

Holy Presence: From Refuge to Living Stones

John 14:1–14; Acts 7:55–60; Psalm 31:1–5, 15–16; 1 Peter 2:2–10

“Holiness is not withdrawal from conflict; holiness is faithful presence within conflict without becoming captive to its spirit.”

At first glance, these verses may seem to pull in different directions: David prays for refuge, Jesus comforts troubled disciples, Stephen dies under violent accusation, and Peter describes the church as a holy priesthood built from living stones.¹ But when these texts are allowed to interpret one another, a unified storyline begins to emerge: **God’s plan of redemption is to bring humanity home into his holy presence through Jesus Christ, the rejected yet risen cornerstone, and then to form believers into a holy people who bear that presence in the world.**

The movement of this message begins in Psalm 31, where the faithful one cries out from distress and entrusts life into the hands of God. *“Into your hands I commit my spirit”* (Ps. 31:5). That prayer becomes more than David’s prayer. It becomes Jesus’ prayer from the cross and Stephen’s prayer as he dies, which is both powerful and deeply thought-provoking. In other words, the Old Testament gives the grammar of trust; Jesus fulfills it in obedient surrender, and the church learns to live and die in that same holy confidence. Scripture does not give isolated inspirational sayings; it gives one redemptive pattern: refuge, revelation, rejection, resurrection, and holy witness.

In John 14, we see the heart of that pattern. The disciples are troubled because Jesus is speaking of departure, betrayal, and death. Into that anxiety, Jesus says, *“Do not let your hearts be troubled”* (John 14:1). This is not sentimental comfort; it is covenantal comfort. Jesus is not merely soothing their feelings; he is revealing the Father’s purpose. He is going to prepare a place, not as an escape from creation, but as the Son who opens the way into communion with the Father. When Jesus says, *“I am the way and the truth and the life”* (John 14:6), he is not giving an opinion or offering a religious slogan. He is declaring that the whole movement of God’s salvation has now taken personal form in him.

This is where the *Gospel of God* comes into focus. The *good news of Jesus Christ* is not simply that believers get somewhere after death. The good news is that, in Jesus Christ, God has come near, made himself known, opened the way home, and begun forming a holy people who live from the Father’s presence now. Our theology of presence helps us to name this beautifully: Scripture’s central movement is the healing and saving power of God’s presence, from Eden, to Moses, to wilderness guidance, to Christ, to the gathered people who become witnesses of that presence.^[2] The goal is not merely to develop a theology of presence, but to become one.^[3]

Then in Acts 7, Scripture shows what that presence looks like under pressure. Stephen is not delivered from suffering, but he is not abandoned in suffering. As stones are lifted against him, he sees the glory of God and Jesus standing at God’s right hand. He prays, *“Lord Jesus, receive my spirit”* (Acts 7:59). This is Psalm 31 passing through Jesus and now living in the church. Stephen’s death is not a random martyrdom tacked onto the Easter story. It is the

¹ John 14:1–14; Acts 7:55–60; Psalm 31:1–5, 15–16; 1 Peter 2:2–10.

cruciform pattern of Jesus reproduced in a Spirit-filled witness. He entrusts himself to Jesus, and he forgives his enemies. Holiness is not withdrawal from conflict; holiness is faithful presence within conflict without becoming captive to its spirit.

Family Systems Theory gives us language for this kind of witness. In an anxious system, people often react, triangulate, blame, or collapse into the emotional field around them. Edwin Friedman argues that strength lies not merely in technique but in presence, especially the non-anxious presence of a well-differentiated person who remains connected without being swallowed by the system's reactivity. This is important to understand: it is good to be connected, but when connection becomes attachment, it can slide into dependency.^[4] Stephen is not detached; he is deeply connected. He speaks truth to his people (the people who stone him), prays for his persecutors, and entrusts himself to Jesus. But he is not governed by their anxiety. He is governed by the risen Christ, and that is what allows him to remain differentiated.

This same movement takes ecclesial shape—the shape of the church—in First Peter 2. Peter takes Old Testament language about the temple, the priesthood, election, and holiness, and gathers it around Jesus. These themes often become dividing lines among Christians, yet Peter centers them all in Christ. Peter takes these and says: Christ is the living Stone, rejected by human beings but chosen by God. Those who come to him become “living stones” and are built into a “spiritual house” (1 Pet. 2:5). Then Peter names the people of God: “a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s special possession” (1 Pet. 2:9). This is not triumphalism; it is vocation. Triumphalism uses chosenness as a badge of superiority. Vocation receives chosenness as a call to humble, holy witness. The church does not exist to admire or flaunt its own “chosenness.” The church exists “*that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light*” (1 Pet. 2:9).

Here, the Old Testament promises are not discarded; they are fulfilled and transfigured in Christ. Psalm 31’s refuge becomes Jesus’ own trust. Temple imagery becomes a people built on Christ. Priesthood becomes the shared vocation of the church. The rejected righteous one becomes the cornerstone. The mercy once longed for becomes the church’s new identity: “*Once you were not a people, but now you are the people of God*” (1 Pet. 2:10). The storyline is not fragmented. It is one gospel-shaped arc.

