

"A holy priesthood offering spiritual sacrifices through Jesus Christ" – in the OT, access to God was restricted to priests born into the tribe of Levi. In the NT, there is a shift under the New Covenant in Jesus in which believers are reborn into God's family to become a new kind of priesthood. This is shared by each and every believer who has invited Jesus into their hearts and lives and has 'priestly' access through their relationship with Him, and their spiritual sacrifices are now Spirit-led worship and service.

7-8 Now to you who believe, this stone is precious. But to those who do not believe, "The stone the builders rejected has become the cornerstone," and, "A stone that causes people to stumble and a rock that makes them fall." They stumble because they disobey the message – which is also what they were destined for.

"This stone... the cornerstone... a stone to stumble" – three quotations about Christ as the authentic, irreplaceable foundation stone of the new temple, rejected by those closely aligned with the old temple and a barrier for those unwilling to submit to Jesus as Lord. God foreknew that not

everyone would receive His Son; however everyone has the choice not to stumble but to step up on the rock.

• **For further study**, see Psalm 118; Matt. 21:42; Isaiah 8:14, 28:16; Romans 9:33.

9-10 But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's special possession, 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; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.

"Chosen people, royal priesthood" – Peter redefines familiar OT labels. The people of Israel were the former "chosen people"; now in the NT the chosen people are the believers.

"God's special possession" – all Christians are to be holy and set apart for service to the Lord as the OT priests were. Christians, through new birth, form a new 'nation' enjoying a special and close relationship with God.

• **For further study**, read Exodus 19:5-6; Deuteronomy 4:20, 7:6, 14:2; Isaiah 43:10, 20-21; Malachi 3:17.

REFLECTION Heaven is an attractive place – not because of the shining gold, or the brilliant light, or the incomparable praise and worship, but because heaven is full of the presence of God, full of the reality of the One who is the definition of love. We are called to take a deep plunge of faith, trusting Jesus at the deepest level with our lives and being changed forever. It's called being born again and it turns us into living stones, in Peter's words, needed to take our place and be fitted with all the others that form this new temple of God's presence on earth. This is the way evangelism is designed to work – with us as this new priesthood between heaven and earth, showing the world a glimpse of something so attractive that it is hard to resist.

QUESTION Does the way we do church and its language, bear out Peter's teaching on our status and call as people of light who are living in God's mercy?

PRAYER Lord Jesus, like Stephen we look up and we see Your scarred hands extended to us in welcome, and we give our lives to You again. We put our times and our actions in Your hands, pledging to keep aligned with You the Cornerstone as living stones set in place with You, and to represent You to others as yet untouched by Your love. Thank You for being the Way, the Truth and the Life. Amen.

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The Living Word

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Bible readings for Sunday, May 10, 2020, with explanatory notes

Bible study on the Revised Common Lectionary passages for **May 10**

Prepare by reading the Bible passages beforehand – read again to reflect on the pulpit teaching

Easter 5 theme: **Anticipating heaven as 'living stones' on earth**

Psalm 31:1-5, 15-16 – Jesus anticipates heaven with David's words

John 14:1-14 – Disciples have a place prepared in heaven

Acts 7:55-60 – Stephen in his dying moments sees heaven open

1 Peter 2:2-10 – Living stones build a heavenly temple of God's presence

Psalm 31:1-5, 15-16 – Jesus anticipates heaven with David's words

Putting our life and times in God's hands is to trust His unfailing love

1-2 In you, LORD, I have taken refuge; let me never be put to shame; deliver me in your righteousness. Turn your ear to me, come quickly to my rescue; be my rock of refuge, a strong fortress to save me.

"Be my rock of refuge" – David laments abandonment by his closest friends after a devastating conspiracy.

3 Since you are my rock and my fortress, for the sake of your name lead and guide me.

"For the sake of Your name" – God's covenant reputation is on the line, having promised through Nathan's word to be with David, 2 Samuel 7:8-11.

