

Jesus The Cornerstone

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[0:00] Well, I'd like us to turn for a few moments together to Ephesians chapter 2. Today is a very exciting day for me and I am so thankful to God for the door that He's opened for me that we've been able to come back here to serve you.

We have so many happy memories of being here, so many wonderful friends and so many things to be thankful for.

But the thing that's really exciting is not coming back, the thing that's really exciting is going forward together as we serve Jesus.

And so seeing as it's such an exciting day, I wanted to choose one of the most exciting passages in the Bible. So let's read again from Ephesians chapter 2 verses 19 to 22.

So then, you are no longer St. George and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God. Built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone in whom the whole structure being joined together grows into a holy temple in the Lord, in whom you are also being built together into a dwelling place for God by the Spirit.

[1:18] In this letter Paul is writing to Christians in Ephesus that was a once great city, but which now lies in ruins in eastern Turkey.

In this chapter Paul is emphasizing to the Ephesians that through Jesus they have been brought into the one great people of God, the new humanity that God is establishing.

So you'll remember that these Ephesians would have been Gentiles, that means they weren't Jews. And that Jew Gentile division had been there as long as they could remember.

And because of that it would have been so easy for them to think, well, I'm not sure we really belong in God's people in quite the same ways that the Jews do.

And that was a difficulty in many of the different congregations in the early church. Paul is saying to them, no, you Ephesians, you are fellow citizens with the saints, you are members of God's household.

[2:19] That must have been so exciting for these Ephesians to hear. Paul is showing them the amazing transformation that has taken place. They are no longer strangers.

They've been brought into God's family. Now there is a beautiful unity between Jews and Gentiles who have been united to Jesus by faith.

So if the Ephesians were worried that they were kind of maybe on the fringes or slightly second class or not quite good enough, then these words must have been so comforting and so exciting.

But what I want to say is that all of this is incredibly relevant to us too, because we are also Gentile believers. And the transformation that Paul describes here is the transformation that's happened in your life if you're a Christian or that will happen in your life if you become one.

And that means that when Paul describes what happens, what's happened to these Ephesians in this chapter, he's talking about us as well.

[3 : 29] There's an awful lot we could look at in this chapter and many things I'd love to explore, but I want to focus on the verses that are on the screen before you because here Paul gives a summary of everything that he is being saying in terms of what these believe version I, you are.

And you can see in version 19 there's a contrast. It says you are no longer and then a moment later he says you are. And so he's throwing a distinction between the change that's taken place.

And to do so, he uses architectural language to picture our new status in Christ. So that means he wants us to think about buildings.

The Christian church is like a building. And in that building, there is a cornerstone.

Now in our buildings today, we don't really have cornerstones in quite the same way as you would have in Greco-Roman architecture because today we use concrete to do many of the things that a cornerstone would have done. But back then the cornerstone was the most important building stone in the building.

[4 : 36] It was central to the building's design, essential to its construction, fundamental for its structural integrity. And Paul is telling the Ephesians and us that the cornerstone of the Christian church is Jesus Christ.

And so as we all begin a new chapter together today, I don't think there's anything more important for us to remember than the fact that Jesus Christ is the cornerstone of his church.

So that's what I want us to think about today and we'll do so in a little bit more detail under three headings, foundation, connection and growth. Jesus, the cornerstone, is essential to all three.

So first of all, I want to think about a foundation. When we see the word cornerstone, it's a little bit hard for us to know exactly what that is referring to. Some have suggested that the cornerstone is actually something to do with the top of a building.

So you think of maybe the center stone in an arch or a stone that kind of binds the top of a wall together, maybe a wee bit like a lintel that we would have over a door. Some have said, you know, so you should be thinking about the top of the building.

[5 : 46] But others have said when you say, when you talk about a cornerstone, you should be thinking about something at the bottom of a building, the primary stone in the foundation that holds everything together and which takes the weight of the building.

