**A ROYAL PRIESTHOOD**

1 Peter 2:4-10

Key Verse: 2:9

"But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light."

After challenging the readers to humble themselves like little babies when they attend Bible study and reminding them of basic holy lifestyle attitude, Peter begins sharing the pure milk scriptures with them to inspire the new life as servants of God. Today's passage is an interesting follow-up for the last chapter of Luke’s gospel because Peter shares some things written in the Prophets, a Psalm and possibly Moses' books. They may be more scriptures written about Jesus that are fulfilled in his followers, even though he is serving now in heaven. Let’s pray everyone among us will grab the chance to work for God according to Peter’s vision and instructions.

SLIDE v4

In verse 4 Peter shares his unique vision for believers and insightful metaphor about Christ. As the babies grow from the pure milk, when the believers grow in their salvation and search the scriptures on their own, he expects they will come to the living stone. It seems like the only place in the Bible where this is mentioned. Jesus described himself as living bread to some Jews who wanted manna to prove Jesus was somebody. He also spoke of living water at a festival and with the Samaritan woman. But the living stone metaphor is uniquely Peter’s expression. It obviously reminds the reader that Peter met Jesus after his resurrection and testifies that Jesus is alive. Peter mentioned other inanimate things having life in his view too. He shared a living hope earlier and talked about the living and enduring word of God that brings a new birth. We can say his letter is full of living things to share life giving grace with anyone who reads it.

SLIDE Psalm 118:2. It seems like Peter refers to a scripture in psalms 118:2. The prophetic reference to Jesus as a stone was well established in Christian theology. Jesus studied the same verse with his critics in the gospels, encouraging them to repent. Rejected stones in a building project seem ugly colored, strange shaped or weak so they are cast aside as rubble. It is how the nation treated Jesus when he did not provide unlimited bread, universal miraculous health care and some exodus plague like devastation against the occupying political powers. (SLIDE Isaiah) God had a plan and Peter referenced the fact found in the prophets that the rejected living stone was precious in God’s sight. The builders had become the ignorant tenant farmers who acted as God's enemies. But God made his son the first living stone by raising him from the dead. He is alive and he saves all who come to him and he is supporting all the other stones in the house. He is the most precious, most important stone in God's plan.

(SLIDE v4) Peter noted believers come to him. It implies action for the believers. When the sheep hear the shepherd's voice they come out of the fields or watering hole to gather around their shepherd. Little children tend to seek their parents when they need things. Similarly, the believers come to him for guidance. Thinking of coming to the living stone may be connected to prophetic predictions of God's saving grace reaching people all over the world. (SLIDE christ the rock) At one Israeli festival a priest would pour water over a rock to celebrate the time water came from a rock to save the Israelites. On that day, Jesus said to the people, if anyone is thirsty let him come to me and drink. It set the stage for all nations to trust him for salvation and receive eternal life giving help from the Holy Spirit. Paul also mentioned this analogy in 1 Corinthians 10. Peter wants the believers to know they will grow as they come to the living stone. They don't need to rely on Peter forever to help them.

(SLIDE v5) Verse 5 introduces a new dimension to the living stone analogy. It says, “you also, like living stones, are being built into a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood, offering spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.” It is odd enough to wonder how Jesus is a living stone, so we are surprised and way more confused to see ourselves and other believers that way too. How is it, then being a living stone? (SLIDE thing) It usually makes me think of a comic book superhero who looked like he was made of rocks, though it may have been a skin condition caused by radiation. He seemed uncomfortable, but I thought it was a cool character when I was young. (SLIDE fossil) Becoming stone like a fossil seems unpleasant, though it might bless some future archaeologists. (SLIDE fellowship stones) Being a living stone is much more pleasant than the stone people in comics and ancient mud. Peter said they are being made into a house. It sounds very similar to something Paul wrote to the Ephesians. (SLIDE Ephesians 2) He said believers are “fellow citizens with God's people and members of God's household, 20 built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone. 21 In him the whole building is joined together and rises to become a holy temple in the Lord. 22 And in him you too are being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit." We expect a temple for God to be a gorgeous building with expensive decorations, but the man made buildings are not special to God. Now he is worshipped among the living, breathing people who trust him. They are his spiritual house of prayer for all nations.

(SLIDE holy priesthood) Verse 5 also describes them as "a holy priesthood, offering spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ." In the last chapter, they were little babies drinking milk, here they are busy temple priests. Under the old covenant, priests offered thousands of lambs on Passover, numerous daily ritual offerings and many other sacrifices when anyone came with a sin offering or request for help. God provided a once for all sacrifice for his living stones so the way of worship and forgiveness has changed. Under the new covenant, there is no longer a separate class of priests. Each living stone has a purpose and participates in offering spiritual sacrifices. The holy priesthood of living stones does not need to return to Jerusalem every year or take turns in a specific building to make their offerings. All that they offer are acceptable to God because their offerings go through Jesus Christ, our great high priest.

