

Results of the Call

Winter Quarter 2022-2023: From Darkness to Light Unit 3: God's Call

Sunday School Lesson for the week of February 26, 2023 By Jay Harris

Lesson Scripture: 1 Peter 2:1-10

Key Verse

But you are a chosen people, 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.
(1 Peter 2:9)

Lesson Aims

- To retrace the journey we have taken this quarter and in this unit as our themes culminate
- To explore what nourishment we should be receiving, why, and for what purpose
- To recall the idea of a kingdom-wide priesthood from its earliest origins and apply it to the church
- To reflect on what it means to join ourselves to the stone the builders rejected
- To appreciate anew the journey we're on and recommit ourselves to bringing others along

Retracing Our Journey this Quarter

This lesson is the last one for this unit and this quarter. It brings our themes to a culmination point. The theme for this quarter has been "from darkness to light," and the theme for this unit has been "God's call." In each lesson, the invitation has been to understand the intersection between our own journey from darkness to light and the call God has placed on our lives in light of this journey.

The scripture for this lesson could not be more fitting to bring these two themes together in a way that culminates this journey for us and calls us to an active response. This is the purpose, is it not? We have been studying these lessons not just to add to our knowledge, but to bring about our own transformation so that we can love God more and bear more fruit in our service to God.

The Need for Nourishment

Our scripture lesson does not mind mixing metaphors. Meaningful metaphors abound. The first ones we encounter have to do with the way we are nourished for our spiritual journey.

¹ Rid yourselves, therefore, of all malice and all guile, insincerity, envy, and all slander. ² Like newborn infants, long for the pure, spiritual milk, so that by it you may grow into salvation— ³ if indeed you have tasted that the Lord is good.

Malice is the intent or desire to do harm to another person. Guile is the attempt to outwit someone using slyness or deception. Insincerity is the opposite of being genuine and presenting our authentic selves. Envy cannot be satisfied with someone having more than we have or being more than we are. Slander is spreading false rumors about others in an attempt to bring them down. Not only should these behaviors be eliminated from our lives because of the obvious harm they inflict upon other people, but also because they spread throughout our being like a poison. Have you ever heard of the phrase: *garbage in, garbage out*? If you take garbage into your lives, then garbage will be what your life produces.

What we let into our lives should only be that which nourishes us for the most authentic life possible. Like newborn infants, we should long for the pure, spiritual milk that will nourish us. What we are growing into is no less than the full experience of the salvation God is offering us. The scripture tests us to see if this is what we want. It says, “if indeed you have tasted that the Lord is good.” This is an echo of what the psalmist talked about in Psalm 34:8 when he exclaimed, “O taste and see that the LORD is good!”

Let that imagery sink in. A person’s senses of taste and smell together bring so much delight. Did you get COVID and lose your sense of taste like I did? I truly missed it, and rejoiced when it returned. Tasting something means you have fed on something. Tasting something also points to something more to be experienced. There is the promise of something more. It is about a desire being awakened. If you have tasted something, there is more to come.

The scripture is asking us if we have tasted salvation. Is there an experience of something? Is there a recognition that, whatever we have experienced, there is more? In both questions, there is an invitation.

Once we have tasted salvation, we want more, and we will not be satisfied with the poison that people commonly let into their lives. If malice, guile, insincerity, envy, and slander do something for you, then be scared. And they probably will entice you at some point. The taste may tempt you to consume more, but the taste will turn bitter. Some people have never tasted salvation. They have never tasted love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. They don’t know what they are missing. Once you have tasted the best, why would you want to taste anything else? This scripture should get us thinking.

Are there times when you realize you are allowing too much garbage in your life? To what behaviors, thoughts, and attitudes are you most susceptible? When you realize that you are allowing malice and envy into your life, what behaviors and practices do you engage in to bring yourself back to greater spiritual health?

This is about the nourishment we need for the journey that lies before us. But there’s more.

