

The Christian Priesthood.

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"Ye are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, an holy nation, a peculiar people; that ye should show forth the praises of him who hath called you out of darkness into his marvellous light." 1 Peter 2: 9.

We want the reader to open his bible and read 1 Peter 2: 1-9. In this lovely scripture he will find Three words on which we shall ask him to dwell with us for a little. They are words of weight and power — words which indicate three great branches of practical Christian truth — words conveying to our hearts a fact which we cannot too deeply ponder, namely, that Christianity is a living and divine reality. It is not a set of doctrines, however true; a system of ordinances, however imposing; a number of rules and regulations, however important. Christianity is far more than any or all of these things. It is a living, breathing, speaking, active, powerful reality — something to be seen in the every-day life — something to be felt in the scenes of personal, domestic history, from hour to hour — something formative and influential — a divine and heavenly power introduced into the scenes and circumstances through which we have to move, as men, women, and children, from Sunday morning till Saturday night. It does not consist in holding certain views, opinions, and principles, or in going to this place of worship or that.

Christianity is the life of Christ communicated *to* the believer — dwelling in him — and flowing out *from* him, in the ten thousand little details which go to make up our daily practical life. It has nothing ascetic, monastic, or sanctimonious about it. It is genial, cordial, lightsome, pure, elevated, holy, heavenly, divine. Such is the Christianity of the New Testament. It is Christ dwelling in the believer, and reproduced, by the power of the Holy Ghost, in the believer's daily practical career. This is Christianity — nothing else, nothing less, nothing different.

But let us turn to our three words; and may the Eternal Spirit expound and apply their deep and holy meaning to our souls!

And first, then, we have the word "living." "To whom coming as unto a living stone, disallowed indeed of men, but chosen of God, and precious, ye also, as living stones, are built up."

Here we have what we may call the foundation of Christian priesthood. There is evidently an allusion here to that profoundly interesting scene in Matthew 16 to which we must ask the reader to turn for a moment.

"When Jesus was come into the coasts of Caesarea Philippi, He asked his disciples, saying, Whom do men say that I, the Son of man, am?* And they said, Some say thou art John the Baptist; some, Elias; and others, Jeremias, or one of the prophets."

{*Let the reader note this title, "Son of man." It is infinitely precious. It is a title indicating our Lord's rejection as the Messiah, and leading out into that wide, that universal sphere over which He is destined, in the counsels of God, to rule. It is far wider than Son of David, or Son of Abraham, and has peculiar charms for us, inasmuch as it places Him before our hearts as the lonely, outcast stranger, and yet as the One who links Himself in perfect grace with us in all our need — One whose footprints we can trace all across this dreary desert. "The Son of man hath not where to lay his head." And yet it is as Son of man that He shall, by-and-by, exercise that universal dominion reserved for Him according to the eternal counsels of God. See Daniel 7.}

There was endless speculation, simply because there was no real heart-work respecting the blessed One. Some said this, some said that; and, in result, no one cared who or what He was; and hence He turns away from all this heartless speculation, and puts the pointed question to His own, "But whom say ye that I am?" He desired to know what they thought about Him — what estimate their hearts had formed of Him. "And Simon Peter answered and said, Thou art the Christ, the Son of the *living* God."

Here we have the true confession. Here lies the solid foundation of the whole edifice of the Church of God and of all true practical Christianity — "Christ the Son of the *living* God." No more dim shadows — no more powerless forms — no more lifeless ordinances — all must be permeated by this new, this divine, this heavenly life which has come into this world, and is communicated to all who believe in the name of the Son of God.

"And Jesus answered and said unto him, Blessed art thou, Simon Barjona; for flesh and blood hath not revealed it unto thee, but my Father which is in heaven. And I say also unto thee, That thou art Peter; and upon this rock *I will build* my Church; and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it."

Now, it is evidently to this magnificent passage that the apostle Peter refers in the second chapter of his first epistle, when he says, "To whom coming, as unto a *living* stone, disallowed indeed of men, but chosen of God, and precious, ye also, as *living* stones [the same words], are built up," &c. All who believe in Jesus are partakers of His risen, victorious *rock* life. The life of Christ, the Son of the *living* God, flows through all His members, and through each in particular. Thus we have the living God, the *living* Stone, and *living* stones. It is all life together — life flowing down from a living source, through a living channel, and imparting itself to all believers, thus making them living stones.

Now, this life having been tried and tested, in every possible way, and having come forth victorious, can never again be called to pass through any process of trial, testing, or judgment whatsoever. It has passed through death and judgment. It has gone down under all the waves and billows of divine wrath, and come forth, at the other side, in resurrection, in divine glory and power — a life victorious, heavenly, and divine, beyond the reach of all the powers of darkness. There is no power of earth or hell, men or devils, that can possibly touch the life which is possessed by the very smallest and most insignificant stone in Christ's assembly. All believers are built upon the living Stone, Christ; and are thus constituted living stones He makes them like Himself, in every respect, save of course, in His incommunicable Deity. Is he a living Stone? They are living stones. Is He a precious Stone? They are precious stones. Is he a rejected Stone? They are rejected stones — rejected, disallowed of men. They are, in every respect, identified with Him. Ineffable privilege!

