

6. Peter opened the Scripture to those who claimed authoritative understanding of it as well as devoted fidelity to it as the word of the living God, but their response to him and his message showed them to be tragically self-deceived. If these leaders of Israel were actually what they purported to be, Peter's words would have cut them like a knife. They would have realized that, in their rejection of Jesus of Nazareth, they had fulfilled the very Scripture they held up as inspired and infallible: The same God who promised to send the Davidic Servant – the Messiah in whom the Council members themselves placed their hope – had also proclaimed His rejection at the hands of the *builders*.

- The psalmist's reference to "builders" links these individuals with the structure founded on the mentioned *cornerstone* (Psalm 118:22), and the overall context of Psalm 118 has led many commentators to view it as a post-exilic psalm which concerns (or even commemorates) the construction of the second temple. If this understanding is correct, the psalm parallels the post-exile prophets whose emphasis was on the second temple – specifically, its non-ultimate, prophetic nature. Even as it wouldn't recapture the glory of its predecessor, so it was to find its own glorious destiny in the everlasting sanctuary associated with the coming of the Davidic Branch (cf. Zechariah 3:1-4:14, 6:9-15; Haggai 2:1-9; Malachi 3:1-5; cf. also Ezekiel's concluding vision (chaps. 40-48) in which the prophet saw Yahweh's glory returning, not to the future second temple, but to a most splendid, idealized sanctuary (ref. 43:1-8; cf. also. 47:1-12 with Revelation 21:1-22:5)).

- Whether or not this psalm is post-exilic, the title, *builders*, implicates these individuals in the work of erecting the structure referred to in v. 22. Moreover, the surrounding context does at least suggest that this building should be regarded as a particular manifestation of Yahweh's sanctuary (ref. 118:19-27). Finally, the pronouncement against the builders highlights the true nature of this building task and their failure respecting it: Their failure as builders consisted in their willful rejection of the foundation stone Yahweh provided; they sought their own "stone" to be the "head of the corner." *Yet the psalmist's indictment of them pertains, not to either of the two physical temples, but to a spiritual, messianic counterpart.*

Set apart by Yahweh as the corporate covenant seed of Abraham, Israel's calling (and preeminently its leaders' calling) was to fulfill the Abrahamic mission of global witness and reconciliation – mediating the knowledge of God to all the earth's families. In that way they would serve His work of erecting an everlasting spiritual house out of living stones constructed upon the Living Stone.

Yahweh's true and ultimate sanctuary – which was prefigured by its various physical predecessors – could only be constructed upon His chosen and precious cornerstone. Thus Peter: "*There is no other name under heaven that has been given among men, by which we must be saved*" (4:12).

The implication of this truth for the "builders" listening to Peter ought to have been obvious: ***Their rejection of this singular stone amounted to their refusal to fulfill their calling, and so also their renunciation of their Abrahamic identity.***

By rejecting Yahweh's cornerstone, Israel's establishment affirmed that they were not true sons of Abraham; sons share in their father's likeness. So it is those who possess Abraham's *faith* who are his bona fide children (cf. Luke 3:1-8; John 8:31-42; Romans 2:28-29, 4:9-25, 9:1-33; Galatians 3:1-29). But this faith doesn't simply prove Abrahamic identity; it is the means for obtaining the salvation Peter held out (4:12; cf. 2:21) – the salvation that encompasses all the blessings of God: forgiveness, cleansing, renewal, refreshing and restoration; the salvation that is the impartation of *life* through the gift of the Spirit of life (2:38-40, 3:19). Rejection of the stone is the rejection of salvation.

These pious Jewish scholars who claimed to believe Yahweh and hold fast to His inscripturated word were actually consummate *unbelievers*, and yet their unbelief itself testified to the veracity and infallibility – the “faith-worthiness” – of the Scripture and the God who has spoken through His anointed mouthpieces. As their forefathers rejected Yahweh's prophets, so they had rejected the quintessential Prophet (3:22-23; cf. Matthew 23:29-36), and now they were refusing to heed those in whom He continued to speak.

a. The most poignant testimony to their unbelief was the Council's complete disregard of Peter's treatment of Psalm 118, especially as it indicted them personally and called them to faith in Christ (4:11-12). One would have expected Luke to note a denunciation by the Sanhedrin of Peter's interpretation and application, but there is none; they only responded to who was addressing them and the implications of Peter's deed and message to their own well-being.

