

SERMON SERIES ON 1 PETER

**You Are God's Spiritual House
(1 Peter 2:4-10)**Jerry Truex; April 13, 2008

A. Introduction

Today we read 1 Peter 2:4-10. 1 Peter was written to encourage people who were shocked by the Roman destruction of the Jerusalem Temple in 70 AD and, after they fled, they suffered as refugees in Asia Minor (Turkey). To this people Peter writes, "Keeping coming to Jesus and be the spiritual temple of God." That is the sermon in a nutshell. To understand what Peter is saying, it is critical that we understand who Peter was writing to. Only then will we understand the problems. And only then will we grasp Peter's insight.

B. People without a Temple

First, Peter was writing to people who experienced the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple, which was considered the center of Judaism and the place where God dwelled on earth.

1. Pax Romana

Peter was writing to Christians living in a shattered world held together by the *Pax Romana*, the peace of Roman military might. The Romans ruled through coercion and power. They intimidated local client kings. They crushed insurgent opposition. They leveled cities and called it peace.

2. The Jewish War (66 AD)

In 66 AD, the client state of Judah (the Jews) thought they could throw off the Roman yoke. They started a war. It was a bad decision. The Romans legions came and squashed the Jewish resistance.

a. Jerusalem Temple destroyed

In 70 AD, the Romans utterly destroyed the Jerusalem Temple. Without a Temple, Jews and Christians were thrown into a state of crisis and disorientation that is almost impossible to overstate. The loss of the temple was a 9/11 event, but on a much more devastating scale. Jews and Jewish Christians became refugees. They left Jerusalem and the region of Judah.

b. Religious life decimated

Their religious life was decimated. The Temple had been the center of Jewish religion. Through daily sacrifices, the Temple was the place where all Jews access to God. With the destruction of the Temple, Judaism collapsed:

- The Sanhedrin (Jewish government) was suspended
- Sacrifices were terminated
- The major Temple-feasts ended
- Jewish land was confiscated

In the aftermath of these tremendous losses, the Jewish rabbis were forced to reshape the identity and practice of Judaism.¹ Christians faced the same crisis as the Jewish rabbis.² Like the rabbis, Peter also had to address the issues of atonement,³ identity,⁴ and the presence of God.⁵

C. People without a homeland

Second, Peter was writing to people without a homeland. They had fled Judea and gone to Asia Minor (1 Pet. 1:1). In Asia Minor, they lived on the margins of society.

1. "Transient strangers" (*parepidēmoi*) (2:11)

Peter calls the recipients "transient strangers" (*parepi,dhmoi*). This means they were foreigners dislocated from their homeland. Perhaps some of them were traveling merchants, missionaries, or refugees. They lived without legal protection and without political power.

2. "Resident aliens" (*paroikoi*) (2:11)

They were also called "resident aliens" (*pa,roikoi*).⁶ This means they were landless people from abroad. They were noncitizens, unable to own land. They were day laborers without hope of permanent and respectable work. They were below citizens, but above slaves.⁷

3. A suffering community (1:6)

The recipients were also suffering community. Suffering is mentioned 22 times in 1 Peter.⁸ Their suffering was not the result of persecution from an official anti-Christian policy by the Romans.⁹ There are no references to Roman hostility, trials, or executions, nor are there any anti-Roman comments. In fact, 1 Peter advises readers to respect authority and honor the emperor (2:13-17), advice hardly conceivable if Christians were being persecuted by Rome.¹⁰

Why were they suffering? It is likely they suffered because they were simply foreigners living in an ancient xenophobic world.¹¹

They were verbally attacked and humiliated. There are a variety of Greek words indicating they were "blasphemed" (4:4), "insulted" (2:23; 3:9), "slandered" (2:12; 3:16), "disparaged" (3:16), and "reproached" (4:14).¹ The letter itself offers one clear explanation why they were abused.

4. *Christianoi* (4:16)

They were verbally abused "because of [the] name of Christ" (4:14).¹³ And they were labeled *Christianoi* or "Christians" (4:16). The label *Christianoi* originated in Latin-speaking circles.¹⁴ From a Latin or Roman perspective, Christ was a criminal, who was shamefully crucified years earlier. Anyone who continued to follow Christ was considered superstitious and very foolish.¹⁵

Thus, *Christianoi* was not originally a self-designation, but came *from others* (Acts 11:26). It was used in a mocking way (Acts 26:28). This explains why the term is absent in most of the NT (only three times 1 Pet 4:16; Acts 11:26; 26:28).