Here, then, we repeat, is the solid foundation of the Christian priesthood — the priesthood of all believers. Before any one can offer up a spiritual sacrifice, he must come to Christ, in simple faith, and be built on Him, as the foundation of the whole spiritual building. "Wherefore also it is contained in the scripture (Isa. 28: 16), Behold, I lay in Sion a chief corner-stone, elect, precious; and he that believeth in him shall not be confounded."

How precious are these words! God Himself has laid the foundation, and that foundation is Christ, and all who simply believe in Christ — all who give Him the confidence of their hearts — all who rest satisfied with Him, are made partakers of His resurrection life, and thus made living stones.

How blessedly simple is this! We are not asked to assist in laying the foundation. We are not called upon to add the weight of a feather to it. God has laid the foundation, and all we have to do is to believe and rest thereon; and He pledges His faithful word that we shall never be confounded. The very feeblest believer in Jesus has God's own gracious assurance that he shall never be confounded — never

be ashamed — never come into judgment. He is as free from all charge of guilt and every breath of condemnation as that living Rock on whom he is built.

Beloved reader, are you on this foundation? Are you built on Christ? Have you come to Him as God's living stone, and given Him the full confidence of your heart? Are you thoroughly satisfied with God's foundation? or are you seeking to add something of your own — your own works, your prayers, your ordinances, your vows and resolutions, your religious duties? If so, if you are seeking to add the smallest jot or tittle to God's Christ, you may rest assured, you will be confounded. God will not suffer such dishonour to be offered to His tried, elect, precious chief — corner Stone. Think you that He could allow aught, no matter what, to be placed beside His beloved Son, in order to form, with Him, the foundation of His spiritual edifice? The bare thought were an impious blasphemy. No; it must be Christ alone. He is enough for God, and He may well be enough for us; and nothing is more certain than that all who reject, or neglect, turn away from, or add to, God's foundation, shall be covered with everlasting confusion.

But, having glanced at the foundation, let us look at the superstructure. This will lead us to the second of our three weighty words. "To whom coming as unto a . . . living stone ye also, as *living* stones, are built up a spiritual house, an *holy* priesthood, to offer up spiritual sacrifices, acceptable to God by Jesus Christ."

All true believers are holy priests. They are made this by spiritual birth, just as Aaron's sons were priests in virtue of their natural birth. The apostle does not say, *Ye ought to be* living stones, and, *Ye ought to be* holy priests. He says ye *are* such. No doubt, being such, we are called upon to act accordingly; but we must be in a position before we can discharge the duties belonging to it. We must be in a relationship before we can know the affections which flow out of it. We do not become priests by offering priestly sacrifices. But being, through grace, made priests, we are called upon to present the sacrifice. If we were to live a thousand years twice told, and spend all that time working, we could not work ourselves into the position of holy priests; but the moment we believe in Jesus — the moment we come to Him in simple faith — the moment we give Him the full confidence of our hearts, we are born anew into the position of holy priests, and are then privileged to draw nigh and offer the priestly sacrifice. How could any one, of old, have constituted himself a son of Aaron? Impossible. But being born of Aaron, he was thereby made a member of the priestly house. We speak not now of capacity, but simply of the position. This latter was reached not by effort, but by birth

And now, let us inquire as to the nature of the sacrifice which, as holy priests, we are privileged to offer. We are "to offer up spiritual sacrifices, acceptable to God by Jesus Christ." So also in Hebrews 13: 15, we read, "By him therefore let us offer the sacrifice of praise to God continually, that is, the fruit of our lips, giving thanks to his name."

Here, then, we have the true nature and character of that sacrifice which, as holy priests, we are to offer. It is praise — "praise to God continually." Blessed occupation! Hallowed exercise! Heavenly employment! And this is not to be an occasional thing. It is not merely at some peculiarly favoured moment, when all looks bright and smiling around us. It is not to be merely amid the glow and fervour of some specially powerful public meeting, when the current of worship flows deep, wide, and rapid. No; the word is, "praise *continually*." There is no room, no time for complaining and murmuring, fretfulness and discontent, impatience and irritability, lamenting about our surroundings, whatever these may be, complaining about the weather, finding fault with those who are associated with us whether in public or in private, whether in the congregation, in the business, or in the family circle.

Holy priests should have no time for any of these things. They are brought nigh to God, in holy

liberty, peace, and blessing. They breathe the atmosphere and walk in the sunlight of the divine presence, in the new creation, where there are no materials for a sour and discontented mind to feed upon. We may set it down as a fixed principle — an axiom — that whenever we hear any one pouring out a string of complaints about circumstances and about his neighbours, such an one is not realising the place of holy priesthood, and, as a consequence, not exhibiting its practical fruits. A holy priest is always happy, always bright, always praising God. True, he may be tried in a thousand ways; but he brings his trials to God in communion, not to his fellow-man in complaining. "hallelujah" is the proper utterance of the very feeblest member of the Christian priesthood.

