

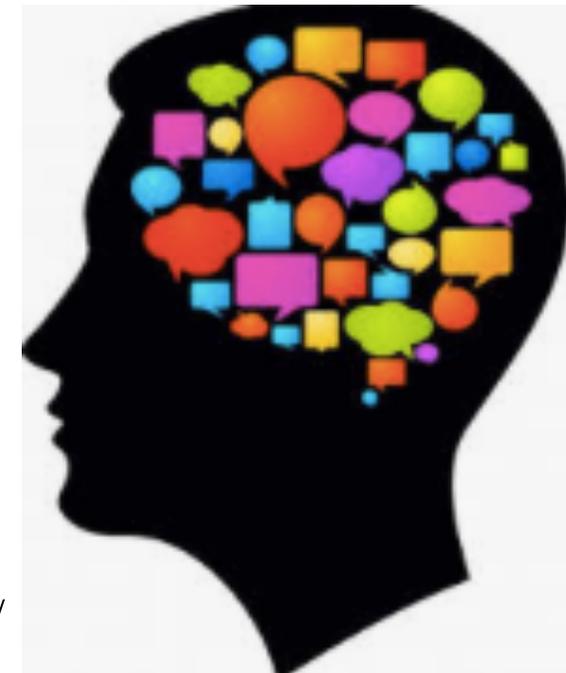
1 Peter 2:3-7
Hope in the storm

focused

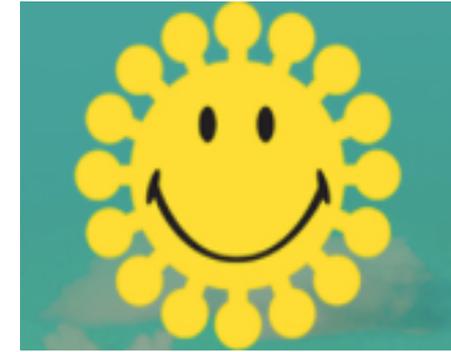


Focus creates excellence. Have you noticed that? If a child decides early on – or their father or mother decides it for them – that they will focus on the piano, or the violin, or the guitar - and that is their focus as they grow up,.. and if they put their hours in at practicing every day,.. usually it will pay off, first with playing first chair on the school orchestra as they get older. They will impress at least some of the girls with their talent, and if they turn out to be really, *really* good at it, they may earn themselves some kind of college scholarship. If they are absolutely exceptional and stand out from even the best of their peers, their special talent and focus may even land them a professional career in some famous big city orchestra, or in recording career, or maybe they can even join a rock and roll band, or a country group, bluegrass or jazz! I've seen some YouTube videos of musicians recording themselves displaying their amazing musical talent. And if their style and creativity *really* catches on with the public – and if it becomes “viral” as they say now - they can develop it into a lucrative concert and recording career! Such desired outcomes **ONLY** come to those who are focused upon their craft! It does not happen *to* all, but if there is a chance of it happening **at** all, it will only happen to the focused person, coupled with ambition and the drive to be GREAT! The child that has all kinds of interests, that plays or works at many things from video games to card collections, will not excel at anything in particular. Their path will follow the path of least resistance as they go through life.

It is the same when following Jesus! A person needs focus when following Jesus. Jesus is supposed to become central to everything we decide and everything we do! He does not forbid us to do the things that we love to do or need to do, but He wants us to welcome His presence in all we do! Everything becomes about Him. Our work, the way we use our resources, our family life, our conversations with others and our inner conversations. By “*inner conversations*”, I mean that voice in our head that expresses our thoughts - like the ideas that come to us, or it puts our emotions and moods into words, giving them verbal shape and form. That voice which no one hears but God and ourselves, ends up justifying our emotions and moods, calming them or inflaming them, justifying them or condemning them. When Jesus is central, we are not alone in our thoughts. We don't get to say, “my thoughts are my own, and Jesus, you are not welcome to intrude or influence them”. No! We invite the Spirit of Christ to search our thoughts, to judge them, to influence them, to tell us if we should entertain those thoughts or if we should not. It is central to following Christ and to letting Him change us in a profound way rather than in just as a surface thing/window dressing. And Jesus **WANTS** to, in fact insists upon, changing us profoundly so that our inner conversations now are nothing like they were before we gave our heart to Him.