We're Building a Kingdom of Priests for God to Inhabit

The next two verses present two powerful metaphors that are different from one another but in the same realm. There is the imagery of a spiritual house and the imagery of a holy priesthood.

⁴ Come to him, a living stone, though rejected by mortals yet chosen and precious in God's sight, and ⁵ like living stones let yourselves be built into a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.

The invitation is for believers 1) to come to Christ, the living stone, 2) to see themselves as living stones, and 3) to let themselves be built into a spiritual house. More will be said in the verses ahead concerning what the imagery of this stone says about Christ and about us. First, let's consider what it means to see ourselves as living stones and letting ourselves be built into a spiritual house. The emphasis is not on believers inhabiting this spiritual house. In this imagery, believers are the building materials used in building the house of worship. The emphasis therefore is God inhabiting this house—God inhabiting our life together.

This is why it is so important that we keep malice, guile, insincerity, envy, slander, and the like from entering our life together. This is why we are only allowing into our life together what is pure and beneficial for growing into the full experience of God's saving grace. We are building something through our collective existence that God himself could inhabit.

How do you think of your life together in your church home differently when you think of it as a vessel for God to inhabit? What does it mean for you to know that you are part of the building materials God is using to build his Church?

The scripture adds another metaphor—that of a holy priesthood. The origin of this idea goes back centuries to the time of Moses:

³ Then Moses went up to God; the LORD called to him from the mountain, "Thus you shall say to the house of Jacob and tell the Israelites: ⁴ 'You have seen what I did to the Egyptians and how I bore you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself. 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 kingdom of priests and a holy nation.' These are the words that you shall speak to the Israelites." (Exodus 19:3-6)

It is moving to imagine a people that God bore on eagles' wings to deliver them from bondage. It is equally moving to imagine these people being called God's treasured possession. Perhaps the most provocative image is God's treasured possession, that is all Israelites, being made into a kingdom of priests. Let's unpack this image.

What is a priest? Catholics, Eastern Orthodox Christians, Anglicans, and Episcopalians generally refer to their ministers as priests, and other denominations refer to them as ministers, pastors, and preachers. As one who is an ordained United Methodist minister, I know that I was trained and set apart to be minister, preacher, pastor, prophet, and priest for the congregations I have served. All these are vital functions that the shepherd of a congregation must live out to be faithful to his

or her calling. Ministers serve, preachers preach, pastors care, and prophets speak God's timely word.

The role of priest is to be God's representative in the context of the worshiping congregation. A priest is God's representative who plays double duty, so to speak. A priest 1) represents God before the people, and 2) represents the people before God.

It is interesting to look at the careers of Moses and his brother Aaron. Moses surely played a priestly role, because we see him at times speaking to the people on behalf of God, and then we see him speaking to God on behalf of the people. Yet, Aaron is the one who would be identified as the priest, and wear the priestly vestments and conduct the rituals and ceremonies. Whatever vestments are worn, the heart of being a priest is being the bridge between God and the people. This is surely what God had in mind when God lifted up the ideal of all Israelites becoming a kingdom of priests.

In the same way that Moses and Aaron were set apart in their various ways to be bridges between God and the people, God was setting apart the whole nation of Israel, God's treasured possession, to be the bridge between God and the whole earth, which also belongs to God. The idea is that God uses one subset of what belongs to God to reach and claim all of what belongs to God.

So, in First Peter, God is claiming for the New Testament Church the role that God gave Israel in the Old Testament. God's ideal is that all believers serve as priests to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ. We will return to this big idea in the 9th verse and develop it more. We have been introduced to two metaphors that are intended to work together—a spiritual house God inhabits and a holy priesthood that God uses to reach the world. In the next three verses, we will lean into the image of the spiritual house and how its one-of-a-kind cornerstone determines the way the Church should be built.

Joining Ourselves to the Stone Others Reject

How a foundation and building will be situated is set by the way a cornerstone is placed. A series of three of Old Testament scriptures have been knit together to reveal thoughts about how Christ, the living stone, serves as the cornerstone for the spiritual community that God is building for God to inhabit.

