

Homeward Bound

1 Peter

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10 Interactive Bible Studies for Small Groups and Individuals

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Second edition
First published 1999

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STUDY 5

The very stones cry out

1 Peter 2:4-12

In 1997, the alpine village of Thredbo in New South Wales, Australia, was hit by a landslide. Nineteen people were buried beneath tonnes of earth and rubble. Miraculously, one survived: Stuart Diver was trapped in an air pocket between two massive concrete slabs for some 20 hours until rescuers reached him. His wife Sally, asleep beside him in the bed, was killed.

Speaking about his ordeal and salvation, Stuart Diver's reaction was interesting. Did he regard his amazing rescue as an act of God? Did it mean anything? Was there any message in it for him? "It was just physics", he said. He happened to be under the right part of the slab. His wife and 17 other people weren't. "It was just an accident of physics."

How would you react if your life was handed back to you like this? Would you search for a reason behind it all? Would it prompt you to re-examine your life's priorities? Or would you shrug and press on with life?

The first 12 verses of 1 Peter 2 are all about salvation and people's response to it. Before we go too far, however, we need to do some work to understand the passage, for it is practically dripping with Old Testament quotations and imagery that we may not be familiar with. Peter's readers, it must be remembered, were themselves Jews, steeped in the Old Testament. They knew the quotations and understood the allusions. We may need to do a little work to get up to speed.

A promise set in stone

To understand this passage—with its living stones and spiritual houses, its chosen peoples and royal priesthoods—we need to remind ourselves of all that has gone before. It's a long story, and we will need to skip large portions of it, but it begins with God choosing Israel out of all the nations of the world to be his own people, with the ultimate purpose of blessing the whole world through them. Beginning with Abraham in Genesis 12, throughout all the history of Isaac and Jacob, God made this small but growing nation his own. He brought them out of Egypt to take them to the land he had promised on oath to their forefathers, and on Mount Sinai, he gathered them together and said to them:

Now therefore, if you will indeed obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession among all peoples, for all the earth is mine; and you shall be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation. These are the words that you shall speak to the people of Israel. (Exod 19:5-6)

This one nation was to be different from all the rest (i.e. holy): they would be like a kingdom of priests, standing between God and the rest of the world. Yet there was a condition ("if you will indeed obey my voice and keep my covenant"), and Israel as a nation did not fulfil it. The story of the long series of books from Joshua through to 2 Kings recounts how Israel consistently disobeyed their God and rejected him, and how in time, he too rejected them and punished them for their sin.

Let us take up the story at this point by turning to the prophet Isaiah, who was writing towards the end of this sorry tale. Israel is about to receive the final blow of punishment from God for all her apostasies, Baal-worship, injustice and wickedness.

Read Isaiah 8:1-15.

1. What is the Lord about to do to Samaria and Judah—that is, the northern and southern kingdoms of Israel?

2. The Lord is often referred to in the Psalms as a “rock” of salvation (e.g. Ps 18:2, 46), but what sort of rock has he become now for Israel?

Read Isaiah 27:12-28:19.

Isaiah also prophesies something better for the future. As well as his gloomy warnings that God is about to send his people into exile, and destroy Jerusalem and the temple, Isaiah also envisions a future restoration.

3. Who are the people being spoken against? What have they done?

4. What sort of “stone” is God laying?

5. What will God do in the future (“in that day”)?

SIDEBAR: Optional questions

Hosea prophesies at a similar stage in Israel's history.

! Read Hosea 1:1-9. What is Israel guilty of? Through the living illustration of Hosea's wife, and the names of his three children, what is God saying that he will do to Israel?

! Read Hosea 2:14-23. Despite all Israel had done, God still promises to restore a remnant of the people. In Hosea 2, God speaks of a time in the future when he will bring 'whoring' Israel back. How will God one day save Israel from the punishment described in Hosea 1?

Read Psalm 79.

One final piece of background to note for 1 Peter 2 is the Psalms. The Psalms are full of praise; we all know that, but it is worth noting that most of the praise in the psalms simply consists of people explaining or declaring to others how great God is—the God who has delivered them from their trouble. Psalm 79 is a marvellous example among many.

