

Those things most precious #7

Out in the middle of the Philippine Sea there are 2 rocks that protrude out of the water. At first glance, these rocks appear to be of little importance, the larger of the two being smaller than the average living room. But as one approaches these rocks, he sees something quite unusual. Out here in the middle of the ocean, there is some construction on that rock. 2 circular walls of steel reinforced concrete, only 160 feet in diameter, placed around that boulder sticking out of the water. Why? Why would anyone want to build anything on these seemingly worthless rocks- especially circular walls? There certainly is nothing to keep in and what would they ever want to keep out?

As the tide goes down, a small island begins to appear. It's really just a coral wreath 3 miles long and 1 mile wide. It's uninhabited, of course, except for some birds that land on it from time to time. And when the tide goes back up, the entire island disappears, all except for those 2 rocks that are the sight of the building project. What a strange place to build anything.

But 1,300 miles away in the city of Tokyo these isolated boulders in the Philippine Sea are of strategic importance for under international law, an island can only be called an island if it can be seen at all times. Land that appears only at low tide cannot be called an island, and cannot be, therefore, claimed by any nation. Japan has claimed this tiny island called Akinotori Sheema for many years- this island consisting of 2 rocks protruding out of the ocean at high tide. But, gradually these rocks have been getting smaller and smaller, becoming eroded by the tides. Left to the natural elements, those 2 rocks would disappear from view in a few years. So the Ministry of Construction took on the project of building walls around those rocks, a project costing millions of dollars. Why would Japan go to all this trouble to save this seemingly worthless land?

Well, this small island is the southernmost tip of Japan's boundaries. If those rocks disappear from view, Japan's territorial coastline would be diminished by 163,000 square miles of water. On those two rocks hang the exclusive fishing and mineral rights to an area 21,000 square miles larger than all the rest of the nation of Japan itself.

We usually take rocks for granted. They are just part of the landscape, and if some rocks were removed, we assume others would just somehow appear to take their place. But there are times when rocks are critically important- Plymouth Rock, the Rock of Gibraltar, 2 comparatively small rocks called Akinotori Sheema that more than double a nation's territory.

This morning, I would like to direct your attention to a very special rock. This rock is among the most precious possessions that a person can ever have in life. In fact, we could never speak of those things that are most precious to us in life without somehow talking about this precious rock. The Apostle Peter speaks of this stone in I Peter 2.

During these past Sunday mornings, we have been speaking of those things which should be most precious to us in life. We have already seen that:

*our soul is most precious- what shall it profit a man if he gains the whole world and lose his own soul (Mark

8:34-37)

*the relationship that God the Father has made available for us to have with him through the Lord Jesus Christ. The Apostle Paul wrote of the number one priority in his life – to know the Lord Jesus Christ in a personal and intimate manner in Phil. 3:10

*the word of God is priceless to us- the word of God is more precious than gold, than much pure gold, and sweeter than the honey in the honeycomb (Ps. 19:10)

*the precious blood of Jesus- we were not redeemed with perishable things such as silver or gold, but with the precious blood of Jesus, a lamb without defect (1 Peter 1:18,19)

*our family relationships – Proverbs 31:10 tells us that a wife and mother of noble character is more precious than rubies.

*godliness, becoming more and more like God himself is valuable to us- physical training is of some value, but godliness has value for all things (1 Tim. 4:8)

Now this morning, we want to look at a precious stone- READ 1 Peter 2:6-8

"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."

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

There are 4 major Greek words that are translated rock or stone in the N.T. We find 3 of them right here in 1 Peter 2:4-8. And it is most interesting that this picture was chosen by the author whose very name was the 4th term- Petros, Peter meaning a rock or a stone.

The term used in verse 6, translated cornerstone, indicates the most important cut stone in the entire building. As we all know from pictures of Palestinian buildings, most of the houses and buildings in the Middle East are made from stone. This is partially because of the scarcity of trees and wood and the fact that the hot, arid, dry climate would dry out the wood house very quickly, and partially because of the abundance of rocks, stone. So it was just natural that the greatest percentage of buildings would be made from cut stone, natural rocks, chiseled and hewn to make building blocks for houses.

Now the most significant stone in the entire building was the cornerstone. The cornerstone was placed in the most critical place, on the bottom level at the corner between the major adjoining walls. The importance of the cornerstone was the fact that the entire design and orientation of the building would be determined by it. The angle of the walls would be directed by the cornerstone so that all the other stones would have to conform to it if the building were to be stable and have an orderly appearance. There was only one cornerstone, and that special stone determined the shape of the entire building.

