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Spiritual Foundations

by T. Austin-Sparks

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"Ye are fellow-citizens with the saints, and of the household of God, being built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus Himself being the chief corner stone; in whom each several building, fitly framed together, groweth into a holy temple in the Lord; in whom ye also are builded together for a habitation of God in the Spirit" Eph. 2:20-22.

"If ye have tasted that the Lord is gracious: unto whom coming, a living stone, rejected indeed of men, but with God elect, precious, ye also, as living stones, are built up a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer up spiritual sacrifices, acceptable to God through Jesus Christ. Because it is contained in scripture, Behold, I lay in Zion a chief corner stone, elect, precious: And he that believeth on Him shall not be put to shame. For you therefore that believe is the preciousness: but for such as disbelieve, The stone which the builders rejected, The same was made the head of the corner; and, A stone of stumbling, and a rock of offence; for they stumble at the word, being disobedient: whereunto also they were appointed" 1 Peter 2:3-8.

We shall now consider the matter of spiritual foundations and stand back and view it in a more comprehensive way.

In this passage which we have read from Peter's letter we have this great truth brought to us by means of a simile, the simile of a building and edifice constituted by a large number of living stones being brought together in relation to one main and important prominent stone called the corner

stone. We are told that that corner stone was chosen by God and placed by God and was very precious to God. "I lay", that is the Lord speaking: "I lay in Zion a chief corner stone, elect, precious." That is, eternally chosen; precious, that is the value of that One in the eyes of God. And then there is seen a process of bringing into relation to that chief Corner Stone other living stones, and so the habitation of God is built.

If you are having difficulty with the phrase, that is, if any of you are of a technical mind and you are having difficulty with the phrase "corner stone", let us explain. When men begin to build in the ordinary way they do not start with a corner stone, they lay a foundation, but if you were building a pyramid you would. Everything is built from a corner in a pyramid. That may give you some interesting study as to what the church really is. You have a pyramid, and when you have a pyramid you finish with one stone which is the topstone; and you find in another part of the Bible the Lord Jesus referred to as the Topstone. He is the beginning and the end, the first and the last, the corner and topstone. Everything from the beginning to the end is in relation to Christ, and that is what we now have spiritually before us. Just that little parenthesis to get over the builder's technical difficulty of the corner stone.

Now, here is the metaphor that the apostle is using as to the nature of God's intention, purpose, and object. It is thus presented to us in the figure of a building. If we get away from the figure, the metaphor, to the real spiritual meaning we shall come to see that in the eternal intention and will of God, two things have been dominant and all-inclusive, and these two things are the two things which represent God's intention in the history of this world and also explain all the dealings of God with man. It will also bring into view what the nature of things will be. You and I ought to be interested in what was intended from the beginning and what will be at last. Surely every man and woman having a being and taking an interest in the world and in history, in life, ought to be interested and concerned with what was intended from the beginning and what will be in the end. Well, it is all embraced in the spiritual meaning of these two things represented in this metaphorical representation of the building, the Corner Stone, and living stones in relation thereto.

God, before time was, had in His heart and in His mind the thought, desire, intention and purpose to have at the centre of this universe something which in every detail of its constitution would express Himself, would reveal Himself, and be the image spiritually and morally of Himself. We are told by the apostle that the Lord Jesus was the express image of the Father's Person, and so the Father determined that everything should be modelled in this central representation according to His Son as the image of Himself. That is, that this world, the centre of the universe, should be a representation of Himself in His Son. And so the Scriptures tell us that when He commenced His creative work, it was through, and by, and unto His Son that the creation was carried out. And then when those creative activities were progressing, at a certain stage He said: "Let us make men in our image", and so He did.

