

VALLEY WORSHIP TALK / 1 PETER 2:4-8a

14 DECEMBER 2025

⁴ As you come to him, the living Stone—rejected by humans but chosen by God and precious to him—⁵ you also, like living stones, are being built into a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood, offering spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ. ⁶ For in Scripture it says:

*“See, I lay a stone in Zion,
a chosen and precious cornerstone,
and the one who trusts in him
will never be put to shame.”*

⁷ Now to you who believe, this stone is precious. But to those who do not believe,

*“The stone the builders rejected
has become the cornerstone,”
⁸ and,*

*“A stone that causes people to stumble
and a rock that makes them fall.”*

When you hear the word ‘cornerstone,’ I would guess that your mind goes first to thinking about it in an architectural context, as the foundation of building and the very first part of its construction. A cornerstone is critical for establishing the correct alignment and position of the entire structure – all other stones are set in reference to it – and an inaccurate cornerstone can affect a whole building's stability.

If I’m right about this, you’ll be visualising a significant stone that is solid, strong and secure, one able to bear the weight of all that it supports and to hold a structure in place in a lasting way.

I spent nearly 30 years of my professional life concentrating on raising capital for investment firms from pension funds, insurance companies, sovereign institutions and wealthy families and individuals. In that world an investor willing to back a new firm or strategy is known as a ‘cornerstone’ investor, the first to commit and take the risk in getting the venture off the ground. These kinds of investors are rare, highly valued and hotly pursued. They typically also demand disproportionately high rewards for the risks they are taking – in simple terms, a bigger share of the pie.

I first got exposed to this world in 1991, when I was asked to join a three man team charged with raising capital to launch a new investment venture. We were thrilled that it had attracted one of the highest profile investors in the US at the time as its cornerstone investor. He’d been on Wall Street in the 1960s, had served at the highest levels of the US Government in the 1970s and, during the 1980s -- through incredibly shrewd investing -- had multiplied his fortune 200 fold, remarkably turning \$2 million into \$400 million. He had masses of capital to invest, exceptional credibility and a vast network of contacts. We thought he was the ideal backer. He was prepared to commit \$50 million to this new venture and we had a goal of raising a further \$450 million for it.

After ten months of intense effort, we were about to close legally on commitments from elite investors from all over the world to achieve this goal. This looming achievement really validated our judgment that we had chosen the right investor to cornerstone the whole enterprise. We had put our trust in him and were sure he would deliver.

I'll tell you how the story turned out a bit later, but – for now – let's focus on the case that the apostle Peter makes here that Jesus was, and remains, the cornerstone in which we should put our trust.

As a reminder, Peter was one of the first two disciples Jesus called to follow him and he spent the next three years of Jesus' public ministry by his side. He lived painfully through the events leading up to Jesus' crucifixion, denying three times that he knew him the night before Jesus' gruesome death. Peter also was one of the very first to witness the astonishing sight of the empty tomb two days after Jesus' dead body was laid there. Thereafter he met the risen Jesus numerous times, including – most movingly – when Jesus dealt lovingly with Peter's denials of him and ensured their relationship was fully restored.

As an observant Jew, Peter was steeped in what we now call the Old Testament. It is often through his eyes and voice that the Gospels and the Book of Acts record how Jesus' followers came to realise who Jesus really was – that he was actually the Son of God and the living fulfilment of Old Testament prophecies of the coming Messiah. These 'light bulb' moments required huge shifts in mentality for Peter, as well as the over-turning of assumptions in which he'd previously had total confidence.

Peter wrote this letter about 30 years after Jesus' death, in the early 60s AD. He could write with conviction on what he'd built, or rather re-built, his life on with Jesus as its cornerstone, drawing on decades of reflection on what he had witnessed first hand in journeying with Jesus and the connections between ancient prophecies and the man he knew.

So right at the heart of these verses, in verse 6, he quotes from a prophecy written by Isaiah, as recorded in Chapter 28 of his book:

For in Scripture it says:

*See, I lay a stone in Zion, a chosen and precious cornerstone,
and the one who trusts in him will never be put to shame.*

This prophecy was written in about 740 BC, during a very uncertain period in Israel's history, when the Assyrian empire was expanding Westward and putting it under much pressure.

Speaking straight in to this time of anxiety and instability, this awesome promise is made. God is beginning a new work and setting a fresh foundation – he is laying a cornerstone, and not just any cornerstone, but rather a chosen and precious one, in Zion.

And why Zion? It symbolised Jerusalem, the spiritual and physical heart of Israel where God's presence had across previous centuries dwelled in the Temple. God is promising to start afresh here, but fascinatingly – even though centuries later a second, physical Temple would actually be built in Jerusalem, after the destruction of the first one – this prophecy refers to this cornerstone as 'him,' not 'it'. In other words, when Isaiah says 'the one who trusts in him will never be put to shame,' he is speaking of a person, not a building.

Peter goes on to knit historic prophecies and his own experience together in quoting, in verse 7, another prophetic statement, this time from Psalm 118, written even longer before Jesus' time, probably in about 1000 BC:

The stone the builders rejected has become the cornerstone.

Jesus himself quoted this verse when dealing with his opponents. At the time they probably didn't understand what he was talking about – I wonder at what point over the intervening 30 years that it dawned on Peter that Jesus was saying I am that cornerstone.