So it's like, well, you could think about the top, you could think about the bottom. Which one should we go for? Which one's the right interpretation? Well, I don't think it matters too much because for both, the cornerstone is the most important stone and that's the key point.

But if you have a wee look at verse 20, what part of the building is Paul talking about? Well, it looks as though he's talking about the foundation.

In fact, he definitely is talking about the foundation. So I think we're safe to say that when we talk about cornerstone, we should be thinking about a foundation stone on which everything else is built.

And as I said, often today we use concrete to do that job, but the idea is the same. So if you go round to Neil Ingram's house, which I invite you all to do so on Neil's behalf, you will see a cracking foundation. Now I don't mean cracking as in falling apart, I mean cracking as in very, very good.

[6 : 54] And if you see that, there's blocks around the perimeter of the foundation, but in the middle there's a massive slab of concrete. And on that foundation, a new structure is going to be built.

That big slab of concrete is a wee bit like the idea of a cornerstone. In verse 20, Paul is telling us that the church, the household of God, is built on a foundation.

And that foundation, as you can see, is the apostles and prophets with Jesus himself as the cornerstone. And what exactly does Paul mean when he says that?

Well, I think at one level Paul's giving us a historical point, because the starting point for the Christian church was the ministry of the apostles and prophets in the New Testament period.

It was through that apostolic ministry of Paul and Peter and many others that the church began. It was through them that the great mission got underway. And it's through their writings that we now have the New Testament scripture.

[8 : 04] So they had a unique role. And that role is one that is no longer repeated. So we don't have apostles and prophets today in the same kind of sense.

So Paul is teaching us a historical point. Paul is also teaching us a theological point.

Because the key thing about the ministry of the apostles and the prophets was that it was all about the Persian and work of Jesus.

He is the cornerstone around which the whole foundation is laid. And that has massive implications for us as a church.

Because if you think about a foundation, there's two crucial things that a foundation gives you. So if you just picture in your mind a foundation either in your own house or Neils house or whatever it may be, imagine a foundation.

[9 : 03] There's two crucial things about that that need to be through about that foundation. It needs to be stable. That's the point of a foundation.

It has to be immovable. And if you go and look at Neils foundation, one thing's for sure is you're not going to be able to shift it. It also, however, needs to be accurate.

So a foundation is exactly the right length, exactly the right width, exactly the right height. And for the Greco-Roman architect, the cornerstone provided both of these things.

It gave stability because it was big and heavy. But it also gave accuracy because all the measurements and alignments were taken from it. So it's a reference point from which everything else is positioned.

So in other words, the cornerstone sets the dimensions for the building and it keeps the building firmly in place. And that's exactly what the ministry of the apostles and prophets has done for the Christian church.

[10 : 08] In our hands, we have the apostolic teaching of the New Testament scriptures. These contain the words that God has communicated to his church through the apostles and prophets and they're all centered on Jesus.

They're all in reference to him and it's all held together in him. So if you go through the gospels, acts, the epistles, revelation, Jesus is the cornerstone of it all.

The gospels record the events of his ministry and teaching his crucifixion, his resurrection. Acts tells the story of how the news of Jesus' resurrection was proclaimed and how lives were changed across the nations.

The epistles explain how everything fits together and how the reality of what Jesus has done should shape the way you and I live our lives. And revelation gives us no doubt whatsoever that Jesus reigns over all and that he's coming back.

It's on this foundation that the church stands and that foundation gives us stability and accuracy.

[11 : 11] It gives us stability because it gives us a message that we can place all our hope on and it gives us accuracy because it shows us what's true and false, what's right and wrong.

All of that means that for us as Christians and for us as a church, there are immovable boundaries that we work within. And again, if you go and look at Neil's foundation, one thing is for certain, it's not moving and it's within the fixed boundaries of that foundation that he will build and exactly the same is true for us.

Our message must stand on the boundaries of what scripture teaches. That means we do not add to it, we do not take away from it and we do not pick and choose the bits that we want to listen to.

