

*You Are the People of God*

**1 Peter 2:1-10**

John Breon

We've seen so far that God gives us hope and God calls us to be holy and loving. Now we see that God makes us into a new people and calls us his own. "You are the people of God." The people of God are a chosen people or race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's special possession or God's own people. The King James Version translates that as "a peculiar people."

Peculiar means odd or different, even strange. Not far from where I grew up is the town of Peculiar, MO. In the mid-1800s, the folks in the little settlement decided they needed a post office. All the names they sent to the postmaster general were already in use, so they finally asked him to name their town. They said, "We don't care what name you give us, so long as it is sort of peculiar." The postmaster general wrote a long and courteous reply. He said he had given their predicament grave consideration. "My conclusion," he wrote, "is that in all the land it would be difficult to imagine a more distinctive, a more peculiar name than Peculiar"

(<http://cityofpeculiar.org/pView.aspx?id=6747&catid=587>).

What does it mean that the people of God are peculiar? Some Christians are peculiar in the "wrong" way—they just seem determined not to fit in anywhere and to make other people uncomfortable. Of course, we can always point to someone who is stranger than we are. Too many of us probably try to fit in too comfortably. But if we really do belong to God, we are different. We will stand out. We will seem weird in the world's eyes.

My parents told me about a man they knew years ago. People thought he was fairly strange himself, but one day he was talking about a woman in town and said, "Ain't Phyllis odd?" That just strikes me as funny.

What makes us God's people? What are God's people like? What do we do? Are we different enough that the world might look at us and say, "Ain't they odd?"

There's a document from the Second Century (less than 100 years after the events in the Gospels) that attempts to explain Christians to someone in the Roman Empire. I think it's an interesting description.

For Christians cannot be distinguished from the rest of the human race by country or language or customs. They do not live in cities of their own; they do not use a peculiar form of speech; they do not follow an eccentric manner of life. This doctrine of theirs has not been discovered by the ingenuity or deep thought of inquisitive men, nor do they put forward merely human teaching, as some people do. Yet, although they live in Greek and barbarian cities alike, as each man's lot has been cast, and follow the customs of the country in clothing and food and other matters of daily living, at the same time they give proof of the remarkable and admittedly extraordinary constitution of their own commonwealth. They live in their countries, but only as aliens. They have a share in everything as citizens, and endure everything as foreigners. Every foreign land is their fatherland, and yet for them every fatherland is a foreign land. They marry, like everyone else, and they beget children, but they do not cast out their offspring. They share their board with each other, but not their marriage bed. It is true that they are "in the flesh," but they do not live "according to the flesh." They busy themselves on earth, but their citizenship is in heaven. They obey the established laws, but in their own lives they go far beyond what the laws require. They love all men, and by all men are persecuted. They are unknown, and still they are condemned; they are put to death, and yet they are brought to life. They are poor, and yet they enjoy complete abundance. They are dishonored, and in their very dishonor are glorified; they are defamed, and are vindicated. They are reviled, and yet they bless; when they are affronted, they still pay due respect. When they do good, they are punished as evildoers; undergoing punishment, they rejoice because they are brought to life. (*The So-Called Letter to Diognetus* chap. 5, in Cyril Richardson, ed., *Early Christian Fathers* 216-17)

Let's go to the beginning of our scripture and see what being the people of God is like. First, there's a change, a letting go of certain attitudes and behaviors, leaving behind an old way of life. Peter says to get rid of malice or ill-will. Malice is the opposite of the sincere mutual love from a pure heart that he was just talking about (1:22). The other attitudes and behaviors he mentions here—deceit, hypocrisy, envy and slander—contradict mutual love and destroy community. That's why we have to get rid of them by God's grace and with God's help.

Peter is describing Christian conversion. In verse 9 he says that we praise God who called us out of darkness into his wonderful light. Israel came out of the darkness of slavery in Egypt into the light of God's presence and guidance through the wilderness. By faith, through the death and resurrection of Jesus, we come out of the darkness of sin and death into God's light and life. It involves a turning away from and leaving behind our way of life apart from God. In that same motion, we turn to God and the direction God has for us. We don't do this by ourselves, but we depend on God's Spirit, God grace and help.

Remember what we say in the covenant of baptism: we renounce wickedness, reject evil and repent of our sin (*UM Hymnal* 34). In fact, Peter may be talking about baptism as the sign of new birth and the mark of conversion.

Now that we've received grace and let go of the old way, we move into the new way God has for us, new life in Christ. We are born anew. But new birth is not the end, it's the beginning of our adventure of life in Christ. We're to be like newborns in our craving pure spiritual milk, the milk of God's word and Spirit. But we are nourished by God's milk so that we will grow up in our salvation.

This is still describing the change God brings to our lives, from darkness to light, from rejecting Christ to trusting him, from disobeying the gospel to being God's people who declare his wonderful works. Again, in the baptism covenant, we accept freedom, confess Jesus as Savior, trust his grace and promise to serve him as Lord (*Hymnal*).

Experiencing this change and making this transition from the old life away from God to the new life with God, is part of what makes us distinct,

different, peculiar. We enter this new life when we come to Jesus. We continue in it and grow as we keep coming to him.

Peter calls Jesus "the living Stone." Jesus has life from eternity. Though he died, God raised him from the dead and he is alive never to die again. He is the source of our life. It's interesting that Peter calls Jesus the Stone. Jesus had given this apostle the nickname Peter or "Rocky." Jesus said he would build his church on this rock.