But why the reference to 'the builders' who rejected the stone? Because the leaders at the time were still focused on the old ways of doing things, of worshipping God and seeking his presence in a physical building, the Temple in Jerusalem, as I said. But, as Isaiah had foreseen, God was doing something new through Jesus. He had a different plan and design for how he was going to be in relationship with people, not just in a single building and not just with one nation, Israel.

What was that different plan and design? This new Temple wasn't going to be a single, physical place where people went to worship God. Rather it was -- and is -- to be anywhere and everywhere, as God comes to us and dwells in our hearts. As we remember every year in this season, this new Temple started to take shape when God himself came to us as a human being, in order to show us what he is really like in character and to make his love known to us directly and personally.

But the builders, those loyal to the old Temple ways of doing things, didn't grasp God's plan and resisted it – the Gospels record just how much opposition Jesus the human being faced, to the point of being sentenced to death. Again with the perspective of decades of reflection, Peter quotes from one more prophecy, this time from Isaiah Chapter 8, in describing the effect Jesus had on these leaders – verse 8 likens him to '*A stone that causes people to stumble and a rock that makes them fall.*' Though the Jewish leaders thought they were acting righteously in condemning Jesus, they actually stumbled and fell, failing to recognise Jesus as the true Messiah rather than a threat. They insisted on continuing to build their lives on other cornerstones.

What can happen to us when we rely on what proves to be the wrong cornerstone?

I'll tell you now how the story of the cornerstone investor turned out in 1991. Just one week before the agreed date to close on large commitments of capital that would launch this new investment firm, our backer suddenly withdrew his cornerstone commitment, with no explanation. Of course, without his name, track record and capital at risk, none of the new investors we'd worked so hard to find and convince to back it would proceed. Months of hard effort were wasted and in the end about 30 people who had been hired to work at the firm had to look elsewhere for jobs, including me.

We had obviously placed our trust in the wrong backer, despite his seeming to have every credential necessary to be the ideal cornerstone investor.

For quite a long while after this happened, I felt really let down by our erstwhile backer, angry about all the time and effort down the drain and wondering how we had trusted him in the first place – were we too blinded by his huge fortune and larger than life personality and therefore missed seeing flaws in his character?

Maybe you've had similar experiences of being disappointed by someone you trusted to come through, to support you or even to love you. Or perhaps you've counted on something tangible to give you security – maybe an inheritance – only to find it taken away when circumstances changed or its value was eroded.

With great wisdom gleaned through long experience and careful reflection, in this letter Peter is imploring us to build our lives on the one true cornerstone who will not let us down, the one who will not put us to shame if we trust him.

What qualifies Jesus to be that cornerstone – why should we trust him?

I'd suggest three key reasons:

- First, because Jesus was chosen by God (as verse 6 says) to be that cornerstone, to be the foundation of God's plan to restore his relationship with us, broken through our sin, and to renew the world. He was unique – the very same person through whom the world was created stepped in to all of the mess it had become on a rescue mission. As we hear at Advent Carol Services, in the ringing words of John's Gospel, *'The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.'* So we can trust Jesus because the master builder, the creator of the universe, chose him to be the cornerstone.
- Second, because Jesus was precious to God (as verse 6 also says). When Jesus died on the cross, he took upon himself the weight of sin of all humanity – past, present and future – and suffered the judgment of a holy God in our place. That price was paid by the most precious asset any father could offer – the life of his own child. To save someone else's life, I can imagine throwing myself under a bus – but I can't even conceive of sacrificing one of our children's lives to do so. What greater evidence of how much he cares for us could God give than the selfless sacrifice of his only son to offer us the free gift of salvation? So we can trust Jesus because of his infinite value in God's eyes.
- Third, because Jesus actually triumphed over death, defeating evil and rising again to new life, showing the way to it for all of us. Look back at the first verse of this passage -- Peter calls Jesus 'the living Stone.' He is not an inert, cold, passive piece of stone, like those that underpin a building – he is alive, vital and active. Revelation Chapter 1, verse 18 records what Jesus first says to John when he sees the Risen Christ – *'Do not be afraid. I am the First and the Last. I am the Living One; I was dead, and behold I am alive for ever and ever!'* So we can trust Jesus because he has proved he has power even over death.

Are you ready to trust Jesus to underpin your life, for the first time today or afresh this morning? We live in unstable and uncertain times –are you reassured that there is an ultimate source of security in Jesus and can you dare to put your full weight on him and his promises?

We may have to let go of false cornerstones that we think give us strong foundations, but which really don't. For me this involves letting go of putting my faith in and seeking security from things that can come and go, like investments and bank balances, reminding

myself of how incredible God's provision and protection have been for my family and me since that venture came crashing down in 1990.

If you think it would be difficult to let go of a cornerstone other than faith in Jesus, as I finish please consider not just the security, but also the adventure, that a life built on him as its cornerstone can bring.

For he is offering us life, in all its fullness and forever – as verse 4, right at the start of our passage says, as we come to him, the living Stone, we too become living stones. We take on his qualities too – as verse 5 promises, we 'are being built into a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood.'

We can enjoy the excitement of being part of what has been God's design and plan all along. God's presence once dwelled exclusively in one physical place – now, amazingly, Jesus has come to dwell in and among each of us as we believe in him and trust him to be our cornerstone. As living stones who make up the new temple, we are able to know God and to carry his presence with us, to be Jesus' hands and feet on this earth and to be messengers who bring his good news of salvation and eternal life to a hurting world.

In the quiet moments to follow, in your heart as well as your head, please try to respond to Jesus' invitation this morning to build your life on him as the one, true cornerstone.

Amen.