D. God's Temple and Household

So Peter is addressing a group of beleaguered (besieged, troubled, harassed) Christian refugees living in Asia Minor 2,000 years ago. What does Peter tell them?

1. "Come to Jesus" (2:4)

1 Peter 2:4 begins with a *present imperative participle* (pro.j o)n proserco,menoi): "Come to him!" or "Keep coming to Jesus!"¹⁶ Peter sees

their crisis—no Temple, no home, living with insults, living as outsiders as resident aliens transient strangers—and what does he say: “Come to Jesus!”

When we face crisis ... any crisis, big or small... and we face them day-in-and-day-out ... we are invited to see the crisis as an invitation to “Come to Jesus!” In our moment of crisis ... in the moment of our trouble or frustration ... there is the divine word: “Come to Jesus!”

What does “Come to Jesus!” mean? I think it means at least three things.

a. Follow Jesus (purgation)

First, it refers to following or imitating Jesus. Following Jesus means character development and Jesus-like behavior. This is *purgation*. Purgation means getting rid of harmful and destructive habits and acquiring habits of justice and compassion. That’s why Peter says:

1 Peter 2:11-12. ¹¹ Beloved, I urge you as aliens and exiles to abstain from the desires of the flesh that wage war against the soul. ¹² Conduct yourselves honorably among the *Gentiles* (NRSV).

b. Experience Jesus (illumination)

Second, “coming to Jesus” means experiencing Jesus. The Risen Christ was an experienced reality 2,000 years ago and Christ is an experienced reality today. God can be encountered in many ways, but there are at least two time-tested practices that have positioned people for such encounters: *Lectio Divina* and *Centering Prayer* (see this month’s Newsletter on *Lectio Divina* and the *Centering Prayer* pamphlet on top of the mail boxes). Both require practice and diligence over a period of time. Both can lead to an experience of God within. This is illumination or enlightenment.

c. Be a spiritual house (unification)

Third, “coming to Jesus”—as the context indicates—means being a spiritual house of God. Notice what Peter said:

Come to him, a living stone ... and like living stones, let yourselves be built into a spiritual house (*oikos pneumatikos*) (2:4-5; NRSV)

In verse 4, Christ is referred to as “a living stone” (*lithon zōnta*). The word for “stone” (*lithos*) refers to a stone that has been quarried, hewn, and readied for construction.¹⁷ In context, it conjures the image of a large stone used in the construction of a building. Christ is called the “cornerstone” where the building was aligned (2:6); he is the “capstone” above the rest (2:7); he is also the “stumbling stone” on the ground (2:8). Peter is saying that Christ as the most important, but overlooked, building block of the emerging spiritual house (2:5). When you are building your spiritual house, don’t leave Christ out!

In verse 5, Peter continues the building metaphor. The *Christianoi* are identified as “living stones” (*lithoi zōntes*) aligned with the “living stone” (*lithon zōnta*), and together they are to allow themselves to be built into “a spiritual house”.

What is “a spiritual house”? It has two possible meanings:

(1) Spiritual family

On the one hand, the term “spiritual house” (*oikos pneumatikos*) can refer to a spiritual household or family. The term “house” (*oikos*) was used metaphorically for a family (cf. Heb. 3:6). In this reading, coming to Jesus means becoming part of God’s family or a spiritual community.¹⁸

This was good news for the *Christianoi*, who were without a permanent home. By saying that the *Christianoi* were a spiritual house, Peter addresses their sense of homelessness.

(2) Spiritual temple

On the other hand, the term “spiritual house” would have called forth images of the Jerusalem Temple, which was often referred to as “the house of God” (e.g., 1 Chron. 28:10-13 and 2 Chron. 7:5 LXX). The Temple was made of gigantic stones. It was an impressive structure—one of the seven wonders of the world. Now Peter is saying that Christ and Christians form the New Living Temple.

Again, this would have been good news for *Christianoi* in the aftermath of the destruction of the Temple. Peter is saying that God did not leave and God is much closer than they thought.

2. Be God's Temple/Family (2:5)

The *Christianoi* thought they were without a Temple and without a home. They were wrong! Peter encourages them to be God's Temple and to be God's family." The *Christianoi* may not have a permanent physical home, but they were a spiritual home/family of God. The *Christianoi* did not have a physical temple, but they constitute the Living Temple. Of course, this is metaphorical language. It is meant to stretch our imagination. It is meant to help us see our lives from God's point of view.