But we must now look, for a moment, at the third and last branch of our present theme. This is presented in that highly expressive word "royal." The apostle goes on to say, "But ye *are* a chosen generation, a *royal* . . . priesthood that ye should show forth the virtues [see margin] of him who hath called you out of darkness into his marvellous light."

This completes the lovely picture of the Christian priesthood.* As *holy* priests, we draw nigh to God, and present the sacrifice of praise. As *royal* priests we go forth among our fellow-men, in all the details of practical daily life, to show forth the virtues — the graces — the lovely moral features of Christ. Every movement of a royal priest should emit the fragrance of the grace of Christ.

{*The intelligent reader does not need to be told that all believers are priests, and, further, that there is no such thing as a priest upon earth save in the sense in which all true Christians are priests. The idea of a certain set of men, calling themselves priests in contrast with the people - a certain caste distinguished by title and dress from the body of Christians, is not Christianity at all, but Judaism or worse. All who read the bible and bow to its authority are thoroughly clear as to these things.}

Mark, again, the apostle does not say, "Ye *ought to be* royal priests." He says "ye *are*;" and as such we are to show forth the virtues of Christ. Nothing else becomes a member of the royal priesthood. To be occupied with myself; to be taking counsel for my own ease, my own interest, my own enjoyment, to be seeking my own ends, and caring about my own things, is not the act of a royal priest at all. Christ never did so; and I am called to show forth His virtues. He, blessed be His name, grants to His people, in this the time of His absence, to anticipate the day when He shall come forth as a Royal Priest, and sit upon His throne, and send forth the benign influence of His dominion to the ends of the earth. We are called to be the present expression of the kingdom of Christ — the expression of Himself.

And let none suppose that the actings of a royal priest are to be confined to the matter of *giving*. This would be a grave mistake. No doubt, a royal priest will give, and give liberally if he has it; but to limit him to the mere matter of communicating would be to rob him of some of the most precious functions of his position. The very man who penned the words on which we are dwelling said on one occasion — and said it without shame, "Silver and gold have I none;" and yet at that very moment, he was acting as a royal priest, by bringing the precious virtue of the Name of Jesus to bear on the impotent man. (Acts 3) The blessed Master Himself, we may safely affirm, never possessed a penny; but He went about doing good, and so should we, nor do we need money to do it. Indeed it very often happens that we do mischief instead of good with our silver and gold. We may take people off the ground on which God has placed them, namely, the ground of honest industry, and make them dependent upon human alms. Moreover, we may often make hypocrites and sycophants of people by our injudicious use of money.

Hence, therefore, let no one imagine that he cannot act as a royal priest without earthly riches. What riches are required to speak a kindly word — to drop the tear of sympathy — to give the soothing

genial look? None whatever save the riches of God's grace — the unsearchable riches of Christ, all of which are laid open to the most obscure member of the Christian priesthood. I may be in rags, without a penny in the world, and yet carry myself blessedly as a royal priest, by diffusing around me the fragrance of the grace of Christ.

But, perhaps, we cannot more suitably close these few remarks on the Christian priesthood, than by giving a very vivid illustration drawn from the inspired page — the narrative of two beloved servants of Christ who were enabled, under the most distressing circumstances, to acquit themselves as holy and royal priests.

Turn to Acts 16: 19-34. Here we have Paul and Silas thrust into the innermost part of the prison at Philippi, their backs covered with stripes, and their feet fast in the stocks, in the darkness of the midnight hour. What were they doing? murmuring and complaining? Ah, no. They had something better and brighter to do. Here were two really "living stones," and nothing that earth or hell could do could hinder the life that was in them expressing itself in its proper accents.

But what, we repeat, were these living stones doing? these partakers of the rock life — the victorious — resurrection life of Christ — how did they employ themselves? Well, then, in the first place, as holy priests they offered the sacrifice of praise to God. Yes, "at midnight, Paul and Silas prayed and sang praises to God." How precious is this! How morally glorious! How truly refreshing! What are stripes or stocks, or prison walls, or gloomy nights, to living stones and holy priests? Nothing more than a dark background to throw out into bright and beautiful relief the living grace that is in them. Talk of circumstances! Ah! it is little any of us know of trying circumstances. Poor things that we are, the petty annoyances of daily life are often more than enough to cause us to lose our mental balance. Paul and Silas were really in trying circumstances; but they were there as living stones and holy priests.

Yes, reader, and they were there as royal priests, likewise. How does this appear? Certainly not by scattering silver and gold. It is not likely the dear men had much of these to scatter. But oh! they had what was better, even "the virtues of him who had called them out of darkness into his marvellous light." And where do these virtues shine out? In those touching words addressed to the gaoler, "*Do thyself no harm.*" These were the accents of a *royal* priest, just as the song of praise was the voice of a holy priest. Thank God for both! The voices of the holy priests went directly up to the throne of God and did their work there; and the words of the royal priests went directly to the gaoler's hard heart and did their work there. God was glorified and the gaoler saved by two men rightly discharging the functions of "*the Christian priesthood.*"