The focus of the apostles was the true Jesus - truly He was their life, the center of their existence - and they wanted others to know Him as they had known Him. Their testimony was that He was a phenomenal presence, the best thing to ever have happened to this sorry world! He was the Creator Himself, second member of God's Tri-unity, come down to earth with an offer of love to all humankind! And He was the head of the church - that organic organization of Christ-followers that the apostles had been tasked to nourish, guard, and to grow into an aggressive force that would, despite fierce resistance, go out and, 1 to 2, then 2 to 4, then 4 to 8, 8 to 16, 16 to 32, 32 to 64, 64 to 108, and so on - each convert to Christ winning one (or more) until they eventually conquered the world for Jesus!



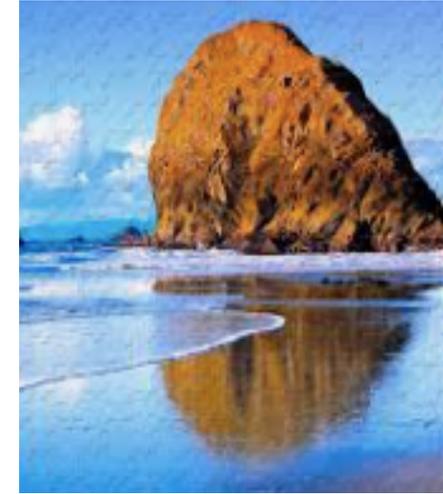
***Viruses** grow like this, taking over the body, multiplying at an astounding rate until they are all throughout the body, attacking cells and causing damage to the the body! They just multiply and multiply before our own immune system begins to catch up, recognizes the threat and responds to their malevolent presence attacking and killing the viruses off.

BUT,.. *what if* there was a virus that grew explosively like usual - but instead caused **good things** to happen in the body! Let's say it came alongside of our own cells and made them... **better!** It made us into a stronger, smarter, kinder, better version of ourselves! And so the people everywhere that were infected, were explaining in wonder to anyone who would listen, about how wonderful this was to be infected! And low and behold, let's say further, that there was no downside whatsoever to the infection, and also that this better-ness was a permanent condition! I don't think it would take long and people would be coming close so they too could get infected! Well, like a good virus, the spread of authentic Christianity should have gone quickly in theory, and have taken over the world - and it was well on its way in the first years! But then it plateaued. The growth slowed, and just like today's church, maybe 10 percent of the people were actually making a genuine attempt to win even one person to Jesus. 2 or 3 percent of the people of the church adopted evangelism as a lifestyle. So the churches grew, but not at the accelerated speed of the first couple of decades. Even today, when a church is planted and grows very quickly (almost always in large population centers), there comes a time when the church as an organization must stop and take a breath, pull back for a while and consolidate before it is completely overwhelmed by its gains! As for the early church, once the churches were established in population centers all throughout the known world, the disciples were kept busy fending off false teachers and correcting erroneous teaching. It was coming at the church from all directions.

So, in the early church, the mission went from a primarily *offensive* one to a primarily *defensive* one, and playing offense, evangelism, dropped off and became less. Many churches continued to grow and expand, and continued to flourish in the mission Christ had given them, but many churches remained curled up in a defensive position, as it were. You see,.. human nature has never changed. We like to be comfortable. It is far more comfortable to be a Christian purely for the personal enjoyment of being a Christian and being a part of a church that you enjoy, loving the worship music, hearing an entertaining Sunday sermon, enjoying Christian friends, having your kids get rudimentary teaching in the Bible and in morality, and so on and so forth. It is a good life, I have to say, it can be as comfortable as a nice overstuffed chair after a hard day at work! It is hard moving a church from that enjoyable inward focus to become externally focused. That takes courage and initiative from people! It requires that one be willing to face rejection and recrimination for sharing Christ - and who wants *that* when we can run back to the shelter of the church week after week and just be there and enjoy the ride! More than that, in this modern age of privilege and convenience and materialism, there is so much that we must do that there just isn't time to fit in the purposes of God in spreading the gospel in any planned or systematic way into our lives! Therefore, for 8 out of 10 of us, it basically doesn't happen. We agree that it should happen, and we imagine doing it,.. next week! And next week never comes. We don't pray for the lost, we don't work to win the lost, we don't even invite them to church, or these day, it would be as easy as inviting them to join the live-stream service! But it is not happening and not likely to, unless we truly repent of our complacency and negligence, which is basically derived from our lack of love and concern for the lost! What we are missing is half the joy of being a Christ-follower! It is joining the offense that brings our spirit to life and refreshes our faith when we see the sudden realization, surrender, and the emergence of faith in someone's eyes and realize that God has used us to accomplish that light! But this does not happen without focus!



