

What do you need to succeed in school? Is it having the supplies - the paper, pencils, books? At least in part, sure. Is it having good teachers, who are able to guide you through even difficult concepts and challenging ideas? Certainly, every student needs helpful teachers to guide them. But I'll contend that what you need to succeed most in education is fundamentals; you need to learn how to read and write if you're intending on tackling anything more complex than Dr. Seuss! Without a solid base to build from, any education will be shaky at best - if you aren't able to handle the most basic parts of learning, how can you be expected to understand mathematical theories or doctorate theses?

If a student isn't set on the right track for learning quickly, it makes it harder to catch up later. It's the same principle used when builders begin to construct a house; if a foundation isn't properly laid, or the edge of the walls isn't set exactly straight, then the rest of the project falls out of line. It's a great picture to use to tell us how a seemingly insignificant change can have real consequences further down the line, and it applies to much more than construction or even education - it's the picture Peter uses to talk about our relationship with Jesus.

It feels strange, doesn't it? To hear Peter call Jesus a "living stone." It's probably not the first thing you'd think of if someone asked you to list "names for Jesus." But as Peter walks us through his reasoning in our reading today, the comparison makes more and more sense. Without Jesus as the cornerstone of what we do, we are destined to fail. But if we build our lives around Jesus, the Living Stone, we have something that lasts from now into eternity.

For Peter's audience, the idea of building a house was especially meaningful. These Christians he was writing to were new to the faith, recently converted people from many different regions of the Middle East. And so for Peter to tie them closely with Jesus by calling them "living stones" as well is no small thing! But he doesn't stop there - this comparison has some real depth to it.

These new Christians aren't just "living stones" like their Savior, they have a profound purpose that Peter wants them to understand; he tells them that they are being built into a spiritual house, and that they will be a holy priesthood. Why does that matter? Because Peter is taking distinctly Jewish images of God's presence among His chosen people and attaching them to a group of people who had no earthly connection to the Jews. What kind of attachment could a Gentile claim to the "spiritual house" of the temple in Jerusalem? Not a single Gentile person was allowed to enter the sacred confines of that building, let alone be a priest!

Peter isn't talking about earthly connections - the ties these Gentile Christians had to the temple and the priesthood were entirely spiritual, but no less real. They knew very well that they weren't descended from the people of Israel, but they shared a connection stronger and longer-lasting than blood - they shared faith in God. They could be built up into a spiritual house because they were being built on the same cornerstone that the people of Israel had been built on - the cornerstone of Jesus.

The image of Jesus as cornerstone is an easy one to understand, especially for people in Peter's day. They knew that anyone building a house first carefully selected and laid a single stone, expertly shaped to have perfectly straight edges, at the corner of where the building would be built. The walls of the building were formed from that one point - if the cornerstone was laid even slightly crooked, the walls would be, too. So, in the same way that a cornerstone ensures a house's walls are straight, a life built on Jesus is firm and true, and leads to eternal life.

Yet even though this teaching is clear, and Jesus himself spoke clearly about himself - that he alone is "the way, the truth, and the life," for some this is not enough. For the Pharisees and the other Jewish leaders, to have Jesus as the foundation of their lives was foolish - they rejected him, even though he proved himself the Messiah by pointing them to the same Scriptures they claimed to know so well. They didn't believe in him, and they cast him aside by putting him to death on a cross.

The sad reality is that those Jewish leaders aren't the only ones who reject Jesus as their cornerstone. Even today, people seek to live their lives *their* way, living their *own* truth, instead of following *the* truth. They build their "house" on anything *but* Jesus - their money or fame, their

sexuality, science, politics, any other religion or belief, or none at all! And in the end those houses crumble and fall, because they were never built straight and true in the first place.

Dear friends, let's not fool ourselves into thinking that this means the problem is with "those people out there" and has nothing to do with the people in here. The same enemy that leads people without faith away from Jesus hasn't given up on us, either. The devil works on us just as hard, if not harder - why waste effort on people who are already on the road to hell? Peter tells us in our reading today that the ones who stumble over Jesus instead of building on Him were going to do that anyway. But that only means the devil has more time to spare for those he hasn't got control over, not less.

You can see his handiwork when you're tempted to skip a few of the "boring" parts of the service recording, because nobody else will know. He shows himself when we hear a challenging portion of Scripture and immediately ignore it, because it doesn't sound the way we want God to be. He's there when we find ourselves wanting to spend more and more time doing the things other people want us to do instead of what God wants us to do. Each time we choose something worldly instead of something Godly, we shift the cornerstone of our house just a little out of place, which means one day it will fall, and we'll be stuck with the consequences.

If we try to build up our lives ourselves, in our own way, then we will fail. The devil is ready and waiting to exploit our sinful natures that want us to believe we can do everything on our own, so that we put our trust in something that doesn't last. But we have something to build on that does last - a cornerstone that is always straight and true, and never fails. We build on Jesus, because what is built on him lasts forever.

Even though the devil works to convince us that we are his, and that we are destined to build lives that fail, this is only another one of his many lies. The truth is what Peter tells to the Gentile Christians reading his letter - the same truth that we hold on to. Even though we were once nothing but sinners, and completely in the devil's grip, that is no longer who we are - now we are God's! We can truly call ourselves God's chosen people, not because He chose us to carry the line of the Savior like the Israelites, but because that promised Savior has already come, and chose to make us his own.

Our Savior Jesus wanted for us to be free from the devil, and he was willing to sacrifice everything - even himself - to accomplish that goal. He set aside his glory as the Son of God and lowered himself to be a human being like us. He made himself subject to the Law that, as God, he himself had written. He fulfilled that Law in our place, and offered himself as a perfect sacrifice so that the debt of our sins could be paid in full, forever. And now, because he has washed you clean in the water of your baptism, he calls you to build your life - not on earthly things that fail, but on Him, the cornerstone that never fails.

By building on the Rock of Jesus, we are assured that everything in our lives is straight and true. We are free from the guilt that the devil tries to place on us for our sins, because that weight was placed on Jesus. What will you do with that freedom? Peter gives us some guidance; we have the opportunity to "offer acceptable sacrifices to God!" Through Jesus, we are able to live lives that please God, and not only ourselves. The life we build with Jesus as its cornerstone is an offering of thanks to God for making us His own, and making it possible for us to live such a life at all!

If that wasn't enough, Peter tells us we have another opportunity - to be a light in a world darkened by sin. God brought us out of that darkness when we heard his Word, and the Holy Spirit brought faith to our hearts. We have the chance to spread that Word to others - to shine its life-giving light on those living in the darkness of death. It was through that Word that we became a part of the people of God, and received His mercy, even when we didn't deserve it, and now it is given to us to share that Word with people looking for identity and longing for mercy.

Dear friends, if you want to be a successful student, you have to learn to read and write first - you need the right foundation to succeed. If you want to build a house that will last, you need to build it on the right cornerstone - if your walls are crooked, that house will fall. And if you long for a life that

will last, that brings the true peace and meaning that comes from having the guarantee of an eternal future, it needs to be built on God's chief cornerstone, Jesus. It's through faith in our Savior Jesus that we are able to build and live lives that please God. And it's a life built on Jesus that leads us to the promise of a new life with Him in heaven - a life that stands forever. Amen.