

# SEQUOYAH HILLS PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

## “Inside Out: People for a Purpose”

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1 Peter 2:1-10

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Today we wrap up this series “Inside Out,” so first let me share a few words on what’s coming up next. Next week we will celebrate World Communion Sunday, and we are very happy to welcome a guest to worship with us, Rev. Balajied Khylllep, who was a friend in seminary and currently serves as Associate Director of the World Mission Initiative at Pittsburgh Theological Seminary.

But then after that we’ll be spending some time in the Book of Kings, in particular about the prophet Elisha, and how the account of his life and ministry is a powerful lens onto the nature of our calling as a church in serving the Lord in mission.

Today as we conclude this series that’s explored some of those core questions of identity, we come to some of Scripture’s answers not just about who we are, but what we’re supposed to do about it. Let’s go to God’s Word together.

### *1 Peter 2:1-10*

*Rid yourselves, therefore, of all malice and all guile, insincerity, envy, and all slander. <sup>2</sup> Like newborn infants, long for the pure, spiritual milk, so that by it you may grow into salvation— <sup>3</sup> if indeed you have tasted that the Lord is good.*

*<sup>4</sup> Come to him, a living stone, though rejected by mortals yet chosen and precious in God’s sight, and <sup>5</sup> like living stones let yourselves be built into a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ. <sup>6</sup> For it stands in scripture: “See, I am laying in Zion a stone, a cornerstone chosen and precious, and whoever believes in him will not be put to shame.”*

*<sup>7</sup> This honor, then, is for you who believe, but for those who do not believe, “The stone that the builders rejected has become the very head of the corner,” <sup>8</sup> and “A stone that makes them stumble and a rock that makes them fall.”*

*They stumble because they disobey the word, as they were destined to do.*

*<sup>9</sup> But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s own people, in order that you may proclaim the excellence of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light.*

*<sup>10</sup> 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.*

The Word of the Lord. **Thanks be to God.** Will you pray with me? O God our Deliverer, we praise you for how you call us, for how you have saved us, for how you have set before us a

purpose not of ourselves but of your glory. We pray that by your Word you would reveal your glory to us, and that you would open our hearts to receive it. And for the Word spoken and heard today, may it not be mine but yours. Amen.

About twenty years ago, a pastor named Rick Warren released a book, really more of a study guide, 40 days long, called *The Purpose Driven Life*.

Rick Warren was the pastor at a church called Saddleback Church in Orange County, California. Warren was the founding pastor, and by that point Saddleback had become one of the largest congregations in the country, with thousands coming to worship at one of a number of different sites under the Saddleback umbrella.

I'll confess my own skepticism when it comes to megachurches. Just too many cautionary tales out there of churches and pastors consumed by growth and brand. So when someone gave me a copy, I was quick to assume it was some hot shot pastor out at some California megachurch, with a title that sounded oddly similar to all those self-help books and conferences we talked about last week. I figured there'd be vapid observations that kind of sound biblical, that kind of sound faithful, but really it's just drivel that I'd hurl across the room in disgust after reading it for five minutes.

So it was with that predisposition that I turned to the first day of the 40-day study guide. And right there in the first sentence it said, "It's not about you." Right out of the gates. In the very first sentence of this book that I thought was going to be dripping in spiritual platitudes about how you could find direction for your life just in discovering your God-given potential and purpose comes those four simple words that cut through any assumption I had brought. A book all about *your* purpose says: "It's not about you."

Without too much of a stretch, you could take those four words and staple them to the top of this passage. "It's not about you."

This letter of 1 Peter speaks heavily to the purpose of the church. The church at the time was facing some of those existential questions we've been asking in this series: "Who am I?" "Who am I made to be?" And in this second chapter, which you might consider to be the centerpiece of the letter, it speaks of what brings the church, the people of God, into this purpose.

First, it speaks about practice and living. "Rid yourselves, therefore," says v. 1, "of all malice and all guile, insincerity, envy, and all slander. Like newborn infants, long for the pure, spiritual milk, so that by it you may grow into salvation—if indeed you have tasted that the Lord is good." In other words, change your diet. It almost sounds like a purge or a juice cleanse.

Now, the longing of newborn infants is not a theoretical exercise for me these days. It sounds all sweet to say it out loud. Oh, how the newborn babe longs for pure milk. But what does

it really sound like when a baby really longs for something? Crying, wailing at the top of their lungs: “This is what I want! I’m hungry! Don’t try to placate me with that binky. I need the real thing.” Not that I speak from personal experience or anything.

But when we consider how this letter is calling upon the church to live, to purge ourselves of malice and guile and to long for pure, spiritual milk instead, maybe doing so should sound more like a crying, wailing baby desperate for nourishment.

But to what end is this longing? Is it for ourselves? Or for something else?

Peter switches imagery over to more of a construction thing. “Come to him,” it says in v. 4, that is, “Come to [Christ], a living stone, though rejected by mortals yet chosen and precious in God’s sight.” That phrase there, “a living stone,” is central here. This is the only place that phrase is used, and even just in the words, it invites us to consider Christ as a stone, of sorts, that is, something everlasting, unchanging, solid, strong, but also living and vibrant.

But more to how the letter puts it forward, this living stone, it says, was rejected by mortals yet chosen and precious in God’s sight, citing a few verses later from the psalms: “The stone that the builders rejected has become the very head of the corner.”

It might seem a bit of an oddly chosen phrase, a “living stone,” until there’s a shift in just who we should consider as one of these “living stones.” In v. 5: “and like living stones, let yourselves be built into a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.” Now who’s the living stone? Not just Jesus. But all who follow him.

It means that the life and strength that we’re invited to see in Jesus we in turn are invited to see at work in ourselves. Or as Paul put it, the same power that raised Jesus from the dead, that which made what was thought to be lifeless alive, is at work within his disciples.

