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1st Peter 2:4-8, ESV.

⁴ As you come to him, a living stone rejected by men but in the sight of God chosen and precious, ⁵ you yourselves like living stones are being built up as a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ. ⁶ For it stands in Scripture:

“Behold, I am laying in Zion a stone, a cornerstone chosen and precious, and whoever believes in him will not be put to shame.”

⁷ So the honor is for you who believe, but for those who do not believe,

“The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone,”

⁸ and “A stone of stumbling, and a rock of offense.”

Romans 9:30–33, ESV.

³⁰ What shall we say, then? That Gentiles who did not pursue righteousness have attained it, that is, a righteousness that is by faith; ³¹ but that Israel who pursued a law that would lead to righteousness did not succeed in reaching that law. ³² Why? Because they did not pursue it by faith, but as if it were based on works. They have stumbled over the stumbling stone, ³³ as it is written,

“Behold, I am laying in Zion a stone of stumbling, and a rock of offense; and whoever believes in him will not be put to shame.”

Isaiah 28:16, ESV.

¹⁶ therefore thus says the Lord GOD, “Behold, I am the one who has laid as a foundation in Zion, a stone, a tested stone, a precious cornerstone, of a sure foundation: ‘Whoever believes will not be in haste.’”

Nothing in between.

I studied mostly abstract mathematics when I was an undergrad, as opposed to applied or engineering mathematics. It wasn't until I was in graduate school that I

started to take almost exclusively engineering courses, where the goal was to learn to build things. I think I have told you before about a friend of mine in grad school who was from Greece. I was raised Catholic, and he was raised Greek Orthodox. The summer before my last year of grad school when I was finishing up my Ph.D. training, my friend went back home to Greece for the summer. Let's call him Dimitris. He was a handsome, smart, kindly guy, and he was charismatic. When he came back in late August, he was tanned and muscled. I told him that he looked great. He told me that he had spent the summer working and working out. But about two months into the semester, he developed a cough. It got worse and worse, and several of us told him to go to the student health center. The medical folks found malignant tumors in his lungs and concluded that they had metastasized from his testicles. He quickly lost weight as he went through chemotherapy. We took turns giving him rides to his treatments. He battled hard. He insisted that he would be healed, and he would survive. As the months wore on, he stayed in school and fought to maintain a normal life. He turned out to not only be gifted, but also to be extremely tough. He lost weight. He lost his hair. He lost energy. But he stayed in class, and he came to the Computer Science building almost every day. Dimitris did not make it. He died months after being diagnosed. Some fellow grad students, including me, put together a Greek orthodox funeral.

His parents came over from Greece for the funeral. It was a high service, with lots of pomp, ritual, and incense. The priests wore elaborate vestments. As I was pulling together material for this sermon, I remembered a conversation I had with him, just weeks before he died. It caused me to focus this message a certain way.

We were sitting in his office. He was thin and had lost the muscle tone that had so impressed me at the beginning of the academic year. I was ignorant about cancer at the time: I didn't realize just how close he was to death. I still had hope that he would be cured by his chemo treatments. He certainly believed he was going to be healed. He was coughing a lot as we talked. The conversation had to do with creativity. Dimitris said that he had decided to get a Ph.D. in Computer Science because he wanted to create something truly important. He wanted to take on a big project, something that would take many years, perhaps decades, maybe even his entire life to construct. It would be a novel software system that would change the world – although he didn't yet know what the software would do. As he talked excitedly, he seemed stronger, even healthier, at least for a handful of minutes. I had started grad school with no specific professional goals in mind. I simply didn't want to earn a living as a programmer and figured that getting a Ph.D. would give me more opportunities in life. Dimitris however knew that he wanted to do something great. He said that he wanted to not only build something

very important; he wanted to be the one who was recognized as the father of some powerful technology. I will get back to my conversation with Dimitris.

I'd like to look at three passages today. The first is from 1st Peter, Chapter 2:

⁴As you come to him, a living stone rejected by men but in the sight of God chosen and precious, ⁵you yourselves like living stones are being built up as a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ. ⁶For it stands in Scripture:

*“Behold, I am laying in Zion a stone,
a cornerstone chosen and precious,
and whoever believes in him will not be put to shame.”*

*⁷So the honor is for you who believe, but for those who do not believe,
“The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone,”
⁸and “A stone of stumbling, and a rock of offense.”*

Despite that in the first verse of this letter the author says he is Peter, the Apostle of Jesus Christ, it is widely believed that a follower of his wrote the letter. An uneducated fisherman would not have been able to write in the extremely literate Greek we find in this letter. There is also material in the letter that clearly dates from periods that occurred after Peter would have died. The letter is written to multiple churches in Asia Minor, now in Turkey. In this passage, the author is telling us that the Church is being built on Christ, that Christ is the cornerstone of the Church, and that in fact, this was predicted in the Old Testament. The Church is built by people, the people to whom the author is writing. When the author says that Scripture tells us *“Behold, I am laying in Zion a*

stone, a cornerstone chosen and precious, and whoever believes in him will not be put to shame,” he is quoting a passage from Isaiah.

Romans is a landmark treatise on Christian theology. Paul references the same passage from Isaiah when he says that we are saved by faith, not by works:

³⁰ What shall we say, then? That Gentiles who did not pursue righteousness have attained it, that is, a righteousness that is by faith; ³¹ but that Israel who pursued a law that would lead to righteousness did not succeed in reaching that law. ³² Why? Because they did not pursue it by faith, but as if it were based on works. They have stumbled over the stumbling stone, ³³ as it is written, “Behold, I am laying in Zion a stone of stumbling, and a rock of offense; and whoever believes in him will not be put to shame.”