This is the truth that we stand on. This is the whole message that we proclaim. Your message must be within those boundaries but also our behaviour must remain within the boundaries of what scripture commands as well.

And if you look at this foundation in the New Testament, you will see that there is no space on that foundation for unforgiveness, for gossip, for selfishness, for envy, for aggression or anything like that.

[12 : 35] And our decisions must also be within the boundaries of the parameters that are set by scripture. In other words, we don't decide things because it's what we like or what we want or what suits us best.

We ground our decisions, our plans, our choices on what scripture teaches and on what scripture prioritises. And that gives us so much stability for our lives as individuals and as a church.

And of course it all makes perfect sense because the opposite is true as well. I look at my life and I look at all the times when I've made a mess of things, I look at all the times when I've made things wobble either in my own faith or in the lives of others, all the times I've made a hash of things and they're all a result of the same thing.

They're all a result of doing the opposite of what the New Testament tells me to do. But when I say that there's immovable boundaries that we work within, for many people that can sound very off-putting.

And especially in our culture today where the idea of restrictions, boundaries, inflexibility is not a very popular one and even for ourselves, when we say that there's immovable boundaries that we must work within it.

[13 : 51] Well that makes Christianity sound very restricting and rigid and that can be very, very off-putting. But I just want you to think for a moment about some of the core apostolic teachings that lie at the foundation of the Christian faith.

So for example, it teaches that human life is precious from the womb to the frailty of old age.

It teaches that truth and honesty matter. It teaches that mercy and grace are better than power and pride. It teaches that the environment around us is to be valued and well looked after.

It teaches us that the poor must not be exploited, the powerful must not be cruel and the greatest achievement for any of us is to love God and to love one another. And it teaches us that through faith in Jesus Christ we can have hope in the face of death.

And when you think of all of those things, please just ask yourself, do you want those things to be flexible or optional or temporary?

[15 : 05] Or do you want them to be an immovable foundation that is rock solid and that never ever changes?

The gospel gives us a foundation and Jesus is the cornerstone. But on this foundation a building is being constructed, which brings us to the second thing I want to think about, the idea of connection.

We can see that if we look at verse 21 and Paul describes how God is building a structure on top of this foundation. There's two things I want you to notice.

First is that there's two very important little words at the start of verse 21. So if you look at verse 21 you'll see the first two words in whom. And these are showing us that it's not just the foundation that's linked to Jesus, it's the whole building.

So even though we think of Jesus as a cornerstone in the foundation, that stone is still crucial for holding the entire building together. Every block depends on its relationship to the cornerstone.

[16 : 12] And in exactly the same way, every single person who is part of God's church is dependent on their connection to Jesus. In fact, that's pointing to the very heart of what it means to be a Christian.

The fact that by faith we are united to Jesus. Different people have got different definitions of what it means to be a Christian. So if you were to say a Christian is, what would be the next thing that you put in that sentence?

You maybe say, well, a believer or a member or a good person or a holy person or good living or something like that. Different people have different understandings. What I want to say is that Paul is reminding us that whenever you think about what a Christian is, at the forefront of your definition must be these words, a Christian is united to Jesus.

As Paul says, it's in him that the whole structure of the church is being built. But the second thing I want you to notice is just a couple of words later where he says that in him, the whole structure being joined together upon this cornerstone, all the parts of the building are being connected and held together, which of course is reminding us that as Christians, we are not only united to Jesus.

We are also united to each other. And this is where we are being reminded that the cross has incredible reconciling power that works both vertically and horizontally.

[17 : 47] So when you think of the cross, it is a vertical beam and a horizontal beam, but the actual achievement of the cross also works vertically and horizontally.

Vertically the cross reconciles us to God through our union with Christ. We who were dead in our trespasses and sins have been made alive with him so that now we have a place with Christ where he is seated in the heavenly places.

But the cross also works horizontally. It unites us to one another and it breaks down all the dividing walls of hostility that sin has caused.

That applies in terms of the Jew, gentile distinction, but it also applies across all the divisions in humanity, whether it's a race or class or status or power or personality in Jesus, we're all joined together and are held together as one amazing building.