So now we’ve got all these living stones around. What happens when you get a bunch of stones together? Something might start getting built. And that’s exactly what Peter says is the case. “Like living stones, let yourselves be built into a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood.”

It might sound a bit cryptic, to be stones that are built together somehow, but it’s really a beautiful image. That the church, the people of God, might somehow be built together into a spiritual house, a temple, a dwelling place of the Lord. That becomes a pretty radical claim when you start to think about it. That the church is this house for the Lord, and by “church” it means not a space, not a building; those have their importance, but the “house” here isn’t the building, it’s you. Let yourselves be built into a spiritual house for the Lord. You are the building blocks for the dwelling place of the Lord.

And this is where that imagery becomes richer and richer. You, we, as living stones being built together. How different would it sound if it said “living bricks” instead? Nothing against bricks, but what are the characteristics of a brick? They’re made from taking raw materials, crushing them down into powder, turning them into clay, then putting them into a mold and fired until hardened, the main point being: they’re all the same. What’s the Pink Floyd song? “All in all, you’re just another brick in the wall.” If you’re building a brick wall, you want all the bricks to be exactly the same.

Stone masonry, on the other hand, is more complicated, especially in the ancient world. I mean sure, there are machines now that can take a big chunk of rock and grind and chisel it until it’s all a bunch of identical stone pieces, but that wasn’t so much the case. If you were building a stone wall or a stone house, you took the stones that you found, and yeah maybe you might refine them a bit, chisel an edge here, round a corner there, but you didn’t make them all the same. You had to place each individual stone in such a particular way that it complemented the placement of all the other stones that, in their own right, were uniquely placed based on their own shape.

That’s where this imagery becomes even richer. It’s saying you, me, everyone who follows Christ, is like a stone that has been found and placed just so and built together into a house for the Lord.

Adding even onto that is the notion that Christ, the living stone, it says, was rejected by the world yet chosen by God. In the same way, we as living stones in Christ follow in the same line: rejected by the world yet chosen by God.

It’s like this. You may have heard of the “Island of Misfit Toys,” from that old Christmas Claymation movie Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer. In Rudolph’s odyssey, he comes to an island where all the toys with some kind of flaw or oddity about them end up.

And even if you didn’t know that reference, you may recognize that phrase, “island of misfit toys,” maybe to describe that one table at a wedding where it seems all the odd relatives get lumped together. And of course, the rule is: if you can’t spot the table where all the odd relatives have gotten lumped together, guess what? You’re sitting at it.

You’ve heard of the island of misfit toys. Well, the church is the island of misfit rocks: those rejected by the world but chosen by God, a bunch of stones that the world looked at and said, “What use is any of this?” And who is the head of it? Who is its cornerstone? Well, the original misfit rock, so to speak. Christ himself. The stone that the builders rejected and yet became the cornerstone.

It may have felt a bit tedious unpacking this imagery, all these phrases about living stones and stonemasonry and all that. But what it leads up, what all of this series to is this:

You were made, you have an identity forged in your creation, in your forgiveness, in your being claimed by grace in Christ. And you made and claimed for a purpose that is unique to you, to who God made you to be, to who you most fully are in Christ.

But that purpose is not your own. Or rather, that purpose is most fully realized when we stop making it about our own individual purpose, when we stop asking, “What is *my* purpose?” or “What is *my* destiny?” A common way of asking it these days that’s been bouncing around is, “What is your why?” Not the worst question in the world. It can be good to reflect on one’s purpose behind doing things. But the claim of the gospel, the impact of the gospel changes us from asking “What is my why?” into “What is *God’s* why, and what place has intended for me in it?” The best why you could ever have isn’t your why at all.

Our purpose is most truly and fully found when we ask, what is God’s purpose? As Rick Warren said, it’s not about you.

And what purpose does God have for choosing and setting apart this island of misfit rocks? What purpose do we have to rid ourselves of malice and slander and instead long, cry, and wail like infants for pure, spiritual milk? It turns out we don’t have to guess too much.

“But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s own people, in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light.”

We are a people made for a purpose. We are a people gathered for a purpose. We are a people built together for a purpose. And it is not our own. But for the glory of God and for the furthering of his kingdom, we are made, gathered, and built together for the purpose of declaring testifying to the world that a new power is and has been and will be at work, bringing that which had been in darkness into marvelous light. It is a purpose of renewal, of rebirth, of new life sewn into the world.

And among the blessings of this purpose, this mission, is that you are at once agents and beneficiaries of it. We declare to the world that which has happened for us.

In the final, fortieth day of *The Purpose Driven Life*, Rick Warren invites those who have gone through it to craft a “life purpose statement.” And same kind of thought as what began that guide: taking an inherently individual exercise, and maybe an inherently individual impulse of finding one’s purpose and saying right from the get-go, “It’s not about you.”

Here he invites people to craft a statement capturing how they sense their purpose in the world, so yes there would be something unique about every person’s statement, but along with it he adds a word of caution and correction.

“I once heard a suggestion that you develop your life purpose statement based on what you would like other people to say about you at your funeral. Imagine your perfect eulogy, then build your statement on that. Frankly, that’s a bad plan,” he says. “At the end of your life it isn’t going to matter at all what other people say about you. The only thing that will matter is *what God says* about you...

He then notes how in the Book of Acts, Paul declares at one point that David, King David of the Old Testament “served God’s purpose in his generation,” that is, not in the generation before, nor in the generations past, but there, then, in his generation. And on that Warren offers, “There is no greater epitaph than that statement! Imagine it chiseled on *your* tombstone: That *you* served God’s purpose in your generation.”

Friends, you were made for it.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.