So we come to our text and Peter mixes some metaphors to try to get the people of the early church to see the bigger picture! In vs 4, he tell them about their great leader—*“As you come unto Him - the Living Stone...”*. Why does Peter refer to Jesus as *“the Living Stone”*? Because, He continues, Jesus is building a house of living stones and He is the Cornerstone of the building! People are being added to the church and they are becoming a part of something that only God can build! God is building an organic structure out of you and me and people like us, one living stone upon another! We are both the organic structure of this temple and we are also it’s priests, with Jesus as our high priest. Just like the people of the entire world had to go to the central temple in Israel’s Jerusalem to meet with God through the priests that represented Him there, so too the people of the world must come to the new priests and a new temple made of living stones - the church. There the story of Jesus and of His atonement for sin will be passed on to them. They will be brought to an understanding of the courage of Jesus and selflessness of His love for the world and for them personally. Through these Christ-follower priests, these seekers will be made an offer that they would be foolish in the extreme to refuse! *“Yet to all who received Him, to those who believe in His Name He gave the power to become the children of God!”* John 1:12. They come to us, or we go to them! But we are their connection with God. God could do this Himself, but He has chosen to do it with a human touch, by His people calling out those who are not God’s people to become God’s people! [Rev. 5:10].



We bear the light to a dark world that is stumbling around in darkness! As Jesus said “*Men love darkness rather than light*”. They seem to prefer that darkness until they are overwhelmed by it, knocked down, and pummeled by the tragedies, disappointments, and failures that people commonly encounter in life on fallen and cursed earth. Softened by grief, disappointment and/or shame, they are more open to the Gospel. As God’s new breed of priests, we show them God’s word, the Bible, and like Philip explained the prophet, Isaiah, to the Ethiopian eunuch, we too are sent by God to help them to understand. We answer their questions or we bring them to someone who can. We can surely point them to Jesus, the One chosen by God, and we point them to their need for Him if they are to be reconciled to their Creator!



*When I was a boy, my parents wanted me to learn to play the piano. They wanted me to eventually be able to use my talent for the Lord in some capacity. Now, I liked the piano, and I imagined that I could get good at it, because music had come easily to me from my earliest memory. I suppose I too dreamed of playing in church and elsewhere. But then came the lesson. They were okay, but then came the practicing during the six days in-between the lessons. I *hated* practicing! I wanted to learn how to play, but I hated practicing! I had hoped in the beginning that it would get easier, but every time it got easier, my teacher would give me harder music, putting me back to square one! It seemed to me that I couldn’t win! Plus I was just too busy playing ball, or out with my neighborhood friends, so I fudged my practice times. I admit to you here and now, that there were weeks when I went to my lessons not having practiced a single time! It never went well when that happened! And my poor teachers had to sit there and listen to that noise! Of course, I was an awful student. I went to those lessons for 2 ½ years, before finally convincing my parents I was never going to be a piano player. I did benefit from those years. I was taught how to play the piano, and basic music theory – which I understand and use to this day. And I really would have liked to have played the piano – and now, of course, I wish I had stuck with it, because I was actually playing out of the hymnbook by the time I quit (and hymns are hard to play). I think I could have gone much further with it, but because I was *UNFOCUSED* and my interests were spread all over the place, and I valued those other interests more than learning to play the piano, I never once played in church. I thought about being a great pianist, and I liked the idea of it, but it never happened.

~ If we would be a priest in the house that God is building, as God had intends us to be when He saves us, then we must apply ourselves! If we apply ourselves, then something else has to give. But Jesus promised that if we seek first the Kingdom of God, we would lose nothing of value and gain everything that means anything! [Heb. 12:1]