And that of course is why division among Christians is always totally unacceptable. God forbid that we ever try to claim the vertical reconciliation of the cross without also embracing the horizontal reconciliation that it establishes between us and every other Christian in the world.

[19 : 08] Now all of this goes back to a question that I'm sure was niggling the Ephesians and it's a question that I'm sure maybe niggles many of us as well.

And that is the question, do I belong? As we talk about the great structure that the church is building, that God is building in his church, as we think about God's great plan to establish that over the ages of history, it's very easy to be niggled by the question, do I belong there?

I am fairly sure that the Ephesians felt that question. I know for a fact that I felt it and I'm pretty sure that you will have felt it too.

And I think there's two big dangers confronting us here. One is the danger of insecurity.

It's so easy to look at ourselves and to see failings, mistakes, errors that we've made. It's so easy to compare ourselves to other Christians and to think that well they're doing an awful lot better than I am.

[20 : 17] I don't cut it. I don't match up. And we can look at ourselves and think, I just don't belong. And it's incredibly easy to feel like that. So on this side there's the danger of insecurity.

But here on the other side there's another danger. And that's the danger of arrogance. Because we can look at others and instead of thinking, you know, I don't belong, we can look at others and see people who are different and we can think they don't belong.

And although these seem like opposites in security and arrogance, what we must recognise is that they can actually feed each other. So we might feel insecure in ourselves and then in order to try and make ourselves feel less insecure we can start judging others to give ourselves a kind of false reassurance that we're not as bad as they are.

And I see that in my own life and I ask myself, when I judge people or criticise them, is it because I think I'm better than them or is it because I'm scared that they're better than me?

These are all the kind of thoughts that can go through our minds. And it's a very damaging cycle whereby our insecurities can actually make us act arrogantly towards others and that can cause tension and that can then just make us more insecure and it's an awful cycle.

[21 : 42] And that of course is why whether it's in the school playground or in the workplace or on the football pitch or whatever it may be, the people who come across as most arrogant are almost always the ones who are most insecure.

And that of course is a reminder why we shouldn't hate these people, we should feel compassion towards them. But this is where we see why the Gospel is so utterly brilliant because it makes all of that nonsense totally unnecessary.

We don't need to do it. When we struggle with that question of whether we belong, the answer is not to throw stones at ourselves or to throw stones at others. The answer is to throw ourselves back onto the glorious fact that we are all joined together on the cornerstone.

Jesus Christ. And that's why the church is so amazing because in it you have all sorts of different people with different interests, different personalities, different stories, different scars who on their own would struggle to fit together but in and through Jesus we are united and held together in Him.

And that should shape everything that we do in our Christian lives, for us as a congregation but also as part of the worldwide church of Jesus Christ. And earlier in the chapter in verse 4 Paul speaks of God's great love and from that there's two prayers that we must never stop praying for ourselves and for family, for neighbors, for colleagues, for a congregation and for other congregations.

[23 : 24] Two prayers we must always pray. One is this. Lord help me to remember how much you love me.

And that's a prayer we need to pray when we face our own insecurities and lack of assurance. Lord help me to remember how much you love me. But the other prayer we also need to pray is Lord help me to remember how much you love them.

As a church we are connected and held together through Jesus, the cornerstone. So Paul is getting us to think about a building. It has a foundation with Jesus as the cornerstone.

On that foundation the structure is being built with every part joined and held together in Jesus. But the third thing that Paul highlights towards the end of verse 21 is that that building grows.

And there's a brilliant contrast between the fixed immovable unchanging foundation of apostolic truth and the fact that on that there's a building that's growing and rising and developing.

[24 : 32] Now at one level that growth is numerical and if you just think of history the increase in numbers from the days when there was a few Christian churches scattered across places like Ephesus to the millions upon millions in the global church today, the growth is mind blowing.