People rejected Jesus, the living Stone. But God chose him and he is precious to God. God holds him in the highest honor and esteems him. The people of God are like our Lord. We are also living stones and God honors our belief in his Son Jesus. Michael Card has set this passage of scripture to music:

Living stones, living stones  
We are holy, living stones  
Built upon the firm foundation  
that is Jesus  
And as we cling to that Rock  
Who became a Stumbling Block  
We remember we are living stones

See, in Zion He is known  
A chosen precious cornerstone  
And the ones who come to trust in Him  
will never know the shame  
that He bore on that Cross  
when it seemed all was lost  
He is a Stone that makes men stumble  
The Rock that makes them fall

By the Word of His mouth  
We are made one holy house  
Though we live as scattered strangers  
we are not homeless, we are free

We are one family, one fold  
One Overseer of our souls  
says we are His own possession  
We are living stones  
("Living Stones," on *A Fragile Stone*)

As God's people coming to Jesus, we receive mercy. God's covenant faithfulness and love are ours in Christ. God doesn't hold our sins against us, but in mercy he forgives us and doesn't give us what we deserve.

As we come to Christ, the living Stone, we are living stones being built into God's house or household. We are the temple of God, a spiritual house where God's Holy Spirit dwells. We aren't scattered individual stones. We are built together. What if the contractors constructing our new building just left pieces of metal lying around the site and didn't put them together? What if they just scatter bricks on the ground? We wouldn't think they were builders. Together, we are God's temple. Together, we are God's people.

Peter starts mixing metaphors now. Not only are we the living stones and God's house, but we are also the priests who serve God in this temple. As God's people in Christ, we are a holy and royal priesthood. This is the main scripture where we get the Protestant doctrine of "the priesthood of all believers." We have access to God. We pray for each other. We share God's forgiveness and encouragement with each other.

Also, as a holy priesthood, we offer spiritual sacrifices to God through Jesus Christ. We see some examples of these spiritual sacrifices in other scripture passages.

- "Therefore, I urge you, brothers and sisters, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God—this is your true and proper worship" (Romans 12:1). As the people of God, we offer God our bodies, which means we give ourselves fully to God.

- “Through Jesus, therefore, let us continually offer to God a sacrifice of praise—the fruit of lips that openly profess his name” (Hebrews 13:15). We offer God praise, worship, adoration. Note 1 Peter 2:9: We are God’s people that we may declare the praises or mighty acts of him who called us out of darkness into his wonderful light.
- “And do not forget to do good and to share with others, for with such sacrifices God is pleased” (Hebrews 13:16). The good we do for each other, the service we give to others is given to God.

So we are the people of God, coming to Jesus, getting rid of old ways that destroy loving community, receiving mercy, receiving new life from the living Lord. This new life floods out in commitment, praise and service.

The South Bronx is one of the poorest neighborhoods around anywhere. There’s a church there that includes former addicts, undocumented aliens, unemployed people and recently homeless people. One year, the congregation decided to put on a passion play and reenact the whole sweep of Holy Week, from Palm Sunday to Easter. They began by dramatizing Jesus’ entry into the city. They borrowed a live donkey and had someone portray Jesus. Then they paraded in a long procession around the block of shabby storefronts and run-down apartments shouting, “Hosanna!” When they got around the block and back to the door of their building, the Palm Sunday procession ran into a group in the street that was protesting police brutality. Maybe it was a more like the original Palm Sunday than we might realize. Jesus and the protestors, the congregation and the street crowds, the cries of “Hosanna” and the cries of social outrage mingled together in a swirl of movement and noise. Someone passing by on the street, seeing the confusion and fearing trouble, even called the police, whose arrival brought added color and drama.

Somehow the processional made it inside the church building where, as the play unfolded, Jesus was tried, condemned, and executed. But then, women came from the tomb early in the morning on the first day of the week with an amazing word of an empty tomb and the astounding news,

"He is risen!" The other disciples expressed disbelief and thought the women's news was just an "idle tale."

But then the script called for three members of the congregation to stand up and bear witness to the truth of the resurrection. "*I know that he is alive...*" each one was to begin. The first was Angie. "I know that he is alive," she said, "because he is alive in me." She then told how she was abused by her father, how she fell into despair and alcoholism, became HIV positive. But then she responded to the welcome of the church, then she started attending worship, then a Bible study, and little by little she was raised from the grave of her life. Now she's a seminary student, studying to become a pastor. "I am now alive because Jesus Christ lives in me and through me," Angie said, her face aglow. "I am a temple of the Holy Spirit." And she's a living stone in God's temple, the church.

The two other witnesses stood and recited their part of the script: "I know that he is alive..." Then that portion of the play was done and it was time to move on. But others in the sanctuary began to stand spontaneously. They would say, "I know that he is alive because he is alive in me." Homeless people, addicts now clean, the least and the lost stood one by one. Nothing could stop them. "I know that he is alive," they shouted (Thomas Long, "The Dream Church," in *Exploring and Proclaiming the Apostles' Creed*, ed., Roger Van Harn, 238-39).

Do you know he is alive? Does he live in you? Are you coming to the living Stone, Jesus, and receiving life from him? If not, you can. You can start right now. If you'd like to join this church as a sign of being a living stone built into God's house, we invite you to do that as well. Come, be part of God's peculiar people.