⁶ For it stands in scripture:

**“See, I am laying in Zion a stone,
a cornerstone chosen and precious,
and whoever believes in him will not be put to shame.”**

⁷ To you then who believe, he is precious; but for those who do not believe,

**“The stone that the builders rejected
has become the very head of the corner,”**

⁸ and

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

They stumble because they disobey the word, as they were destined to do.

From Isaiah 28:16, we get the picture of God laying in Zion a cornerstone that is chosen and precious. We are promised that we will not be put to shame for believing in him. To us who believe, the stone is precious, but according to Psalm 118:22, those who do not believe are not the first to reject the stone. For, it was the stone that the builders originally rejected that was chosen to become the cornerstone. According to Isaiah 8:14, this stone that became the cornerstone has also been a stone that has caused people to stumble. Those who stumble do so by disobeying the word. It is said that they were destined to stumble because the story of Christ forces us to make a decision. Christ is either the stone over which people stumble or the stone which they build a life. We do have a choice, but we cannot avoid the choice. The stone is a stone of destiny. Avoiding the choice is itself the choice to reject.

This is the perennial theme running through the story of Christ—the very stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone. Jesus was crucified on a cross, which represents the ultimate rejection. The great paradox is that the rejection of Jesus that put Jesus on the cross did not undo God’s plan. It was on the cross of rejection that Christ perfectly carried out God’s plan and created the means for our atonement and salvation. It was Christ’s sacrificial love on the cross that conquered the power of sin and death and created the power of resurrection and new life.

Either Christ is the cornerstone of our faith and the cornerstone of our life together, or there is no faith or life together. The potency of the Church’s faith and witness rests on the degree to which we proclaim Christ and him crucified and risen.

What does it look like when Christ serves as the cornerstone of your church, its life together, and its witness? What does it look like when your church may be occupied with matters that take the focus away from Christ and him crucified and risen?

The Priesthood of Believers and the Call to Bring Others Along on the Journey

Verse 9 resumes the thought from verse 5. In verse 5, we saw God’s ideal in Exodus 19 being applied to the New Testament Church. God’s ideal in Exodus 19 was for all of Israel to serve as a kingdom of priests to the whole earth. In verse 9, look for these hopes for God’s people Israel being applied to the New Testament Church.

⁹ But you are a chosen people, 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.

Notice the familiar Old Testament references to the covenant people Israel: 1) chosen people, 2) royal priesthood, 3) holy nation, and 4) God’s own people. In verse 9, these names are being

applied to the Church. God's ideal for the Church is that all believers serve as priests to offer, in the words of verse 5, "spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ."

What are spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God? The whole Letter to the Hebrews is largely devoted to applying Old Testament illustrations to the Church. It recalls the constant, repetitious sacrificial offerings of animals in the Old Testament, and then tells how Christ, through the one sacrificial offering of himself, accomplished in one single act what all those animal sacrifices could never do—he atoned for our sins once and for all. There is no need for us to make ritual animal sacrifices ever again. What do we offer instead? We offer spiritual sacrifices. In the final chapter of Hebrews, we are given examples of what this looks like: "*Through him, then, let us continually offer a sacrifice of praise to God, that is, the fruit of lips that confess his name. Do not neglect to do good and to share what you have, for such sacrifices are pleasing to God.*" (Hebrews 13:15-16) Believers—that is, all believers—are to witness and serve.

Paul stresses the same idea in the first two verses of his Letter to the Romans: "*I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, on the basis of God's mercy, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your reasonable act of worship. Do not be conformed to this age, but be transformed by the renewing of the mind, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect.*" (Romans 12:1-2) We are to offer ourselves continually as living sacrifices. We worship God daily (24-7) by the way we are renewing our minds, discerning the will of God, and resisting conformity with the world.