6. What do you think is the context for this prayer?

7. What is the end result the people are praying for?

The living stone

With all these hopes and expectations in the air, and their fulfilment long-awaited, Jesus steps onto the scene in first-century Judea. Yet ironically, Israel's leaders reject and despise him, just as they had his Father so many centuries before. In a very pointed way, Jesus quotes the words of Isaiah to them:

But [Jesus] looked directly at them and said, “What then is this that is written:

‘The stone that the builders rejected
has become the cornerstone’?

“Everyone who falls on that stone will be broken to pieces, and when it falls on anyone, it will crush him.”

The scribes and the chief priests sought to lay hands on him at that very hour, for they perceived that he had told this parable against them, but they feared the people. (Luke 20:17-19)

It was not long, of course, before they found their opportunity, and Jesus was arrested, tried and executed. But death could not hold him; he rose triumphant, and his gospel was preached to all the nations, starting at Jerusalem.

With all this in mind, we are now ready to read 1 Peter 2.

Read 1 Peter 2:4-8.

8. A “living stone” is a strange idea, since a stone is usually about the most lifeless thing you could imagine. Why do you think Peter describes Jesus as a “living stone”?

9. What function does this particular stone have? What part of the building is it? What sort of building will the finished project be?

10. How does this relate to some of the Old Testament prophecies we looked at above?

11. What does God think of this “living stone”?

12. What reactions do different people have to the stone? What is the result for them?

Responsive stones

The further we delve into this passage, the more extraordinary it is. Peter’s readers, we must remember, were descendants of those exiled from the nation of Israel so many centuries ago. They had no temple in which to worship, no land, no priesthood, nothing. Now at last, all that was promised through the prophets is being fulfilled through Jesus Christ. In coming to him, they have become heirs once again of the inheritance (cf. 1 Peter 1). They have been born again and redeemed from their exile. And they are receiving, once again, a temple, a priesthood, and much more besides.

In 1 Peter 2:4-6, Jesus is pictured as the foundation or cornerstone of a new spiritual temple, and as they come to him and believe in him, they become the building blocks, as it were, of the temple. As each new believer comes to Christ, he or she is added to the foundation, and the building rises up to become a “spiritual house”, made with living stones consisting of the new people of God in Christ.

Let us look further at what Peter’s readers have received and what their response should be.

Read 1 Peter 2:4-10.

13. List all that believers in Jesus Christ now are, or have received, as well as the Old Testament foreshadowing of this blessing (from earlier in this study or from your own knowledge).

What they now are/have received	Old Testament connection
e.g. verse 4—we are coming to the living stone, rejected by men.	The promise of a stone laid by God that would mean salvation for some, but that would be rejected by others (e.g. Isaiah 8, 28).

14. Think back to Psalm 79 and other psalms of praise. What did God's people specifically do in the temple in response to his salvation? How is this similar to the response of the new people of God who are a new spiritual house?

Read 1 Peter 2:11-12.

15. What tension or contrast do you see in how the people are described in verses 9-10 and in verses 11-12? How is this tension lived out? When will it be resolved?

Implications

(Choose one or more of the following to think about further or to discuss in your group.)

- ! Peter is writing to exiled Jews, reminding them of how God has fulfilled his promise to them in Christ. Elsewhere in the New Testament, we read about how Gentiles are also incorporated into this "spiritual house". How does Paul speak about this in Ephesians 2:19-22?

- ! The "spiritual house" does not refer to a single local 'church' as such, since in Peter's letter, it is made up of believers from many different places. How are they joined together? How do you think the people of this temple 'proclaim the excellencies' of God in practice (1 Pet 2:9)?

- ! How do you tell and declare to others all the wonderful things God has done for you?

- ! What are some of the ways that Christians stand out in today's society as "sojourners and exiles" (1 Pet 2:11)? What are we abused or reviled for?

- ! Some Christian traditions have 'priests', holy buildings and other similar trappings. What implications does this passage have for this way of thinking?

Give thanks and pray

- Thank God for his being faithful to his promises in the face of human sinfulness. Thank him for having mercy on you instead of giving you the punishment you deserve.
- Thank God for making you one of his chosen people, royal priests and living stones so that you can be part of his spiritual house.
- Ask him to help you proclaim his excellencies to the world as you live as a sojourner and exile this side of Jesus' return.