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Look around you. Do you know the name of the people sitting in your row? Do you know how their week was? What they are struggling with in life right now? Where do they find their joy? Do you know the people behind you, those in front of you? Do you know how their week went? What are they struggling with in life right?

In mid-July 1995, Chicago was hit with a brutal stretch of weather: Temperatures climbed to around 35°C with humidity pushing the heat index even higher to 41°C, nights offered almost no relief, staying above 27°C. The heat lasted for days, giving people no time to recover and the city wasn't prepared for how severe it would become. More than 700 people died, and many of the deaths shared heartbreaking similarities: People were found alone in their apartments, sometimes days later. Many victims were elderly, but not all—some were younger adults living in isolation. In fear of crime, some kept windows closed and doors locked, trapping heat inside. Air conditioning was often unavailable—or people were afraid to leave home to find cooling centers. Ambulances were overwhelmed. Hospitals ran out of space. The morgue had to bring in refrigerated trucks.

What Eric Klinenberg discovered later was striking: It

wasn't just the heat that killed people—it was social isolation.

In some neighbourhoods: Streets were empty, and people didn't know their neighbors. There was little trust, so fewer people checked on others. In others neighbourhoods: People sat outside together, business owners noticed when regulars didn't show up, neighbors knocked on doors, especially for seniors. The temperature was the same—but survival rates were not.

Two neighborhoods became famous in his research:

- North Lawndale: higher death rates, more abandoned buildings, less street life
- South Lawndale: far fewer deaths, vibrant streets, strong community ties

Even though North Lawndale had more resources on paper, it lacked the relational connections that actually save lives. Klinenberg called this “social infrastructure”—the invisible web of relationships that actually saves lives.

This tragedy revealed something we often miss in our society today: People didn't just need air conditioning. Individual strength wasn't enough, wealth wasn't even the deciding factor—they needed someone who would notice if they were missing. People didn't survive because they were tougher — they survived because someone noticed

them.

It's a sobering reminder that: You can live in a crowded city and still be completely alone, independence can quietly become isolation. Community isn't optional—it's essential.

We have reached the last message in the series on rocks in Scripture. We started with God as the foundation, to Jesus as our Cornerstone, with stones along the way, and now in Peter's 1st letter we are called to be living stones.

In Peter's first letter, he is writing to persecuted Christian communities, largely Gentiles, but also mixed with Jewish believers scattered across Asia Minor. If you remember back to Exodus, Aaron, Moses' brother, was chosen by God to be the first high priest of Israel. Aaron and his descendants had a unique, central role for Israel's worship life - they were set apart as priests, responsible for helping the people approach God in the tabernacle and later in the temple. Only Aaron and his descendants could serve as priests. They were the go-betweens. They offered sacrifices for sin on behalf of the people, they maintained the sacred space where God's presence dwelt, they taught God's laws to the nation and they pronounced blessings over the people. They didn't replace God—they helped the people draw near to Him safely.

When God sent Jesus, his Son, to save the world, through his death and resurrection on the cross, to save us from our

sins, Jesus became the great high priest. Peter is now saying to these persecuted Christians, Jesus, the living stone, the cornerstone, remember him? He was rejected, but chosen by God, precious in God's sight. I'm sure a reminder that they too, who are persecuted, are to remember that they are chosen by God, that they are precious in God's sight. The readers of this letter are on the margins of political and social life, they didn't stand much chance of becoming popular or attractive. The church represented a place of belonging for the displaced and the disenfranchised. It was an alternate and self-sufficient society where people could cultivate in common the values and ideals which were at variance with those of the society at large. They are not exempt from suffering, just look to Jesus. But, Peter says they are to be like living stones. As believers they are living stones because of their faith in the resurrected Christ. It highlights the believer's active, yet dependent, role in staying connected to Christ for spiritual life. Jesus' resurrected life becomes theirs, despite the hostile world they live in. Not only will they have resurrection at the end of the age, but they have new life now through Christ.