Now here comes in a very interesting question or proposition. If there had never come in by sin - by complicity with the Enemy of God, by disobedience a process of degeneration, what would the successive generations of man have been like? They would have remained, undoubtedly, according to the original type and each successive generation would have been in the image of the first, the head of the race. The image would have been retained right through, the likeness would have been maintained continually. But there came in that which instantly represented a drop, and then commenced a downgrade movement, and in that fall, and in that degeneration, of course the original image was lost. God's intention in that race was not realized: a whole race and a whole

world maintaining His image. Eventually He sent His Son into that world. We know that that Son of God voluntarily took upon Him all the results, the effect of that movement downward. Voluntarily He entered into that thing to its very depths. The sin, the misery, the wretchedness, the ugliness of it all: "His visage was so marred, more than any man"; and so deep did He enter into it that even His Father had to turn away His face, one last moment of agony, that awful thing which He was representing voluntarily, had to be forsaken once and for all, and in that turning away though it may have been but for a moment, of His face on the part of the Father from the Son, in that hour when He was made sin for us, He who knew no sin, God's verdict was revealed for that race. It is for ever abandoned; it is for ever given up; it has failed irreparably, failed of its intention, and it is carried away in a Representative Person into the eternal wilderness of desolation and forsakenness.

But there was another side. God raised Him from the dead. But He did not raise that One who was made sin, from the dead. That is, it was not the Son there in His representative capacity now as made sin and made a curse that is raised. He is raised without any of that. He is raised in the perfection of His own Divine humanity without a trace of the old thing which He had taken on Him. And when He is raised He is presented not to the whole world, but to a little company as God's eternal Model, God's eternal Representative on the Divine side, presented to them, to their faith. When faith has been exercised towards Him and they recognize Him as they never recognized Him before, and appropriate Him and accept Him and make Him Lord in their life and come into vital, living resurrection union with Him, the work has commenced again in the earth. And He is taken and established in the glory, and the Holy Spirit is sent - the Spirit of that One in the glory, to carry on the work of reproducing Him here.

Slowly the work goes on, a hidden work, largely a secret work, a work, which even those in whom it is being done are largely unable to discern. I mean that you and I who are children of God by faith in Christ Jesus, in whom the work of God is going on, even we are not able to see all that is going on of what God is doing in us. From time to time we are able to see just a little of what has been done. After a while we realize, well, there are some big changes that have been made in us; we are not what we once were. But God hides His work very largely even in those in whom He is doing it. We do not see our own spiritual progress, but He knows. What is happening? Christ is being reproduced. To use the words of the apostle Paul, there is a conformity to the image of His Son going on. You see it is getting back to the original intention: "For whom He foreknew, He also foreordained to be conformed to the image of His Son...". This work is going on behind much obscuring scaffolding; the day will come when the scaffolding will be taken down and the spiritual edifice will be manifested in perfection. This building is all in living relationship to Christ, living stones linked with Him, the Living Stone, the Chief Corner Stone.

Now the apostle Peter here says that there are two alternatives presented to men, presented to faith. You see faith in the Lord Jesus, that is, faith in all the work which He has done as well as faith in Him for what He is as God's Son - the work which He did in His cross in bringing under judgment in His own Person all that sin, all that evil, all that unlikeness to God, in order that God might begin again, in order that God might have that which He originally set His heart upon; faith in that. And then faith in the meaning of Christ Risen as the firstborn among many brethren. That is the beginning again of a new race, with an inward likeness to God initially, to be developed. Faith in the Lord Jesus as to His work, and as to His Person is that which links us to Him, the Chief Corner Stone, and makes us living stones, and thereby brings about the basis, the foundation of that progressive work of God which ultimately is to be revealed as, shall I say, a collective, a corporate, a universal Christ, the image of God.

The end of all this work of God spiritually and morally in the lives of His own is going to be that in all things and everywhere, Christ is seen and Christ will be seen. I am never tired of dwelling upon that. Beloved, in the glory you and I are not going to be somebodies. Christ is going to be the One, the altogether and only One throughout the universe and throughout eternity. We shall not be pointed at and have it said of us what a great and glorious being we are. The whole testimony will be to Christ. How marvellously Christ shines in that one; how fully you can see Christ there. It is going to be Christ filling all things. That is the end, that is what God has started. That is the explanation of creation. That is the explanation of God's dealings with us. That is the answer to any question as to what will ultimately be.