- The Council was discomforted by Peter's words, but not because of a pierced heart. What agitated them was the effrontery of untrained and non-credentialed “laymen” presuming to instruct them (4:13). The Sanhedrin was populated with Israel's recognized biblical scholars, and they were astounded at the hubris of these Galilean fishermen who would stand before them and boldly interpret the Scripture and indict them with it.
- These rulers refused to hear Peter's message, but that didn't mean they saw no significance in Peter's miraculous work and subsequent proclamation. Their unbelief left them numb to the personal spiritual implications of what they were hearing, but they were very much attuned to the temporal implications: The news of the lame man's healing and the apostolic interpretation of it were spreading like wildfire, and the Council knew that this could only serve to undermine their privileged position and standing with the people (cf. John 11:45-50).

Continuing the pattern they initiated in their dealings with Jesus, Israel's religious establishment staunchly refused to “hear” the meaning and import of the miraculous healing (a miracle which they knew they could neither deny nor discount – v. 4:14), but they were equally intent on plugging the ears of their fellow Israelites. The same self-centered self-righteousness that caused them to reject the kingdom of heaven provoked them to try to restrain all others who would seek to enter it (ref. Matthew 23:13; cf. 23:4, 15).

- b. For all its power, the Council couldn't eradicate or reverse what had transpired the previous day on the temple grounds. Their power couldn't erase the truth, but perhaps it could conceal it; perhaps their authority was sufficient to intimidate Jesus' witnesses into silence. In view of their limited and unfortunate options (4:21), that seemed to be the best course of action, and the Council accordingly directed Peter and John – and, by implication, the entire Christian community – to never again speak publicly of Jesus or teach the people in His name (4:15-18).
- c. The Sanhedrin had authority to command, threaten and punish, but it had no power to suppress the truth or its working among men. They could imprison or even kill Jesus' heralds, but His gospel would continue its effectual work; God will fulfill His eternal purpose in His Son (Romans 1:16; cf. Philippians 1:12ff).

Peter had come to understand the triumphal power of the gospel, and so wasn't constrained by the Sanhedrin's order or intimidated by its threats. He knew that Jesus had taken His seat at Yahweh's right hand, thereby assuming His everlasting, sovereign rule over all things (2:33; cf. Matthew 28:18; Ephesians 1:18-23). And as the Father's enthroned King, Jesus had sent His omnipotent Spirit to establish and perfect His all-encompassing, all-transforming kingdom.

Gloriously attested by the healed man standing beside Peter and John, the Spirit was at work renewing the created order, restoring it to the Father and to His exalted Son; what, then, was there to fear from human authority? The temporal power of the Council was nothing in view of the power of Christ's Spirit. Moreover, the gospel's sure triumph through the Spirit makes it foolish and useless, as well as culpable, to try to oppose it. *This is as true of unfaithfulness and compromise as of direct opposition:* To yield to the gospel's opponents – in whatever way and to whatever extent – is to wage an unsuccessful attempt at opposing Christ's Spirit; conversely, to yield to the Spirit's will and leading is to triumph with Him, whether in life or in death. Peter and John had come to the conviction of these things, and so it was as impossible for them to deny the gospel through silence and inaction as it was for its opponents to eradicate or emasculate it by their threats and punishments (4:19-20; cf. 5:26-32).

This was an important lesson for the fledgling Church to learn, and one that would be tested and reinforced repeatedly, *from within the Church as much as from without* (cf. 5:1-11, 17-29, 6:8-7:60, 8:9-25, 10:1-11:18, 12:1-3, 15:1-32, 20:17-32, etc.). Indeed, the need for this lesson among Christ's saints – and God's providential means for teaching it – continue in every generation and will do so until the end of the age.

Jewish opposition was the primary ordained means for promoting the growth of the early Church; Israel was God's chosen vessel of wrath through which His saving mercy came to vessels of mercy (Romans 9:1-29). Ironically, Abraham's offspring were to fulfill their obligation of global witness and reconciliation, not through faithful sonship, but through rebellious unbelief. Israel's opposition to Christ would grow His Church *numerically*, but more importantly, it would grow it *spiritually*, refining it as the refiner's fire.