Peter says here that Jesus Christ is the cornerstone. He is the only one in life who can provide the stability and

design necessary for the entire structure. Now Peter is speaking here of the church, and he is saying that Jesus Christ is the cornerstone of the church which is pictured as the temple of God. If our church is to be stable and enduring, it must be built upon Jesus Christ as the cornerstone. We must honor him and structure our church according to his truth, not just according to our own whims and desires or the latest church fad. But the truth that Peter is giving here can also be applied to the personal life of any individual. No person is able to have complete stability in his life or reach his full potential personally unless Jesus Christ is the cornerstone of his life. He must have a personal relationship with Jesus Christ and live his life walking in fellowship with his Lord, following the precepts of God's word in order to realize God's intended best for his life. And this principle can be applied to a country as well. God established governments to give structure and order to any society. Governments that are established with Jesus Christ as the cornerstone built upon principles given in the Word of God will be governments that prosper. So it is appropriate for us to consider Jesus Christ's place as the cornerstone on this Memorial Day weekend as well.

Peter says then that Jesus Christ is the chosen and precious cornerstone. He is the one who gives stability and design to life. Now why is it that he is so valuable and precious as the cornerstone for our church, our lives and our nation? Note with me 3 reasons that Peter gives for the indispensable nature of Jesus Christ as the cornerstone in this passage.

1. First, we see in verse 5, that Jesus Christ is necessary as the cornerstone in order to build a solid, enduring, spiritual house.

READ 1 Peter 2:4,5.

1PE 2:4 As you come to him, the living Stone--rejected by men but chosen by God and precious to him--⁵ 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.

In English class we were introduced to oxymorons- phrases in which contradictory terms are combined to make a new figure of speech. Now most of these oxymorons we take for granted because we are so used to hearing them:

*We speak of a person being awful good or pretty ugly.

*something will be told to us as old news or as an open secret

*a salesman might offer a mandatory option or an original copy to us

*politicians speak of loyal opposition or a benevolent despot

All of these are phrases composed of contradictory terms, causing them to take on brand new meanings.

*We even have double oxymorons. The other day I was in a grocery store and I saw a sign advertising fresh frozen jumbo shrimp. Just think of that one. How can you really have fresh frozen jumbo shrimp? It's a double oxymoron. But we just take the phrase for granted because we are used to seeing it.

Peter in this passage used an oxymoron. He says that the one who has Jesus Christ as the cornerstone in his

life becomes a living stone. The term for stone that Peter uses in verse 5 is lithos- a cut or dressed stone. This was a stone which was prepared to be used in a building. Usually, in the bible, a rock or stone was connected with that which was dead. Capital punishment in the O.T. was accomplished by stoning someone to death with stones. After Abigail told Nabal of David's plans to attack his household because of his foolishness in not sharing food with David's men who had risked their lives to defend his property, the Bible records that "his heart failed him and he became like a stone." I Sam. 25:37. Stones were used in the bible to picture that which was dead, lifeless. And we use similar pictures today. We sometimes speak of being stone dead.

But Peter introduces a brand new, revolutionary thought. He speaks of living stones. The living stone, Jesus Christ the cornerstone, who came back to resurrected life after being put to death by crucifixion has the ability to pass on his eternal life to us so that we too might become living stones built up into a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood. To those who have been born dead in trespasses and sins, Jesus Christ gives new life so that they might have his own righteousness imputed to their account. To those who have been born with a self-centered, selfish heart, Jesus Christ gives new life so that they now desire to offer themselves to God as living sacrifices. The precious cornerstone, Jesus Christ, is able to bring new life to his people from death so that they too become living stones, built up into a spiritual house.

This past year, Sandy and I have the opportunity to visit the Viet Nam Memorial in Washington D.C. with a couple of our boys. Striking in its simplicity, this memorial is a black, granite wall containing the names of the 58,156 American soldiers who died in that war etched in its stone. Since its opening in 1982, the Viet Nam Memorial has stirred deep emotions in its visitors. Some walk slowly down its length, reverently without stopping. Others stop before certain names remembering their loved one who gave his life. We saw many memorial gifts that we placed in memory of loved ones. For 3 Viet Nam veterans, however, a visit to the memorial is especially significant. These soldiers are Robert Bedker, Willard Craig and Darral Lausch. Because of data-coding errors, these 3 men were listed among those killed in action. So these 3 men and their relatives can actually go to the Viet Nam Memorial and read their own names alongside of all the others who died serving their country.

Dead, yet alive. This is the physical state of these 3 soldiers. But in a real sense this describes the spiritual state of all those who have Jesus Christ as the cornerstone in their lives. In spite of the fact that all are born dead in trespasses and sin, those who have accepted Jesus Christ into their lives and who have chosen to build their lives on Him as their cornerstone, have been made a living stone, for he has brought forth spiritual life from that which was previously dead.

2. But let's move on to a second reason for the precious nature of Jesus Christ as the cornerstone of one's life. Peter says that the one who trusts in Jesus Christ will never be ashamed.