But as Paul talks about growth here I don't think that he's talking primarily about growth in numbers. He's talking about something else and you can see it at the end of verse 21. He's talking about growth in holiness.

The church of Jesus Christ is growing into a holy temple. But yet again what I wanted to show you is that that growth is in the Lord as you can see it at the end of verse 21.

It's all in and through Jesus Christ the cornerstone. Now when we talk about growth in holiness the word that we use to describe that is the word sanctification.

That's the great work of God whereby he changes us in our whole being from the very core of our insights which no one else can see through to our words, our actions and our outward conduct.

[25 : 44] He changes us in our whole being to make us more and more into the people that he created us to be. And the reason that happens is because Jesus has sent his Holy Spirit to dwell within us.

That's why the language of temple is being used. We are the temple of God in which he dwells by his spirit and now that the spirit is in us as Christians he's renewing us and changing us.

Now back in the Old Testament there was a great shadow of this. That was of course the temple building in Jerusalem and I just want to highlight the point that if you could have walked into the temple on the day it was completed in Jerusalem and it would have been about 950 BC or something like that.

If you'd walked into the temple on that day what would you have seen? You would have seen something that was breathtakingly beautiful and that is exactly what God wants us to be as a church as well.

That's what it means to be holy, to be set apart, to be different, to be unpolluted, unstained. In other words to be beautiful. Now I don't mean beautiful in terms of the building, I mean beautiful in terms of people and in terms of our relationships and in terms of how we treat one another.

[27 : 10] And the more and more we are like Jesus the cornerstone, the more and more we are united together in him the more beautiful our building will be. That's what you see in the life of Jesus.

When you read through how Jesus behaved and conducted himself he just acted with such beautiful love towards everyone and as our sanctification continues we become more and more like him.

That's why we must never forget that we cannot be beautiful without Jesus. It's only through his teaching, his example, his grace, his strength. At the same time though we must not forget that we cannot be beautiful without each other.

You think of all the beautiful commands of the apostolic teaching in the New Testament, commands to encourage, to share, to be kind, to be forgiving, to be hospitable, to be generous, to be loving.

How many of them can you do in isolation? None. But together God can make us into something beautiful.

[28 : 21] That's always been his plan. He is not establishing a great collection of individuals, he's creating a beautiful family all united together. And the amazing thing is that God has placed us in a community full of people and God wants us to draw them into that community by his grace and his spirit working through us.

And if you are not yet a Christian please if you hear anything I say to you today I want you to hear the fact that God wants to include you too.

So if you're not a Christian or if you're not sure or if you're wondering about all of this and how it might work please don't worry, don't look at yourself and think am I good enough.

Don't look at your past and think there's too much baggage there. Don't look at the future and think oh well will I be able to manage. Just look at the fact that right now Jesus has his arms wide open and he's saying just come on with me and with us and I'll do the rest.

So Jesus is the cornerstone. That means we've got a solid foundation that's stable and accurate and true. It means that if you're a Christian or if you become one you're connected to him and to each other and it means that this building is growing into something holy, something beautiful.

[29 : 41] And all of that means that as we start a new chapter together there is so much to be excited about. As we go into this new chapter we have to ask and ask the question do we have the foundation we need?

Yes we do. It's right here in the apostolic teaching of scripture. Do we have the materials we need for God to build this church? Yes we do. Jesus the cornerstone is there and you the building blocks are here and do we have a builder?

To right we do. It's God and he has promised to continue that work and all of it, every single bit of it is through Jesus the cornerstone.

So that means we've got what we need and that means we can just go for it together. Amen. Let's pray. Father we thank you so much for your son, our cornerstone Jesus Christ.

We pray that every part of our lives would be built on him. We pray that in him that you would bind us closer together more and more and more and we pray that we would grow in holiness to display your beauty and your goodness in every part of our lives.

[31 : 01] And together Father we ask that you help us and lead us so that we can proclaim this great wonderful news that Jesus Christ is the cornerstone.

This is the Lord's doing and it's marvellous in our eyes. Amen.