

Engraved With Christ

by Linda Rex

May 7, 2023, 5th Sunday in Easter/Resurrection—Yesterday I was wearing a necklace given to me years ago by one of my children. It is a polished stone, smoothed into a pastel pink disc, hanging on a black string. In the center, the stone slopes of into an off-sided hole through which the string is woven. As I held the stone yesterday, I realized it must have taken great patience and skill to smooth that stone into a disc with a hole in it without causing it to shatter or crack.

When reading the New Testament passage for this Sunday, 1 Peter 2:2–10, it occurred to me that in many ways, our Father has done this very thing with all of us as his children. He has, in his Son, engraved upon each of us as living stones, the very nature of Christ, the Living Stone. We are meant to be reflections of God's image, and Jesus Christ is this very image we reflect by the Spirit, as we respond to him in faith. He has carefully forged into our human flesh, the likeness of God, enabling us by the Spirit to live and walk in right relationship with himself.

In John 14:1–14, Jesus told his disciples that he was going home to his Father to prepare a place for them. Now I understand that this is often understood to mean that Jesus was building, as a good carpenter does, actual buildings for us to live in when we get to heaven. That is a lovely thought, which is quite appealing. However, it is more likely that what Jesus meant was that he was creating a place for us within the life and love of Father and Son in the Spirit. Apart from Jesus' incarnation, crucifixion, resurrection, and ascension, we in our broken human flesh would have remain alienated in our hearts and minds, and unable to see or live in the truth of who we are as God's beloved, precious children. This isn't what God wanted for us, so he sent his Son to do what was necessary to make our oneness with him possible.

In the very special tools of his life, death, resurrection, and ascension, Jesus forged within our human flesh an ability to participate in his own face-to-face relationship with his heavenly Father in the Spirit. In our human flesh, Jesus lived the life we are to live, in dependency upon his Father, led by and filled with the Spirit. He died the death we deserve to die, becoming sin for us and giving us his righteousness in that amazing and thrilling exchange. In Christ, the Father polished off all the sharp edges of our sinful flesh, making us living stones who, by faith in Christ and in the gift of the Spirit, can begin to bear witness to the grace and goodness of God wherever we go. Jesus raised us up in his resurrection, bringing us all up into a new place in the ascension, and sending the Spirit as promised, so we each can participate individually in this wonderful gift of eternal life.

Our response to Jesus Christ and whether or not we believe this truth about God and ourselves is reflected by how we live our lives. In Acts 7:55–60 we read the story of Stephen, an early Christian martyr. He believed that Jesus was the Son of God in human flesh, who had died, but had risen again. As he spoke with the religious leaders of his day, he shared with them the vision he was given of Jesus Christ, once human, who was standing at the right hand of God in glory.

Stephen knew to the core of his being that this was the true reality. But those who heard him believed that he was out of his mind. They could not and would not believe the truth about who Jesus Christ was. And even though they were people who were trying to obey God, they could not get past the stumbling block who was Jesus Christ, the God-man. They could not see the truth of who Jesus was, and therefore they could not see who they were as God's beloved children. So they stoned Stephen to death.

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Standing there, present in this moment, was a man named Saul, to whom they gave their coats while they were busy stoning Stephen. This man was in full agreement with them, and he would soon be dragging believers into prison and forcing them to deny Christ. What he didn't know at this point was that the resurrected Jesus had his eye on him, and one day soon, while on the way to Damascus, Saul himself would encounter the Living Stone, the Lord Jesus Christ. And when that happened, he would never be the same again.

When it comes to Jesus Christ, there can be no middle ground. He calls us to faith, to trust him and believe in him—to accept him just the way he is, surrendering ourselves to his lordship, his goodness, and his love. Our lives are no longer our own—they are his, to be lived as reflections of the love and goodness of God himself, as we participate in all the blessed things God is doing in this world to bring about his kingdom in its fullness. Will we stumble over the Rock, Jesus Christ, or will we surrender to God's work of engraving him on our hearts and lives, making us true reflections of our God who is Father, Son, and Spirit?

Thank you, Father, for the life you have given us in your Son, Jesus Christ. Thank you for you Spirit, who is ever at work in us and in our lives, transforming our hearts by faith. Grant us the grace to participate in this process of transformation as we pay attention to your story, Jesus, and what your Spirit is teaching us and asking us to do. And move us to share with others the good news we have come to see and believe in Jesus Christ. Amen.

“... like newborn babies, long for the pure milk of the word, so that by it you may grow in respect to salvation, if you have tasted the kindness of the Lord. And coming to Him as to a living stone which has been rejected by men, but is choice and precious in the sight of God, you also, as living stones, are being built up as a spiritual house for a holy priesthood, to offer up spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ. For this is contained in Scripture: ‘Behold, I lay in Zion a choice stone, a precious corner’ stone, ‘and he who believes in Him will not be disappointed.’ This precious value, then, is for you who believe; but for those who disbelieve, ‘the stone which the builders rejected, this became the very corner stone’ and ‘a stone of stumbling and a rock of offense’; for they stumble because they are disobedient to the word, and to this doom they were also appointed. But you are ‘a chosen race, a’ royal ‘priesthood, a holy nation, a people for God’s own possession,’ so that you may proclaim the excellencies of Him who has called you out of darkness into His marvelous light; for you once were ‘not a people,’ but now you are ‘the people of God’; you had ‘not received mercy,’ but now you have ‘received mercy’.” 1 Peter 2:2–10 NASB

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