(SLIDE spiritual sacrifices) Some aspects of their offerings are universal, meaning, every stone in the house makes the same sacrifices, like their confession of faith in Christ for their salvation. As Paul encouraged them in Romans, they offer their bodies to God as living sacrifices when they testify that Jesus is alive and when they abstain from sinful acts that lead to death in the lost world. They tend to set apart some time in the week for fellowship with each other and learning from the Bible. Other spiritual sacrifices may spread out into broader categories that some make while others do not. They may be related to individual talents and Holy Spirit empowered gifts like described elsewhere in the Bible. And every community might not experience the same opportunities and duties so it may not be practical to make a list of everyone's spiritual sacrifices. (SLIDE musicians daily bread) Our local ministry is greatly blessed by the musicians for a long time, while other fellowships rarely had a member who could even play the piano. I think our global ministry has the best daily bread preparers among any that I compared in the past because their focus was to read the Bible passage and just summarize it briefly. Many, many living stones in our fellowship made a spiritual sacrifice for their career and easy life as they had the opportunity to emigrate to other countries trying to share the good news and fellowship with the nations. (SLIDE widows offering) Jesus surprised his disciples while discussing some spiritual offerings with various people. He said a widow's tiny money offering was much more meaningful than a rich man's large donation to the temple. He challenged another rich man to sell all his goods to bless the poor and work for Jesus' kingdom instead. (SLIDE welcome the charitable) He told of welcoming many into his kingdom who were compassionate toward his brothers without even knowing they helped out Jesus himself. He warned his followers not to make a big show of such sacrifices and prayer topics, but keep them secret so that only the heavenly father sees what they are sincerely working on. (SLIDE ISBC) In other aspects, we are really blessed that we can bring some spiritual offerings in the open with loud equipment and large international conferences, while believers in many places risk their life just to even read a Bible in a secret place hoping no one notices them. (SLIDE v4&5) The spiritual offerings going on around the whole world in the living stone house of God are impossible to fully catalog or investigate, but in Christ they are all acceptable and God is aware of everything. I'm just thankful our spiritual offerings are so convenient, without logistical problems and strict regulations about animal selection and where or how to have them slaughtered. God is very gracious to us, providing the way to make our offerings to him through Christ. Jesus is the only offering needed for sins; other sacrifices imitate Jesus' style, attitude and service but they remain spiritual, in our worship, love for God and acting like Jesus' hands and feet in the lost world.

(SLIDE in scripture Isaiah 28) To support his teaching about the living stones Peter shared three Bible verses that are fulfilled in Jesus. The first one is Isaiah 28:16. "For in Scripture it says: "See, I lay a stone in Zion, a chosen and precious cornerstone, and the one who trusts in him will never be put to shame." 7 Now to you who believe, this stone is precious. This was the premise for encouraging the believers through hardship and conflicts that come up as they endeavor to live for God. They realized the value of Jesus' righteousness and power of his saving grace is like a treasure in a field or pearl of great price. They realized they can give up everything to have eternal life rather than anything this world can offer them.

(SLIDE in scripture Psalm 118 & Isaiah 8:14) Next he shared two verses to show how Jesus relates to the unbelievers. The first is Psalm 118:22 "But to those who do not believe, "The stone the builders rejected has become the capstone."" It was referenced earlier in showing how the people mistreated Jesus, leading to his execution. In some way or another, anyone who disregards Jesus makes the same mistake rejecting the way to eternal life, choosing to meet God in their sins. Peter also quoted Isaiah chapter 8:14. It describes the Lord as "A stone that causes men to stumble and a rock that makes them fall." Peter summarized the consequences of rejecting the living stone by saying they stumble because they disobey the message--which is also what they were destined for. This is the big picture reality for the unbelievers. They will disregard the precious savior and fall into sin, self-righteousness and unbelief. Those ultimately lead them to tragic destruction. It is a miserable destiny for many. This short Bible study shows there are two ways to view the living stone. First is the rejecting view for people with a heart of stone. They think God is dead and they don't want to live for his glory. (SLIDE Ezekiel 11) The other is the precious view, for living stone people with a new heart of flesh that loves God and worships the creator in Christ.

(SLIDE v9) Regarding those who view the living stone preciously, Peter shares a surprising Bible study. Let's read verse 9 together. "But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light." This is surprising because all the commentators think Peter mentions a promise Moses' shared with Israel in Exodus 19:5-6 while addressing the believers, especially the idea of them being the royal priesthood and holy nation. One theological note to consider is that the majority of Hebrew to English versions say a kingdom of priests in Exodus, which seems different from Peter's recollection. But looking at the English translation of the Greek Bible that was common in Peter's time it is the same. That Greek version is the one his sheep in the north would likely be able to read. It is also important to note Peter did not write “as the scripture says” or similar before describing the readers with those ancient promises. But it is remarkable that he seems to think of believers in the equivalent descriptions of Israel.

