

Be Part of Something Great • 1 Peter 2:4-8

John Ronald Reuel Tolkien was born in 1892 in South Africa. He became a master of languages and eventually a professor at England's Oxford University. He not only learned languages but he invented languages. At the age of 62 in 1954 he published a book that became a movie in 2001 — *The Lord of the Rings*. Nominated for many Academy Awards including "Best Picture", it is a mythical tale for the battle between good and evil.

The story takes place in Middle-earth and includes Elves, Dwarfs, Trolls, Goblins and Men. The story centers on a set of rings created by the evil Sauron. But one of the rings, the Ring of Power, can combine all the others into a mighty force for evil.

Through a strange set of circumstances the ring comes into the possession of a Hobbit named Frodo. If he can destroy that one ring in the fire from which it came he can save the world from evil. Because Hobbits are only a few feet tall they are unlikely leaders in the kingdom of Middle-earth. Hobbits are sometimes called "Halflings". Who would expect the destiny of the world to rest in the hands of a Hobbit? Frodo was a "nobody" who became part of something great.

There is a sense in which all of us are the Hobbits of history. We are not very important. Most of us have never even met anybody who is particularly important. We sometimes wonder if we really matter at all.

St. Peter lived in the first century at a time when Christians were less important than the Hobbits of Middle-earth. Life for them was hard; they felt insignificant, like they didn't matter. But Peter taught them a principle that not only helped them with their discouragement, it gave them purpose and meaning for their entire lives. It's a principle for Christians today as much as for Christians then. The principle is to be part of something great. He writes in I Peter 2:4-8:

As you come to him, the living

Stone—rejected by men but chosen by God and precious to him—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. 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."

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.

This is all about following a great leader in a great cause. The two often go together.

Imagining building a massive monument, a wonder of the world, like one of the pyramids of Egypt or the Coliseum in Rome or the Capitol Building in Washington, D.C.—something that would influence all of history. Then, imagine building something better than a monument.

Imagine building a movement, something that isn't made out of bricks and rock—it is actually alive and moving and thriving. Its life and energy come from the leader and that leader is Jesus Christ, the Son of God. He is the Big Stone, the Rock of Gibraltar and the Mount Everest of the movement of God. When we come to Jesus as our great leader we not only

join a movement, we get our life, energy and spiritual destiny from him. He is "... the living Stone—rejected by men but chosen by God and precious to him..." It is an interesting descrip-

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tion of our leader. He is alive although once he was dead; he was rejected by men but chosen by God.

Michelangelo was one of the world's most magnificent artists. He was an architect, sculptor and painter. He gave us the famous ceiling of the Sistine Chapel in the Vatican as well as the carved masterpieces of Moses, David and others.

Michelangelo was renown for choosing large pieces of marble that other artists rejected. They said he could see the finished masterpiece inside the flawed stone and it was his calling to let it out. He would cut and carve along the flaw lines and used so-called discolorations to add wonderful elements of design. It makes you wonder what the other artists thought when they saw his finished work. He had created his masterpiece out of what they had rejected.

There were those who rejected Jesus. They said he was flawed. They saw neither good nor a future in him. It makes you wonder what they must think now when they realize that he is the Masterpiece of God, the King of kings and Lord of lords, the Best of the best, the One whose birth defines the calendars of the world, the crucified and risen Savior—chosen by God and precious to God.

The great Jesus is the living Stone of the movement of God. But that is not the only description given to our leader. A quote from the Old Testament prophet Isaiah (28:16) describes Jesus as the “cornerstone” of the great movement of God when 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.”

“Zion” is a name for the city of Jerusalem, much like “Washington” is a name for the “District of Columbia”. It was in Jerusalem that God established Jesus as the cornerstone of his movement to change the world.

We often think of a cornerstone as a block of granite that is inserted when a building is completed and dedicated. But there is another use of the word cornerstone. It can also be the first stone laid to establish the place and lines of the building. Every other stone or brick is laid in line with the edges of the cornerstone. If the cornerstone is right then there is a standard for everything

else to be right. If the cornerstone is wrong or missing then the whole building can be out of line.

Jesus is the cornerstone of the movement and church of God. He is the standard of truth, the baseline of behavior and the cornerstone that defines everything that God is doing in our world. The movement of God to change all of humanity for eternity is totally based on and dependent on Jesus. Anyone or anything else is a fraud. As our leader we need to keep looking to Jesus to line up our lives, our beliefs and our destinies. Jesus is our Cornerstone.

Jesus is also our capstone. The next lines of the Bible had first century Jews in mind, but they equally apply to many people today. I Peter 2:7 is a quote from Psalm 118:2. In fact, all of the quotations in this section of the New Testament are from the Old Testament. It says, “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.”

Jesus is the precious Living Stone of believers. To be a Christian is to love Jesus Christ. Christianity is not merely a list of religious doctrines to believe and a set of religious rituals to practice. It is a warm close personal relationship to Jesus. We like Jesus. We love Jesus. We are connected at the heart to Jesus. Jesus is everything to us. Jesus is precious to all who believe in him.

But there are those who don't believe. They reject Jesus as the Son of God, the Savior from sin and the Lord of life. They may say he was a good man or an articulate prophet. They may say he was a fake and a fraud. For whatever reason, unbelievers reject Jesus as the cornerstone of their lives. Those who reject Jesus have a surprise coming. He becomes the capstone. The “capstone” is the “top stone”—the last stone to finish the building. It is the keystone that holds up the arch. It is the crown of the masterpiece—the finishing of everything.