Questions:

- Have you ever thought of yourself (plural) as God's Home/Temple?
- Have you ever thought that your life in all its dimensions—physical, emotional, biological, relational, spiritual—was a place where the Divine Spirit lived?
- What comes to mind when you think of yourself as a Divine Home? Or part of the Divine Household?
- How are you a Temple of God?

What images come to mind?

- The Temple used to be the connection between heaven and earth; now the Living Temple of God, which you are, is that connection.
- God's family is inclusive, so must I be.
- God's Temple is sacred and pure, so must I be.
- Just as the Temple was viewed as the Dwelling of God, so now I must see God as living within me.

Notice what Peter is saying. Coming to Jesus means being the Divine Temple. Coming to Jesus means allowing God into your life—to live within you. I think this means:

- Opening yourself to God.
- Submitting to God.
- Not being afraid of God.
- Trusting God enough to be ruthlessly honest with God and yourself.
- Saying to God, "I'm ready. Move in."
- Giving God access to all the rooms in your life—your thought life, emotional life, etc.
- That is coming to Jesus.

The Divine Reality wants to dwell within us. This is unification. God comes to us in the person of Christ. God comes to us in Scripture and tradition. God comes to us in nature. And God comes to us *from within*. Discovering God within doesn't happen all at once. We purify ourselves by imitating Christ (purgation), we move toward enlightenment through the meditative arts (illumination), and over time we may, by grace, we discover God within (unification).

E. New People of God

Peter assumes that God dwells among the *Christianoi*. In this way, Peter sees the *Christianoi* as *replacing* the Jerusalem Temple; as Josephus wrote, there can only be "one temple for one God."¹⁹ So, contrary to some contemporary Jewish beliefs, which hopes the physical Temple will be rebuilt, the *Christianoi* have no need to rebuild an earthly temple and no need to preserve its practices.

Our passage ends with Peter linking the *Christianoi* with the people of Israel. The people of Israel were given the task of being God's people and God's priests to the nations.

Exod 19:5-6. ⁵ Now therefore, if you obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession out of all the peoples. Indeed, the whole earth is mine,⁶ but you shall be for me a priestly kingdom and a holy nation. These are the words that you shall speak to the Israelites." (NRSV)

1 Peter 2:9-10. ⁹ But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people, in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light. ¹⁰ Once you were not a people, but now you are God's people; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy. (NRSV)

The *Christianoi* were primarily Gentiles who had received instruction in Judaism, perhaps at a local synagogue, but then "came" to Jesus.²⁰ What is striking is that Peter addresses *Christianoi* with terms ordinarily used to define the people of the house of Israel:²¹

The elect (1:1)	A royal priesthood (2:9)
The dispersed ones (Diaspora Jews) (1:1)	A holy nation (2:9)
A holy priesthood (2:5)	A people belonging to God (2:9)
A chosen people (2:9)	God's people (2:10)

This means the *Christianoi* were, according to Peter, part of the house of Israel as God's people.²² The *Christianoi* are all priests for God--hence, the doctrine of the

priesthood of all believers. The *Christianoi* are part of the “true Israel of God” (Gal. 6:16).

F. Conclusion

There are two concluding remarks that I want you to take with you.

First, keep coming to Jesus. Peter encourages the *Christianoi*—and you are the *Christianoi* as much as anyone—not to be passive observers of traumatic events. You will have your 9/11 events. But you are not victims. You will have your crises. But you are not powerless. You must keep coming to Jesus. You come by imitating Jesus (purgation), by experiencing Christ (illumination), and by discovering that God abides within you (unification).

Second, let God dwell within you. You do not need to feel spiritually homeless. You are not a spiritual alien or exile. Why? Because you are the Divine Home and, together, you are the Divine Family. You do not need to wonder where God is in your moments of crises. God is there. God is nearer than you thought. God is within.

When you come to Jesus, when you discover you are God’s dwelling place on planet earth, you will also discover you are not alone. There is a whole people, who together we are the people of God, the divinely chosen ones, the holy priesthood, the holy nation, and the beloved of God.