In this passage, Paul is arguing that Jesus, the cornerstone of the Church, is proving to be a stumbling stone for those who believe that simply following the law, as opposed to having true faith, leads to salvation. Interestingly, both the author of 1st Peter, as well as Paul, the author of Romans, seem to misquote Isaiah in precisely the same way. You can see a modern translation of this passage in our third quote for today; here is Isaiah 28:16, from the ESV:

¹⁶ therefore thus says the Lord God, “Behold, I am the one who has laid as a foundation in Zion, a stone, a tested stone, a precious cornerstone, of a sure foundation: ‘Whoever believes will not be in haste.’

The misquotes are due to there being at the time different versions of Isaiah in circulation. This is something we should all keep in mind when we study the

Bible, especially the Old Testament: often, the creators of our canon have had to choose one variation of a Book over another.

But here is something to think about. I chose the two New Testament passages for two reasons. First, they both talk about building the Church and they use the very visual metaphor of stones. It's interesting that the name Peter does indeed mean rock. There's a second, more important reason, though, for using them. Consider how early readers of these two Books, say people around the year 200, would have interpreted them. At that time, 1st Peter was absolutely believed to have been written by Peter himself, although, even from early times, there was a question about whether 2nd Peter was written by Peter personally. So, let's look at this from the perspective of early believers. They saw Peter as an important man in the development of the church. Jesus says this in Matthew Chapter 16: *18 And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it.* They also were familiar with the letters of Paul, the man who started out trying to destroy the Church by hunting down and imprisoning and executing followers of Christ, but who then became a member of the church, and then became arguably the most effective builder of the church. They knew that Paul had spread the Word to the far reaches of their known world. Many of them were believers because of Paul. We don't happen

to have much written documentation of Peter's actions as a builder of the Church. He certainly worked hard as an evangelist and was apparently executed in a brutal way, crucified upside down, because of his work. But it was Paul's missionary letters that were so widely read. So, in sum, Peter was the symbolic builder of the Church, the stone upon which Jesus built. And Paul was the famous practical builder of the Church. One of these two men, Peter, started out as a fisherman, became a follower of Jesus, and then became the metaphoric cornerstone of the Church. The other, Paul, started out as a hater of the Church, then became a follower of Christ, then became a great builder of the Church.

I'd like to get back to Dimitris. He didn't live long enough to see his vision unfold, to be a developer of some powerful, new software technology, and to be recognized as a genius. He wanted to be both the Peter and the Paul of a technology that would change the lives of millions. Steve Jobs, the founder of Apple did this. So did Elon Musk. There are hundreds of other people who are famous, at least among technology-oriented people, if not among the general population. But Peter and Paul did not set out to be famous. Paul abandoned his role as a powerful religious authority within the Jewish community, gave up his fame, his home, and went on the road. We believe he was eventually executed because of his evangelical work. Peter was an uneducated fisherman who gave

up even that minimal, safe existence to live the life of a martyr. We may all know who Paul and Peter were, but they lived for God, for the future of the Church, not for fame on Earth. To Paul and to Peter, there was no settling for an in-between solution. It wasn't good enough to just belong to the Church. Once they made the decision to leave their old worldly lives behind, they didn't just become the faithful. They became evangelists. They became living stones. Joining wasn't enough: they had to build. They were motivated by their love of their God.

There's a big difference between living for this world and living for the Kingdom of God. Our society teaches us to have the values that Dimitris had. He was a good person, respectful, gentle, hard-working, and honest. Several decades have passed since I knew Dimitris and our society values human fame now even more, compared to faith. People today don't see any middle ground between being a nobody and being powerful and famous. They want to be celebrities. Even Christianity itself has been corrupted: look at the TV preachers who fly in private jets and live in vast mansions. And ironically, as the U.S. has become richer, anger and hatred have increased. Godlessness has led to division.

When I was a boy growing up in a Christian family, and in a mostly Christian community, I had what is now seen as a naïve view of success. I believed that serving God is a far greater accomplishment than becoming famous among

people. We must understand that we live in a time when we cannot afford to have anything in between being a nonbeliever and being a builder. We can share our beliefs with others. We can be evangelists. We can work to grow the church, rather than just belonging to it. We can pray. We can turn to God and ask for grace, not for ourselves but for others. We can tell others that there is something more important than our personal needs and desires. We can ask God to help us put new life into the Church, so that we are not the last generation of believers in this country. My purpose in giving this message today is to tell you the importance of you being here. There have been many revivals in the U.S., including a major one in the 60's and 70's, and a modest one in the 1990's. Recently, though, while the Church has been growing in Africa, Asia, Central and South America, and even in China, it has been shrinking in nations where people live abundant lives. While we wait for the Church to grow again, you are the anchor of the Church, holding it together and giving it a vibrant core. You are keeping the Church alive, maintaining an important seed that will one day sprout again. You are the reason that faith will survive this age of self-centeredness.

Please pray with me. *God, we come to you as living stones rejected by men. We are the support structure of your spiritual house. We pray that the people of this nation will become disgusted by the corruption and the selfish entitlement of*

our society. We pray that they will learn that being spoiled, that having so much more than most people in this world is not a good thing. May the people of this nation turn away from the things of this world and rebuild our Church upon a single stone, a tested stone, a precious cornerstone, a stone named Jesus. Amen.