4-5 Keep me free from the trap that is set

for me, for you are my refuge. Into your hands I commit my spirit; deliver me, LORD, my faithful God.

"Into Your hands" – words of David's dependence on God, spoken by Jesus in His dying moments.

15 My times are in your hands; deliver me from the hands of my enemies, from those who pursue me.

"My times are in Your hands" – submitting to God all events, circumstances, and also timing.

16 Let your face shine on your servant; save me in your unfailing love.

• **For further study**, see Num. 6:24-26; Psalms 4:6; 67:1; 80:1, 3, 7, 19; 97:11; 118:27; 119:135.

REFLECTION Is trust like faith or like hope? More the latter, which is a confident expectation in God's faithfulness. This is what Jesus, racked with pain, expressed in His dying moments. We, too, can choose to put our life and times in God's hands.

PRAYER Lord, I trust You – but help me when I don't trust You very well. Amen.

John 14:1-14 – Disciples have a place prepared in heaven

Jesus reminds them that they know Him and He is the Way

means personal, relational trust, as in the OT, Psalm 56:3-4; Isaiah 26:3-4.

1 "Do not let your hearts be troubled. You believe in God; believe also in Me.

"Hearts be troubled" – difficult news, John 13:33,36.

"Believe in God... also in Me" – Jesus' simple but also profound solution to heart anxiety. "Believe"

2 My Father's house has many rooms; if that were not so, would I have told you that I am going there to prepare a place for you?

"My Father's house" – like the son's return to his father's house in Luke 15. Jesus promised His

followers a welcome into “eternal dwellings”.

• **For further study**, see Luke 15:11-32, Luke 16:9, Rev. 21.

3 And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with Me that you also may be where I am.

“I will come back” – Jesus’ second coming. If we believe in Him (v.1) we will be expected and He will return for us.

4 You know the way to the place where I am going.

“You know the way” – or you know the Way, v.6.

5 Thomas said to him, “Lord, we don’t know where You are going, so how can we know the way?”

6 Jesus answered, “I AM the Way and the Truth and the Life. No one comes to the Father except through Me.

“I AM the Way” – an answer rich with double meanings. Jesus’ I AM sayings echo God’s revelation of Himself to Moses, Exodus 3, and signal His divine origins as Messiah. The Early Church were first known as Followers of the Way.

“Except through Me” – the only way to God is through Jesus, Acts 4:12, an exclusive claim which does not sit well with our culture, but our reasoning must not invalidate what Jesus plainly states. Those who claim to know God but reject Jesus, do not know Him, John 5:39-47.

7 If you really know Me, you will know my Father as well. From now on, you do know Him and have seen Him.”

“Know Me... know My Father” – to know Jesus is to know the Father.

• **For further study**, see John 5:37-38, John 8:19; 1 John 2:21.

8 Philip said, “Lord, show us the Father and that will be enough for us.”

REFLECTION It is easy to be down on Thomas and Philip, from our vantage point of hindsight. However we could also say that they asked honest, good questions – so good they have given us some of the clearest and most memorable answers by Jesus. Jesus is the Way in two senses: He is the exact representation of what God is like; and believing and trusting Him is the way – the only way – to God.

QUESTION *How would you answer someone who rejected the exclusivity of Jesus being the only way to God?*

9 Jesus answered: “Don’t you know Me, Philip, even after I have been among you such a long time? Anyone who has seen Me has seen the Father. How can you say, ‘Show us the Father’?”

“Seen Me... seen the Father” – Jesus, facing Philip in His humanity, clearly sets out His deity. Philip has yet to grasp that Jesus came to reveal the Father, John 1:14, 18, John 12:44-45.

10-11 Don’t you believe that I am in the Father, and that the Father is in Me? The words I say to you I do not speak on My own authority. Rather, it is the Father, living in Me, who is doing His work. Believe Me when I say that I am in the Father and the Father is in Me; or at least believe on the evidence of the works themselves.