(SLIDE Deuteronomy 7) He called them chosen people. According to Deuteronomy 7:6 ("For you are a people holy to the Lord your God. The Lord your God has chosen you out of all the peoples on the face of the earth to be his people, his treasured possession.") Peter was one of the old covenant "chosen people" and he tried to live up to God's hope he told Jesus he would never eat something unclean. But when his mind was opened he accepted the new covenant in Jesus' blood and stepped out of his comfort zone to witness beyond his homeland. He was the first to see God's spirit land on the Gentiles and he had to admit God's plan was much bigger than he ever imagined. His conclusion: God chose all believers according to his pleasure to accomplish his plan. Being chosen by God is a very high honor. It means God saw potential for them to bear good fruit, so he invested his Spirit in them and he prunes them to make them fruitful. If Jesus was chosen and precious to God, so are the believers. They share Jesus’ glory and God's blessings with others following Jesus' example.

(SLIDE Royal Priesthood) We thought about some functions as the priesthood earlier. It's good to consider the royal appointment however in this verse. In the USA, we are somewhat out of touch with political royal operations since modern royalty often seem symbolic and a nation's prime minister does most of the decision making. Nevertheless, it is understood that if the king or highest leaders of some group appoint certain people for various tasks it is considered an important, high calling. Governments have many ministers and department heads and local branch leaders to stay in touch with the people. Some governments even have embassies in other nations when their influence requires permanent representatives. There is a similar, royal establishment in God's kingdom. The Lord Jesus leads it as king over all, calling the shots. But he is also the high priest who is on the job non-stop in heaven. He shares the tasks of seeking lost sheep with his appointed servants. Each believer has some priestly duty appointed to them by the king himself. We have to remember the royal assignment from heaven is the most important, highest calling anyone can experience. They are appointed to care for his flocks, represent his kingdom, defeat his enemies and be the king's hands and feet all over the world.

(SLIDE holy nation) What does it mean to be a holy nation? How can sinful people even dream of being holy at all when holy and sinful seem like complete opposite concepts? The main idea of holy is to be set apart for God's purpose. You may remember in the tabernacle stories that anything designated holy should be sanctified and no longer be used for common purposes. There are scenes where common people desecrated holy things and came to tragic ends because only the sanctified people should use them. A holy nation should likewise be set apart and sanctified for God's purpose.They should not spend time at Satan's fellowship or be used for the sinful worlds purposes. Though they live among the lost, Jesus’ righteousness sanctifies the whole house of living stones so they are acceptable to the holy God. The new covenant Holy Nation is not a political entity that can be circled on a map. Maybe the little churches around the world are similar to embassies in the lost world but even a single believer in a secret prayer closet can be a holy nation, serving God in their specific task. Thank God for amazing grace that makes his people holy, worthy and useful to him now and forever.

(SLIDE a people belonging to god) Peter also identifies the believers as "a people belonging to God." It is similar to the concept expressed in Exodus 19:5 where God called Israel "my treasured possession". Peter teaches that the believers are united to God and share his promises in the new covenant since they obey his will, putting their faith in Jesus for salvation. They are like the army resurrected from dry bones who fight against the dark forces of Satan's influence. They are the people who praise God for his gift of eternal life. They are loved by God and they love God so they are always striving to repent and please their father in heaven. Peter says all these aspects combine to accomplish their new life purpose. To declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light. This is a very precious grace for believers. It is a simple calling that aligns with all Jesus' principles for living as God's people. Take notice that they are not called to enforce Moses' laws on the world or to slaughter everyone who disagrees with them or otherwise coerce the lost world into appreciating God. They are wise as serpents but harmless as doves as they witness by praise and thanks to God and his son throughout their lives.

(SLIDE v10) Look at verse 10. It is a reminder that the readers can't act self-righteous about their relationship to god, their holiness and their special place in the universe. It says, 10 Once you were not a people, but now you are the people of God; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy. This reminds the readers they were nothing special until they came to faith in Christ. The letter was sent to people of Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia and Bithynia. They were by nature objects of God's wrath, fit for destruction since they ignored God, serving idols and demons as common residents of the dog-eat-dog lost world. (SLIDE Hosea) Comparing the first part of verse 10 to the last part of a prophetic verse written in Hosea, Peter seems to reference the prophet's vision. Paul shared the same idea in his letter to the Romans 9:25. Two witnesses share the same idea that scripture written about Jesus comes true for people all over the world when they experience God's merciful forgiveness of sins. Yet Peter stresses to remember God's mercy. His calling is amazing grace. We called it God's one-sided grace, since there was nothing in the people that made them special. Yet they are blessed with eternal life when they respect his Son and respond to his calling.

(SLIDE Key verse) Today's passage has a glimpse of Bible study with the apostle Peter. He shared many encouraging ideas about believers' service to God and their relationship with him and the world. He also recalled the miserable destiny of unbelievers, and counseled his disciples not to be proud of themselves when it comes to God's mercy on them. Believers definitely share the highest calling on earth with the most desirable eternal reward and the very blessed opportunity to worship god and serve the lord, by declaring his praises. (SLIDE Key Verse) Let's read the key verse one more time and pray.