Now, I see that Christ presented to faith brings with it two alternatives as the apostle here says. "For you therefore that believe is the preciousness" (1 Peter 2:7). What preciousness? The preciousness of Christ to the Father. "Elect, precious". That is the word about Him. Precious to God; and then you, as living stones, brought into living relationship to Him through faith, partakers with Him of that preciousness to the Father, become precious to the Father. What is the nature, the essence of that preciousness? What is it that makes it precious to God? The realization and fulfilment of all that God said is here, to have a universe Christ-centric, conformed to the image of His Son Jesus Christ. If you had some object which engrossed your whole heart and mind and for which you had given all your best lavishly, and for which you had suffered long and waited, and at last you had that, how precious it would be to you. That object is the precious thing to you, and all the preciousness of God is vested in His Son. His Son is precious to Him in this sense: that His Son is the means, the instrument, the vehicle, the channel, the vessel by which God gets all He has ever set His heart upon. And when we come into living relationship by faith to the Lord Jesus, that purpose of God is expended to us in Christ and we come into the preciousness.

"For you therefore that believe is the preciousness." That is why God has gone to such lengths for our salvation. God has given His best, has poured Himself out: "God was in Christ, reconciling the world unto Himself"; God suffered in Calvary's cross. We are told: "the church of God, which He has purchased with His own blood". It is God who has suffered through the ages. Abraham, in sacrificing his only and well beloved son, is only a faint type of what God Himself has done: "God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son...". Why "so loved"? Because it was the centre and the sphere of all that upon which His heart was set. God has gone to all that length of suffering and sorrow and agony because His heart is bound up with this world in a great eternal purpose. Therein is the preciousness.

And when He can have any one further living stone which will contribute toward that whole purpose, a vessel for the universal display and showing forth of Himself, His glory, spiritually and morally, then He has something which to Him is very precious; and you will find the Word of God throughout speaks a great deal about the preciousness of the saints to God. How dear they are: "...for he that touches you touches the apply of His eye" (Zech. 2:8). "Yea, He reprov'd kings for their sakes, saying, Touch not Mine anointed, and do My prophets no harm" (Ps. 105:15). He has hurled empires to their doom because they have raised their hand against His Son. Egypt went to disaster and ruin because it stretched out a hand against His people. Babylon, the glory of the ancient world, was hurled from the high place to the depths because it dared to put a hand upon His people. Rome persecuted and martyred and butchered the early saints, and Rome is no more. What has been, ever will be. His saints are precious to Him because it is in His saints that His whole design and purpose of the ages is to be realized. The preciousness to God of one child of His through faith in the Lord Jesus.

That is one alternative. There is the other: "but for such as disbelieve...". This Stone which was intended to be the means by which they are brought into that preciousness to God, by which they were to be brought into that place of glory, the manifestation of God universally, this very Stone chosen of God for their honour, for their glory, the very thing which was meant for their salvation, becomes their undoing. "For such as disbelieve, the stone which the builders rejected, the same was made the head of the corner; and a stone of stumbling, and a rock of offence" (1 Peter 2:7,8). Two emphases again. A 'stone of stumbling' is a stone in the way over which people trip. A rock of offence, that is a piece of jutting rock upon which, striking themselves, they cut themselves to pieces. That is the other side of the history.

