes near shall be put to death. The children of Israel shall pitch their tents, everyone by his own camp, everyone by his own standard, according to their armies; but the Levites shall camp around the tabernacle of the Testimony, that there may be no wrath on the congregation of the children of Israel; and the Levites shall keep charge of the tabernacle of the Testimony."

They were given a specific job. They were not even numbered to go to war or any of those other things. Their job was to take care of the Tabernacle, the dwelling place of God.

Now the Levites were not numbered because God had chosen them. And that was their job. Matthew Henry says they belonged to God. They were God's tribe. That is a high calling. They were to set it up when necessary, take it down when necessary, and brethren, they were to guard it with their lives. If any outsider were to approach the Tabernacle, they were to be killed. This

offense was punishable by death. Access to God was cut off and not any old Joe could wander up to the Tabernacle. This penalty of death is repeated at least five times in the book of Numbers if I counted correctly.

Is God serious about His law? Is He serious about His holy Temple? Are we not His Temple? Anyone who was not a Levite could not even walk around the Tabernacle. They were not even allowed to look at the Holy of Holies. Is God serious about His house?

Do you know why not just anyone was allowed to just stroll around the Tabernacle? God cannot dwell where sin is. That is why it is so important for us, brethren, to get the sin out. I think it was Paul that said, put it to death in your members. Get it out. Get rid of it. And not only get it out, guard the truth, guard the Temple.

Now there is an episode that we do not hear a whole lot about back in Exodus. This time let us go back to Exodus 32. We will read verses 25 through 30. This is right after the Golden Calf incident.

Exodus 32:25-30 Now when Moses saw that the people were unrestrained (for Aaron had not restrained them, to their shame among their enemies), then Moses stood in the entrance of the camp and said, "Whoever is on the Lord's side—come to me!" And all the sons of Levi gathered themselves together to him, and he said to them, "Thus says the Lord God of Israel: 'Let every man put his sword on his side, and go in and out from entrance to entrance throughout the camp, and let every man slay his brother, every man his companion, and every man his neighbor.'" So the sons of Levi did according to the word of Moses. And about three thousand men of the people fell that day. Then Moses said, "Consecrate yourselves today to the Lord, that He may bestow on you a blessing this day, for every man has opposed his son and his brother." And it came to pass on the next day that Moses said to the people, "You have sinned a great sin. So now, I will go up to the Lord; perhaps I can make atonement for your sin."

Again, this was right after the Golden Calf incident and Moses asked, "Who is on the Lord's side? Let him come to me." Is it not amazing that only one

tribe jumped up? There is no mention of anyone else. Then all the sons of Levi came to Moses, and he sent them to do the Lord's bidding to uphold His law. And what did God do for the sons of Levi? He bestowed a blessing on them for they did not regard son or brother in upholding the truth of God. God's law was first priority, and God blessed them for it. Sin had entered the camp and it had to be eliminated. Unfortunately, this was not the only time that the Israelites would grieve the Holy Spirit.

Another thing popped into my head just this morning. It seems that Moses just shoved Aaron aside. Aaron, was he responsible, partly at least, for the loss of 3,000 lives? Moses says, you did not restrain these people. Did his complacency also contribute to the death of his sons?

Now in verse 30 we find that Moses, on the next day, went up to try and make atonement for them. This is yet again where our calling is so valuable and special. The children of Israel did not have access to the Tabernacle. They did not have access to the Father, and only the high priest was allowed entrance into the Holy of Holies, once a year on the Day of Atonement. But brethren, the change in the priesthood, the laying down of His life, God offering His Son as sacrifice for our sin, has given us direct access to the Father at any time.

Our High Priest, Melchizedek, Jesus Christ, has torn away the veil. He has opened the way to the Tabernacle, giving us access to the Holy of Holies at any time. And only those whom God the Father has chosen can come to Him on the authority of Jesus Christ. Our King and our High Priest, is He worthy of our lives, our praise, our every breath? We should strive every minute of every day to uphold the name of our High Priest who gives us unlimited access to the Most High—His Father and ours.

If we can do this, brethren, we will indeed fulfill the last one in our list and become a holy nation, God's own special treasure. His jewels, as it says in Malachi 3:17.

Now as we begin to close, we are going to go back to Peter. This time we will be going over to II Peter. Peter began chapter 2 with a list of what we must get rid of in our lives: Laying aside all malice, all guile [deceit], hypocrisy, envy, and evil speaking, we must put to death these things in our

members. Much like what Paul said in Colossians 3:5, get the sin out, and not only get it out, but get rid of these things. But desire the pure milk of the word.

What does it mean to desire the pure milk of the word? Ali and I have been given just a wonderful example the last, you could say, four years. Louie and Hazel will not leave their mother alone. Well, Louie does now, but every time they see their mother, they want milk. They want that pure milk. Louie, if Lacey was close by, he would have his hand going right down there. Give me some of that pure milk! And he would never stop. It has been wonderful watching them.

Now once again, Peter does not leave us with just the what not to do, but what we should be doing. II Peter 1, we will go ahead and read the first 10 verses.

II Peter 1:1-10 Simon Peter, a servant and apostle of Jesus Christ, to those who have obtained like precious faith with us by the righteousness of our God and Savior Jesus Christ: Grace and peace be multiplied to you in the knowledge of God and of Jesus our Lord, as His divine power has given to us all things that pertain to life and godliness, through the knowledge of Him who called us by glory and virtue, by which have been given to us exceedingly great and precious promises, that through these you may be partakers of the divine nature, having escaped the corruption that is in the world through lust.

But also for this very reason, giving all diligence, add to your faith virtue, to virtue knowledge, to knowledge self-control, to self-control perseverance, to perseverance godliness, to godliness brotherly kindness, and to brotherly kindness love. For if these things are yours and abound, you will be neither barren nor unfruitful in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ. For he who lacks these things is shortsighted, even to blindness, and has forgotten that he was cleansed from his old sins. Therefore, brethren, be even more diligent to make your call and election sure, for if you do these things you will never stumble.

We have been called by glory and virtue. Can we consider what Peter lists here as building blocks, a materials list? Add to your faith virtue, to virtue knowledge, to knowledge self-control, and on and on the list goes. And if we do these things, we will never stumble. "Grace and peace be multiplied to you in the knowledge of God and of Jesus Christ our Lord, as His divine power has given us all things that pertain to life and godliness." All things that pertain to life and true life and godliness.

We have been given a job, brethren, and I am sure most of us never found it on an aptitude test. How are we building? Will God want to dwell in us? Will we become His jewels?

You know, Peter started out just like another old field stone but he became a living stone. And Peter will be one of the jewels of God that adorns His house. Will we? Or will He send out the Levites?