READ 1 Peter 2:6

⁶ 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 idea that Peter is bringing across here is that the one who trusts in Jesus Christ, the one who builds his life on the truths of God's word will never be disgraced or stand red faced before God. He will be able to stand before God with a clear conscience, knowing that he has done that which was right in God's eyes. Yes, some might misunderstand his actions here upon the earth. But ultimately, there is only one judge before whom we must all stand, and that is the chief cornerstone, Jesus Christ. If we have built our life on his person and teachings, then we never have to fear being put ashamed before him.

The opening scene of human history reveals Adam and Eve in the perfect environment of the Garden of Eden. There, they had everything that their hearts could desire to bring happiness and contentment into their lives. And more important than all of their material blessings was the fact that daily they walked and talked with God himself as they fellowshiped with him in the Garden. But then the enemy of man's soul came to tempt them. *Eat of the forbidden fruit*, he said alluringly, *for then you will become like God knowing good and evil*. Eve and then Adam made a treacherous decision- a decision to disobey the direct commandment of God. What was the immediate consequence of their decision to sin against God? Shame. The Bible records that when God came into the Garden for his daily walk of fellowship with Adam and Eve, they were found hidden in shame from the presence of God.

So it will be in our lives. Of all the blessings that we can possibly know in life, the greatest is the privilege that we each have to walk thru life in fellowship with God. But we will only be able to live in perfect fellowship with God as we allow Jesus Christ to be the cornerstone in our life. If he is not in that pre-eminent position, we will be hiding from God in shame, and we will miss the greatest of all privileges in life- that of perfect fellowship with our creator.

3. But notice finally a 3rd reason for the precious nature of the cornerstone, Jesus Christ. The one who builds his life on this cornerstone will not stumble or fall.

READ 1 Pet. 2:7,8

1PE 2:7 Now to you who believe, this stone is precious. But to those who do not believe,

"The stone the builders rejected
has become the capstone, "

1PE 2:8 and,

"A stone that causes men to stumble
and a rock that makes them fall."

There is a very interesting legend that comes down thru Jewish history. According to this legend, during the building of the temple under King Solomon, a very unusual stone was delivered to the builders from the stone-cutters in the quarry- unusual because of its different shape. Now this is not difficult to imagine, for to save time and efforts and cleanup, the stones were cut by the craftsmen on the mountainsides where they were harvested. Then they

were taken by wagon to the building site to be placed by the construction men. So adept were these builders that very seldom did any extra trimming have to be made. Anyone who has ever visited Jerusalem stands in awe at the gigantic cut stones which make up the wall of Herod's temple, many tons in weight, still 2,000 years old perfect in shape from the skill of the craftsmen.

Well, according to the legend, this one stone was brought from the quarry so obviously out of shape that the workers jumped to the immediate conclusion that a mistake had been made on it. It would never fit into the temple wall anywhere. So the builders rolled it down the mountainside into the Kidron Valley to get it out of the way, and they continued to work on building the wall. Eventually, they came to a corner and realized that they needed a different shaped stone to finish the wall. But none was to be found. As they were looking in puzzlement, one of the builders remembered that unique stone that had been so obviously out of shape that it had been discarded down the hill. As they remembered the shape of that stone, it became apparent that they had been too hasty in considering the stone to be worthless. So the construction men climbed down the hillside, and began the long search of finding that stone among all the other stones on the rocky, Palestinian valley. Suddenly, one of the workers cried out that he had found it. And the men now had to all join together in the difficult process of getting that stone back up to the temple site. After much effort, they arrived at the place and found that, sure enough, this very stone was the special stone that had been designed to fit into this very special place in the wall of the temple.

We don't know that this Jewish legend accurately portrays history, but it certainly pictures exactly what happened when God sent his son to the earth as the Messiah and Savior. *He came unto his own, but his own received him not*, John records. The nation of Israel rejected this unique God-man, the only one who could provide redemption for sin. And in that rejection, they stumbled and fell over the very cornerstone who could have brought stability and salvation to their lives. How embarrassed these construction men must have felt as they were searching for the key stone that they had previously rejected and thrown down the hill. Just think of how people will feel as they one day stand before Jesus Christ, seated on his throne of judgment, if they have rejected him as the cornerstone in their lives.

Peter tells us that Jesus Christ is the cornerstone, the only one who can complete the building as it was designed to be built. If a person accepts him as the cornerstone of his life, he will then be able to have his life built into a spiritual house, being a holy priesthood, a sacrifice acceptable to God. If a person accepts him as the cornerstone of his life, he then will have the confidence that he will never stand before God ashamed. If a person accepts him as the cornerstone of his life and lives his life consistently with Christ as his cornerstone, he then will have the confidence that he will not stumble or fall spiritually as he walks thru life.

Is Jesus Christ the cornerstone of your life this morning? If he is, you have a possession that is most precious indeed.