Notes

1. With the fall of Jerusalem, Rabban Yohanan ben Zakkai (70-85 C.E.), Rabban Gamaliel (85-115 C.E.), and other Jewish rabbis gathered in the town of Yavneh (Jamnia) and instituted dramatic changes to Judaism, spawning what is now called rabbinic Judaism.
2. Any thought about the temple being destroyed was very disturbing to both Jews and Christians (Mark 13:1-8; 14:57; John 2:19-22; {191} 11:48; Acts 6:13). It is conceivable that Christians, especially Jewish Christians, participated in temple activities until the temple was destroyed. For example, Paul was a follower of the Way (Acts 24:14), yet he participated in temple rituals (e.g., Acts 24:18) and brought Gentile Christians to the temple (Acts 21:28).
3. 1 Pet. 1:2b, 18-19.
4. 1 Pet. 1:22; 2:9-10.
5. 1 Pet. 1:23-25; 2:4-10.
6. 1 Pet. 1:1; 2:11 (cf. 1:17). Unless noted otherwise, the translations are those of the author.
7. Scott McKnight, *1 Peter*, NIV Application Commentary (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), 25.
8. See 1 Pet. 1:6-7; 2:12, 15, 18-20; 3:9, 14, 16-17; 4:1, 4, 12-14, 16, 19; 5:1, 8-10.
9. The only evidence that might suggest Roman persecution of Christians (but ultimately fails) comes from a letter written to Emperor Trajan by Pliny the Younger, the governor of Bithynia-Pontus (ca. 112 C.E.). In the letter, Pliny asks Trajan’s advice about what to do with Christians,

who were denounced by local residents for worshipping Christ, shameful acts, and refusing to practice emperor worship. The fact that persecution was not happening officially is confirmed by Trajan's reply that Christians should *not* be hunted down and *not* punished for unproved charges. See Elliott, *1 Peter*, 792-94.

10. Elliott, *1 Peter*, 100, 793.
11. Elliott, *ibid.*, 94-103.
12. The terms are overlapping synonyms. See "*Blasphemō and Its Semantic Relations*," chapter 4 in Jerry Truex, *The Problem of Blasphemy: Early Jewish Understandings and the Fourth Gospel* (Ph.D. diss., Durham University, England, 2002).
13. Author's translation. The phrase *en onomati Christou* can be understood as causal, following J. N. D. Kelly, *The Epistles of Peter and Jude* (New York: Harper and Row, 1969); Erland Waltner and J. Daryl Charles, *1-2 Peter, Jude*, Believers Church Bible Commentary (Scottsdale, PA: Herald, 1999); Elliott, and other recent commentators.
14. Elliott (*1 Peter*, 789) states that *Christianos* uses "a borrowed Latin ending (-ianos [Gk.] from -ianus [Lat.]) or an underlying Latin formation in its entirety." When the suffix -ianus is attached to a proper name (e.g., Christ), it indicates an associate or partisan of the one named.
15. This is supported by the Roman historian Tacitus (*Annals* 15.44.3), who wrote: "Christus, from whom the name [*Christiani*] had its origin, suffered the extreme penalty during the reign of Tiberius at the hands of one of our procurators, Pontius Pilate, and a most mischievous superstition, thus checked for the moment, again broke out not only in Judaea, the first source of the evil, but even in Rome, where all things hideous and hateful from every part of the world find their center and become popular."
16. "Coming" (*proserchomenoi*) is a present participle with imperatival force, "keeping coming."
17. *Lithos* is often used for large, prepared stones for building (Matt. 24:2), sealing graves (Matt. 27:60), millstones (Rev. 18:21), and inscriptions (2 Cor. 3:7).
18. This position is argued by Elliot (*1 Peter*, 414-18); see also Waltner and Charles, 75.
19. Quoting Josephus, *Ag. Ap.* 2:193. {193}
20. McKnight, 23; also see Scott McKnight, *A Light Among the Gentiles: Jewish Missionary Activity in the Second Temple Period* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 1991).
21. The readers are familiar with *Jewish concepts* like election (1:1; 2:4-10), purity (1:2, 14-16, 33; 2:5, 9; 3:5), redemption (1:18-19), and Zion (2:6); with *Jewish scripture*, such as Exod. 19:5-6 (1 Pet. 2:4-9) and Hos. 1:9; 2:23 (1 Pet. 2:10); and with *Jewish traditions* about Abraham and Sarah (3:6), Noah (3:19-21), and Passover (lamb, 1:19).
22. McKnight, *1 Peter*, 24.