“I am in the Father and the Father is in Me” – as in John 10:30, “I and the Father are one” where “one” is the neuter ‘one thing’, not one person. So one in essence, will and purpose – not identical persons. With the Holy Spirit, Matt. 28:19, 2 Cor. 13:14, the three distinct Persons constitute only one Being.

12 Very truly I tell you, whoever believes in Me will do the works I have been doing, and they will do even greater things than these, because I am going to the Father.

“Works” – Greek erga, meaning as well as miracles, all teaching, merciful acts and mission of Jesus would continue.

“Greater things” – the Holy Spirit to be given would replicate and multiply the ministry beyond Palestine and worldwide.

13-14 And I will do whatever you ask in My name, so that the Father may be glorified in the Son. You may ask Me for anything in My name, and I will do it.

“Ask in My name” – meaning coming to God in the will and authority of Jesus, as those that are His. Our alignment with Him is the key to this arresting promise, not using a form of words.

Acts 7:55-60 – Stephen in his dying moments sees heaven open

Through the pain he sees Christ standing to welcome him

55-56 But Stephen, full of the Holy Spirit, looked up to heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God. “Look,” he said, “I see heaven open and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God.”

“Stephen, full of the Holy Spirit” – in sharp contrast to the religiosity but spiritual lack of his Sanhedrin prosecutors, who reacted to his demeanour in uncontrolled rage.

“Son of Man”, Daniel 7:13-14; Luke 22:69.

57-58 At this they covered their ears and, yelling at the top of their voices, they all rushed at him, dragged him out of the city and began to stone him.

REFLECTION Not many of us see into heaven before we get there, although there are arresting testimonies written about some people's experiences. Stephen was one such a special case – an outstandingly fruitful and courageous evangelist who was so Christ-focused, he attracted the same hatred that had put his Lord on the Cross. As he looked up into heaven, it is striking that he caught and expressed heaven's attitude of mercy towards those who were motivated by hell to kill him stone by stone. He forgave them publicly, leaving us his example. Jesus gave the highest priority to us extending the grace we receive through Him and forgiving others.

QUESTION *Who do you find impossible to forgive? How do you think Stephen would counsel you on this?*

1 Peter 2:2-10 – Living stones build a heavenly temple here on earth

Every believer is part of the new priesthood representing God to men

2 Like newborn babies, crave pure spiritual milk, so that by it you may grow up in your salvation, now that you have tasted that the Lord is good.

“Grow up in your salvation” – as healthy children feed and grow. Salvation is both an event (on deciding to entrust your life to Christ) and a lifelong process of Holy Spirit healing and freedom on the road to spiritual maturity.

4-6 As you come to him, the Living Stone – rejected by humans but chosen by God and precious to him – you also, like

Meanwhile, the witnesses laid their coats at the feet of a young man named Saul.

“Began to stone him” – without trial and illegally, possibly overseen by up-and-coming Pharisee Saul.

59-60 While they were stoning him, Stephen prayed, “Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.” Then he fell on his knees and cried out, “Lord, do not hold this sin against them.” When he had said this, he fell asleep.

“Do not hold this sin against them” – strikingly similar to Jesus’ words “Father, forgive them...” on the Cross, Luke 23:34. Jesus greatly emphasised forgiving others, Matt 6:14-15; Mark 11:25; also Luke 11:4; 17:3-4; Matthew 18:21-35.

“He fell asleep” – a common NT way of conveying that death for believers is a transition, Luke 8:52; John 11:11; 1 Thess. 4:14-15.

living stones, are being built into a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood, offering spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ. 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.”

“The Living Stone... you also, like living stones” – Peter describes the church as the new temple inhabited by the Holy Spirit of God. Every believer is a living stone aligned with Christ as Cornerstone – a picture of dependence and connection, like Paul’s teaching on parts of the body connected to the Head, 1 Cor. 12:12-27.