The Lord Jesus has come for man's salvation and not condemnation, but if they disbelieve, that which is meant for their salvation becomes the means of their undoing. The issue of Christ having come into this world leaves no one in a no-man's land. It is either: "For you therefore that believe is the preciousness", or if you disbelieve, the very thing itself will be for your undoing. No, God never designed hell for man, and God never wills that men should go to hell. That was never in God's thought. Hell, we are told, was created for the devil and his angels. The Lord sets up a warning against hell and everything that He can do to stop men in that way He has done, and all along the way He is warning men and calling men. He is saying, in effect: 'I never wanted, never do want that you should share the devil's doom.' And He would call, entreat, urge, and by every means He would save men, but if man will go on refusing His warning, ignoring His entreaty, well, there is only one end. God has done His best and is doing His best. "But for such as disbelieve... a stone of stumbling, and a rock of offence". You see the alternatives. You see the side of the glory. You see the side of the shame. The issue for us is an issue of faith in the Lord Jesus.

Now just one word before closing, by way of underlining one word. He is called a *Living* Stone, and then those linked with Him are living stones. That for me determines the entire nature of relationship to Christ, that determines the basis, the foundation of that life which is eventually to issue in the manifestation of God's glory, God's image. The word *living*. The Word of God does not argue at all on this matter. It simply takes for granted one thing, that apart from faith in the Lord Jesus Christ, no one is in this sense alive, everyone is dead. "And you... when ye were dead through your trespasses and sins..." - dead. So far as this kind of union with the Lord is concerned, no one has it by nature; they have not that life. If you could read the exact text of the original language here, you would at once be settled upon that. The word living, here, is the word always used in connection with God. There are four words in the Greek translated into the English word 'life', or 'living'. Three of them relate to the ordinary human life as we know it, the life which every person and animal has by nature. But there is a fourth word which always relates to Divine life, the life of God, and that is the word used here, living. That is, those who have God's life, and no one has that life only in organic union with the Lord Jesus. The Holy Spirit through the apostle is very precise: "*Living* stones". If He had only been content with a metaphor, He would have said: 'A lot of stones all together bringing about an edifice.'

Living stones; that is the feature of every part of this building, that it has Divine Life; not ordinary human life, but Divine Life. Christ alone had that life and has it, and we only have it as we are in Christ by faith. The Lord Jesus came to bring the gift of this Life to mankind. "I am come that they might have Life" is the word in the Gospel of John chapter 10 verse 10, "and that they might have it more abundantly." "The gift of God is eternal Life", the same word again. "He that has the Son has Life; and he that has not the Son of God has not Life" (1 John 5:12).

Now, all you who are so familiar with this, well-seasoned and mature saints have got to be patient while I emphasise and stress these things. Remember some of us want to have foundations attended to and that is what the Lord is concerned with. The foundation of God's eternal purpose is living union with Christ by faith. That is the foundation, the union which is a oneness with Him in Divine Life. Everything is built upon that, everything comes out of that. All our spiritual growth is the result of our having spiritual Life, Divine Life. All our becoming conformed to His image is the outworking of that Life in order; just as in nature a certain kind of life produces a certain kind of likeness, so here in Divine things, this peculiar, specific, exclusive Life of God produces the likeness of God. And for the acceleration of spiritual growth, for the speeding up of spiritual progress, for the development of Christ-likeness, the one need is an accession of Divine Life by the Holy Spirit. Everything issues from the basic thing, that is, having His Life in us and the fact that we only have that by being joined to Him. His picture of the vine and the branches is basic to this truth. The vine and the branches make one organism and the fruit is borne because the life of the vine is the one life passing through all the branches; and it is that oneness and likeness of life, which is basic to everything in the eternal purpose of God. That life which was of Adam meant that the Divine likeness was lost; that Life received by faith in Jesus brings back the Divine likeness inwardly and it will develop.

I asked at the beginning a question which may have sounded to you something like a speculation, as to what the result would have been if that degenerating course had not come in the race. Here you have Christ who is the Original - God's original in resurrection. We are born of the Holy Spirit and receive the Divine Life which is in Christ. That produces Christ-likeness and that likeness goes on with every fresh generation that is born of Christ. When really born from above, born anew, born of the Holy Spirit, whichever term you prefer from the Scriptures, it all means the same thing: that we receive the Life of God which is in Christ, and every fresh one that is born of that Life comes into the image of Christ and receives that element which means ultimately perfect conformity to His image. And so throughout all eternity what will be shown is generations, and generations, and generations after the image of Christ. All generations will reveal Christ throughout eternity.