The image of "living stones" implies that God is constructing a new temple—no longer a physical building, but a community of people who house His Spirit. No where else in Scripture are believers called living stones but they

are described as God's temple or house in 1 Corinthians 3:16 "Do you not know that you are God's temple and that God's Spirit dwells in you?" Ephesians 2:19–22 "So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God, built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the cornerstone. In him the whole structure is joined together and grows into a holy temple in the Lord; in whom you also are built together spiritually into a dwelling place for God." Hebrews 3:6 "Christ, however, was faithful over God's house as a son, and we are his house if we hold firm the confidence and the pride that belong to hope."

As believers we make up the building stones of God's new temple, the church. But the point of the text is not that believers are being built into a spiritual house but that they as living stones are being built up. Peter continues that not only are they the temple, but also the priesthood that performs the ministry in the temple. They are to see themselves in the place of Aaron and his descendants, however they now come to Jesus instead of the altar. They do not bring animal sacrifices but spiritual sacrifices and the temple is not made from human hands, such as the tabernacle or the temples in Jerusalem, but they themselves constitute the temple.

I just completed the Baptist Identity course at ADC, and one

of the last questions we were asked, was what do you think is one of the most important Baptist Distinctives. Now, before I started the course, I didn't know what they all were. Of course, the distinctives of the Lordship of Christ, and the Sufficiency of Scripture are extremely important, so aside from those I chose the priesthood of all believers. This distinctive is based on this passage, which arose from the reformation.

The Reformers didn't invent the idea, but they pointed back to Scripture, especially passages read today and from Revelation 1:6 "and made us to be a kingdom, priests serving his God and Father, to him be glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen." They argued that, all believers already have direct access to God through Christ—not through a human priest. The idea really took shape through Luther in the early 1500s.

In works like *To the Christian Nobility of the German Nation*, he argued: There is no spiritual hierarchy in terms of access to God, and baptism makes every Christian a "priest". Church leaders still exist—but their role is service, not mediation. His belief was that all Christians are truly of the spiritual estate... there is no difference among them except office.

So, what changed? The Reformation flipped the structure. Before, the priests only had special access to God, and the people were dependent on this access. After, Christ was the

only mediator, with all believers having direct access, with pastors being teachers and shepherds, not gatekeepers. Other Reformers such as John Calvin and Ulrich Zwingli developed the idea further by emphasizing, the authority of Scripture for all believers, the responsibility of every Christian to grow in faith, and the importance of the whole community, not just clergy

This wasn't just a theological tweak—it changed everything. From this, access to Scripture changed with the Bible being translated into common languages, and people were encouraged to read it themselves. There was a direct relationship with God as there was no need for a priest to confess through. Prayer became personal and communal.

Every believer has a role in God's mission. Faith is lived, not just received. The Reformers did NOT mean: "Everyone is their own authority" or that "Church leadership doesn't matter." They still believed in: Pastors/elders, teaching authority, and order in the church. The shift was not removal of leadership, but removal of exclusive spiritual access.

The last two verses of the passage today read 1 Peter 2:9–10 "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. 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.” The passive of the verb signifies that God is the one building the church. Peter was not thinking mainly of each individual functioning as a priest before God, but the church corporately as God’s set-apart priesthood. As Westerners we can sometimes tend to individualize the notion of priesthood rather than seeing the emphasis on community. In the Old Testament priests were limited to the tribe of Levi but not now, all of God’s people are now priests.

Peter is drawing off Old Testament passages to describe the status and missional vocation of the church, including from Exodus 19:

Exodus 19:3–6 “Then Moses went up to God; the Lord called to him from the mountain, saying, “Thus you shall say to the house of Jacob, and tell the Israelites: You have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how I bore you on eagles’ wings and brought you to myself. 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, but you shall be for me a priestly kingdom and a holy nation. These are the words that you shall speak to the Israelites.””