In the words of 1 Peter 2:9, we are making a spiritual offering of ourselves by proclaiming the mighty acts of him who called us out of darkness and into his marvelous light. The mandate behind the priesthood of all believers is that the work of ministry is not to be limited only to those who are ordained or carry the title "Reverend."

Another way of referring to the "priesthood of all believers" is to talk of the "ministry of all Christians" or the "ministry of the laity." Clergy and laity are meant to be partners in ministry. Whenever there has been revival, reform, or renewal in the Church, a mobilization of the laity has been at the center of it. It is the way of the world to pay somebody to do all the work. It is too easy for congregations to adopt this same attitude. Question: "What do we pay you for, preacher?" Answer: "It is not to do all the ministry." The role of pastors is to help the laity find their gifts and become active participants in ministry. When this happens, the Church truly becomes the Body of Christ—the hands, feet, arms, and face of Jesus in the world.

Verse 9 is very direct: the priesthood of believers exists, so that through word, action, and sign, YOU may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called YOU out of darkness into his marvelous light. The emphasis is on you sharing with others what you have experienced and bringing others along with you in the journey from darkness to light. We are not to keep to ourselves the gift we have received. Holding on to what we have received and not sharing it flies in the face of our Savior who gave his all for us.

What is the participation level of the laity in your church? What is your participation level? Can you look back on a time when the participation level was greater? How could you take a step toward greater participation? What would it look like in your church if a

much greater proportion of members became activated in the church's overall ministry? What would you be doing as a congregation? What joy and excitement would you be experiencing collectively?

We are given yet another image from the Old Testament to inform the New Testament Church. This comes from the Book of Hosea.

**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.**

If you will recall the story of the Old Testament prophet Hosea, he was the one whom God caused to fall in love hopelessly with a woman named Gomer, who was a prostitute. He was not called to sample her services. He was called to love her, marry her, care for her, support her, give her the means to clean up her life, and take her out of the business. She would not have it. As much as he tried to woo her and love her, she did not return his affections in the same way. God called him to father the children born to them although it was doubtful that he was the father. All this heartbreak that Hosea experienced was to allow someone on earth to know how God felt when God's people rejected him. He became father to three children who were to be given names that conveyed the poor spiritual condition of God's people. Two names stand out: "Not-pitied" and "Not-my-people."

Throughout this saga, Hosea does learn about the heart of God. Hosea learns that despite all the ways he was wronged by Gomer he cannot help but love her. God says that it is the same way with God himself. God will never let his people go. God will do all God can to bring God's people back to himself. Through divine perseverance, God does bring God's people out of darkness into the light. The sign of the restoration of God's people is when Not-my-people becomes known as "children of the living God" and Not-pitied becomes known as "those who have received mercy."

Verse 10 recalls this image of God's people Israel and applies it to believers who make up the New Testament Church. Every one of us starts out either in darkness, or were headed there, until God intervenes and brings us into light. Every one of us starts out longing for a sense of identity and a sense of belonging, and then God intervenes and reveals that God has a plan for our lives. (That was my story.) Every one of us starts out in need of divine mercy—and, frankly, remains in need of divine mercy. The secret of life is to know where mercy is found. God's mercy, my identity in Christ, my belonging to God's family are all precious gifts I am bound to share. When I share them, not only do I not lose anything, but my experience of these gifts is multiplied a hundredfold.

In what ways have you journeyed from darkness to light in your life? What darkness do you think you may have avoided by coming to Christ? What are the mighty acts of God that you could point to in your life or your church? Has it been too long since you witnessed a mighty act of God? What renewal do you long for your church? Since many

pastors feel a burden carrying the ministry of the church on their shoulders, how might you come alongside your pastor and join in the work of ministry?

Prayer

Covenant God, you created your people Israel to be a bridge between You and the world, and you gave the same vision to the Church. Grant that we would catch that vision, so that your people would be mobilized to make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world, through Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever, Amen.

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