It is a marvellous thing, is it not? It does not matter where you move with the gospel of Christ in this world, whether it be in what may be called the dark heathen races who have no light, knowledge, training, or civilization, in any language or nation, the gospel of the grace of God is preached and faith in the Lord Jesus is exercised through the hearing of that word and through the exercise of that faith Divine Life is imparted. It does not matter where it is, the lowest of the low, or highest of the high, there comes about a similar likeness, one likeness. We have seen it. I have seen a man, stand round an open air meeting, who was the very picture of debauchery, whose features were horrible - the consequence of sin - standing there with hardly a decent rag on him, marred and wretched; and I have come to know that that man's home was like himself, his children half naked, his home divested of all comfort and furniture, in order that he might indulge his lusts. His poor wife a mere bag of bones, toiling for those children because of his sin. I have seen that man hear the gospel (a case in my own experience) at that open air meeting, and open his eyes as the grace of God and the saving power of God was presented, and become concerned, interested, and being spoken to afterwards, exercising simple faith in the Lord Jesus without very much intelligence or understanding, with a dulled mind and a spoiled life, nevertheless reaching out from his darkness and receiving Christ as his Saviour. Within a week that man had become conscious of the filthy state in which he was and had done everything in order to change his own condition and home. A week later he turned up at the meeting wearing a nice clean scarf, and within a month he came wearing a collar and tie. And his home was changed and furniture was coming in, and his wife knew something

of relief, and his children wondered whether the millennium had started. Yes, that is true. That is the incoming of Divine Life, which starts conformity to the image of Christ and changes things. And this universe is going to be changed altogether by that. The day is coming when that very Life will have transformed everything, and everywhere it shall be Christ. That is God's end.

But that is not going to be through a long series of ages through a kind of slow absorption until everyone has received the gospel. No, no! There is a crisis coming. This is a day of grace. This is the day of the gospel. It will not always be so. Christ is presented to faith with that object in view now. We settle our destiny by whether we believe or disbelieve, and God has fixed a day when He will judge the world by Jesus Christ and the day of grace will have ended, and all will stand before Him. And the question will be: "What did you do with My Son: believe or disbelieve?" To those who believe He will say: "Come, ye blessed of My Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you...", and to those who disbelieve: "Depart, from Me...". A great divide will come. This is the time for believing or disbelieving, putting ourselves on one side or the other, accepting one of these two alternatives. "For you therefore that believe is the preciousness: but for such as disbelieve... a stone of stumbling, and a rock of offence." The means of undoing and overthrowing. It has been so always with individuals; it has been so with nations. The nations are today in this very crisis, in this very balance. If the truth were known, the state of the nations today is the issue of how they have answered, to God's challenge in His Son, the Lord Jesus. If we had time we could very well prove that.

But leaving the national and international aside for the moment, this is an individual question. Beloved fellow children of God, let me urge this upon you: the basis of everything for us is that the Life of the Lord is vibrant in us. And what the Lord desires, needs, and must have is that every one of these stones should be a *living* stone. Are you a living stone in the House of God? Are you alive with the Life of God? Is the manifestation of His Life there? That Life will produce Christ-likeness.

Well, both believers and unbelievers must answer to the Lord as the outcome of this word. If it sounds severe, challenging, do not think it is meant to be harsh. It is only by reason of the seriousness of the matter, the eternity which hangs upon it that we press and urge and seem to be so emphatic. There are such great issues in the balance as to whether we believe or disbelieve, as to whether we are alive with the Life of God, or whether we are where the Word of God puts us by nature: dead in trespasses and sins. May the Lord accomplish the purpose of His Word.