Initially this was seen in the resurrection of Jesus. The first century religious leaders who rejected and crucified Jesus must have been flabbergasted when God raised him back to life.

Eventually this will be seen in Jesus' eternal rule. The Bible describes a day when Jesus will

be crowned King of kings and Lord of lords and “at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.” (Philippians 2:11)

Have you ever believed in someone or something when few others believed? Maybe it was a candidate who was predicted to lose the election. Perhaps it was a stock that was out of favor. It could have been an employee that no one else wanted to hire. Then, the candidate won by a landslide; the stock made a fortune for you; the employee rose to the top of the company.

That’s the way it is and will be with our great Jesus! Some may reject him but those who believe will someday see him become #1—the “capstone” of all of history and eternity!

There is one more “stone analogy” used to describe Jesus. It is unlike the others and seems like a strange addition to the gemstone list of descriptions. Jesus is also a stumbling stone. I Peter 2:8 says, “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.”

Some people trip up on Jesus. They don’t believe in him; they don’t like him; they are offended by his claims to be the only way to God. Instead of being a stepping-stone to God and eternal life, Jesus becomes their stumbling stone that turns them against God and away from eternal life. These are people who will not obey the teaching of the Bible. They have set out on a path of independent choice and will follow that path even though it leads them away from God and away from heaven.

This is a sad reality that is hard to think about or talk about. Some people have made up their minds about Jesus and the more they hear about him the more resistant they become. An old adage says, “The same sun that melts the wax hardens the clay.” So it is with Jesus. The same gospel of Jesus turns some people’s hearts to repentance and faith while turning the hearts of others to disbelief and disobedience. It all depends on the response we have to Jesus.

Put all of these rock comparisons together and you have a powerful picture of our great Jesus. He is wonderful, powerful, divine, eternal and magnificent. He is the Living Stone, the Cornerstone, the Capstone and the Stumbling Stone. He is our Lord and our Leader and we who follow this great Jesus are part of his great cause.

Just as Jesus is the Living Cornerstone, we are also living stones, cemented together with him. According to I Peter 2:5, “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.”

The point here is that each one of us is like a brick or stone in the building of God’s cause in the world. God is using us and counting on us to do his work and accomplish his will in our world.

Sparta was one of the city-states of ancient Greece. It was especially well known for its military strength and genius. We even have an English word describing someone who is self-sacrificially strong and enduring as “Spartan”.

There is a story about a Spartan king who boasted about the walls of Sparta to a visiting monarch. He said his city was invincible because the protective walls could not be conquered. When the visiting king actually saw the city of Sparta there were no walls at all. He asked, “Where are the walls about which you boast so much?” The king of Sparta pointed to his soldiers and said, “These are the walls of Sparta, every man a brick,”

So it is with Jesus. The greatness and strength of the cause and the church of Jesus Christ is not in buildings but in people. We are the bricks of God. We are the church of Jesus Christ.

As Christians we are “living stones” who are “being built into a spiritual house.” God is using every one of us to do something great in history. We are the presence and body of Jesus here now on earth.

As Christians we are in this together. Just as a brick or stone is worthless without other bricks and stones, Christians need to work together.

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Occasionally I hear someone say, “I don’t really need the church or others. I’m pretty private in my faith. I go it alone.” These are people who don’t join churches. They don’t pray with others, fellowship with others, work with others or give with others. They are “independent Christians”. What nonsense! An independent Christian is like an independent liver. Just as organs need one another to survive and thrive, just as bricks need one another to construct a building, so believers need one another to be Christians.

Our great Jesus is fighting injustice, confronting sin, spreading love, representing God, saving sinners and building his church. He is building a masterpiece out of us. Don’t be a missing brick! See yourself for who you are—part of something truly great for God. Be and do your part!

Peter is writing all this to encourage Christians who are discouraged. He is rolling out the superlatives into a list to convince us to take courage and be blessed. But he adds one more stunner to the list. He says that you and I are part of a holy priesthood.

In the Old Testament in the nation of Israel there were priests who represented the people to God. In the rituals of the Jewish religion everyone needed to go through a priest to get to God. Priests were special people with special rights and responsibilities. Only men could be priests. Only men who belonged to the Hebrew tribe of Levi could be priests. Only Levite men who were descendants of Aaron could be priests. Only men who had never been divorced could be priests. Only men without disabilities could be priests.

How would you like to be a priest? Would you like to have direct access to God without going through anyone else? Would you like to be a priest even though you aren’t Jewish? Even though you are a woman? Even though you have been divorced? Even though you have a disability? Even though you haven’t received formal theological training?

Listen well: every Christian is a priest! You are “a holy priesthood, offering spiritual sacri-

fices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.”

I have a favorite old story from London. It was during the construction of St. Paul’s Cathedral. The architect was Christopher Wren. He was at the peak of his career and creativity. One day a passerby stopped at the construction site and asked a bricklayer who was working on that huge structure, “What are you doing?” With some disdain the bricklayer said that he was slopping mortar and piling bricks. To him his job was drudgery. The passerby then asked another bricklayer what he was doing and he answered, “I am working with Sir Christopher Wren to build the Cathedral of St. Paul.”

When our lives seem to bog down, when we are weary and discouraged, when we wonder if we matter at all—remember that Jesus is our Great Leader and we belong to a great cause. We are working with God to build the cause and church of the Lord Jesus Christ!

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Leith Anderson and Wooddale Church
6630 Shady Oak Road
Eden Prairie MN 55344
952-944-6300
www.wooddale.org
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