These words from Exodus God spoke to Israel right after the exodus and its liberation from Egypt, defining its role in redemptive history. Foundational and constitutive for Israel’s identity and very being as the people of God. Peter

is telling the church that now that same missional role belongs to them. Now God's kingdom of priests consists of the church of Jesus Christ. They are a royal priesthood and a holy nation. They are to mediate God's blessings to the nations, as it proclaims in the gospel and as we hear from the Great Commission in Matthew 28:18–20 “And Jesus came and said to them, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.””

One commentator writes, about Exodus 19 “Israel's response to God is conceived in terms of personal commitment to God, but this is not simply a vertical relationship. Israel's commitment will immediately entail service to the neighbor, indeed the entire creation. As God formed Israel to praise him, now the church has been established to praise his wonders.” God's ultimate purpose in everything he does is designed to bring him praise (Isaiah 43:7 “everyone who is called by my name, whom I created for my glory, whom I formed and made.”). The declaration of God's praises includes both worship and evangelism, spreading the good news of God's saving wonders to all peoples.

And so, what does this all mean for us as the church? ...So

many things. One of the things I want to point out is that this Wednesday, April 22nd, is Earth Day. Part of praising and worshiping God is taking care of His creation.

If God's purpose in creating and redeeming a people is His glory, and if that glory is expressed through praise, then praise cannot be reduced to singing on a Sunday morning. Praise is a way of living in right relationship: with God, with others, and with creation itself. When God calls Israel in Exodus 19 to be a *"kingdom of priests and a holy nation,"* He is not just giving them a title—He is giving them a mission: To represent God to the world and to reflect His character in everything they do. That includes how they treat: the poor, the outsider, the land, the animals, and the rhythms of creation itself (Sabbath, rest, restoration). So when we talk about something like Earth Day, it's easy to treat it as: a cultural moment or a political issue. But biblically, it's neither of those at its core. It's a worship issue. Because if: "everyone who is called by my name... I created for my glory" (Isaiah 43:7), then creation itself is part of that glory. We don't worship creation—but we care for it because it belongs to the One we worship.

In Genesis, humanity is given "dominion," but that word has often been misunderstood. Biblical dominion doesn't mean: exploitation or control for selfish gain. It means: stewardship that reflects God's character. God doesn't abuse what He creates—He sustains it, delights in it, and

calls it good. So if we are a “kingdom of priests,” then part of our priestly role is: to care for what belongs to God in a way that points back to Him. To take care of the earth, and to take care of each other.

The story from Chicago showed us something we can't ignore. People didn't die just because of heat. They died because no one noticed. No one knocked. No one checked. No one knew. And in other neighborhoods—same temperature, same conditions— people lived. Because someone paid attention. Because someone cared. Because someone showed up. And that's where this comes back to us. Because Peter doesn't just say: “You are living stones.” He says: “You are a royal priesthood.” And what do priests do?

They don't stand far off. They draw near to God...and they bring others with them. They notice. They intercede. They serve. They carry the presence of God into everyday life. So this isn't just about: “Do you believe the right things?” It's about: Are you living as a priest where God has placed you?

Look around you again. The people in your row. Behind you. In front of you. Do you know their names? Do you know what they're carrying this week? Because being the church means: No one should be invisible here. No one should go unseen. No one should suffer alone. And it doesn't stop in this room. Out there—There are people living in crowded spaces...but completely alone. Just like

Chicago. And God's answer to that is not programs. It's A people.

A people who notice. A people who care. A people who act. A people who live as priests.

So here's the question: Who has God placed in your life... that you are meant to notice?

Who needs: a conversation, a prayer, a check-in, a reminder that they are not alone. Because this is how we declare His praises: Not just with our voices...but with our lives. You don't need a title to be a priest. You don't need a stage. You just need to be willing to see people...the way God sees them. So as living stones, built into a spiritual house, go and live as the royal priesthood you already are—declaring His praises by being a people who see, who serve, and who refuse to let anyone remain unseen.