This is why context matters so deeply. If John 14 is isolated, it can become a private promise about heaven detached from discipleship. If Acts 7 is isolated, Stephen can become only an example of courage rather than a witness to the risen Jesus. If Psalm 31 is isolated, it may become only a personal lament rather than part of the biblical pattern fulfilled in Christ. If First Peter 2 is isolated, “chosen people” language can be twisted into spiritual superiority rather than holy mission. But when the Bible interprets itself, the fuller picture appears. Jesus is the way into the Father’s presence; the Spirit forms believers into a holy house; and the church becomes a people whose life declares God’s mercy.

This is the teleios, the fuller picture. The Bible is not a drawer full of disconnected proof texts. It is the drama of God’s faithful presence. N. T. Wright makes this point strongly when he says Christians read Scripture as the narrative of creation and new creation, covenant and new covenant, and as the story in which believers are now called to participate.^[5] That is exactly what these texts do. They do not merely inform us. They locate us.

The early church understood this pattern. Justin Martyr described the gospel as going out from Jerusalem through ordinary witnesses empowered by God, and he connected Christian

truthfulness, enemy-love, and willingness to suffer with the Gospel's public credibility.^[6] Irenaeus read the gospel as the fulfillment of God's long work of restoring humanity in Christ, resisting interpretations that broke Scripture into disconnected or secret meanings.^[7] Tertullian, though complicated and sometimes severe, recognized that martyrdom revealed a courage rooted in allegiance to Christ rather than fear of earthly power.^[8] These early voices matter because they show that the church has long understood **Scripture as one coherent witness** centered in Christ, not as a collection of spiritual fragments.

The Friends' faith belongs naturally in this conversation. Early Friends did not understand themselves as inventing another sect, but as seeking the recovery of "primitive Christianity," the living reality of apostolic faith.^[9] These early Friends sought to be "Friends of Jesus," not merely a denomination bearing a name.^[10] This is a central point for understanding First Peter 2: A holy people is not formed by religious branding. A holy people is formed by coming to Christ, the living Stone, and being built together into a people who bear his Light. Our emphasis on holiness in the Friends tradition fits here: holiness is not merely personal moral improvement, but Spirit-formed transformation that becomes visible in worship, witness, peace, and communal life.^[11]

Thomas R. Kelly would press this inwardly, toward the Divine Center, and then outwardly, toward holy obedience. The gathered life of the church begins with attention to the Divine Center, where the soul learns holy obedience. D. Elton Trueblood raises the emphasis simply: Friends at their best are not trying to preserve peculiar habits, but to recover basic Christianity in lived form.^[12] Leonard Sweet would remind us that the church must not merely explain the story; it must become a sign of the story. Our faith witness requires the courage to remain open, truthful, and undefended in spaces where shame and fear often rule. Stephen's witness is holy vulnerability under fire, and Peter's living stones are not polished marble; they are redeemed people being built together by mercy.

The comfort Jesus gives is inseparable from the exclusivity and sufficiency of his person. Jesus does not merely show a way; he is the way. Yet Friends would add that this way is not only confessed outwardly but followed inwardly and communally, as the living Christ teaches his people himself.

This is where the "Flow of Holiness" framework helps bring the passages together. Holiness is relational fidelity: God's steadfast presence with us in Christ, and our Spirit-formed responsiveness to God and one another over time.^[13] Psalm 31 shows faithful entrustment. John 14 shows the Son opening communion with the Father. Acts 7 shows holy presence under persecution. 1 Peter 2 shows the community formed into a holy priesthood. The river of living water runs all the way through from refuge in God, to revelation in Jesus, to witness in suffering, to a holy people on mission.

So, the gospel in these verses is not merely "trust," "suffering," "heaven," or "church identity," though all of those are present. The depth is a **holy presence through Christ**. God is our refuge. Jesus is the way to the Father. The Spirit enables witness. The church becomes a living temple. This is the Gospel of God: the holy God does not abandon his creation to darkness, anxiety, violence, or shame. He comes to us in Jesus Christ, brings us into mercy, and forms us into a people who declare his light.

For believers today, this prevents two errors. First, it prevents escape theology. John 14 does not permit us to ignore the world because we have rooms in heaven. It is an assurance that

because Jesus is with the Father, the people of Jesus can live in the world without being mastered by fear. Second, it prevents activist theology without abiding. 1 Peter 2 does not call the church to manufacture relevance. It calls the church to come to Christ, be built together, and then declare the praises of God from the stability of mercy.

In anxious times, we, the church, are tempted to become reactive. We can become people of outrage, fear, nostalgia, or self-protection. But these readings call us back to the center. “Do not let your hearts be troubled” (John 14:1). “Into your hands I commit my spirit” (Ps. 31:5). “Lord Jesus, receive my spirit” (Acts 7:59). “You are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation” (1 Pet. 2:9). These are not separate devotional thoughts. This is one formation path.

The thread that ties us together is this: **the God who was refuge for Israel has revealed himself fully in Jesus Christ, the Son who opens the way to the Father; and through the risen Christ and the Holy Spirit, God now forms a holy people who embody his presence, endure suffering without surrendering to fear, and declare his mercy to the world.**

This helps us read these passages not as separate devotional thoughts, but as one story. That is Scripture interpreting Scripture. That is holiness as the Gospel of God made visible.

Notes

[1] Acts 7:55–60; Psalm 31:1–5, 15–16; 1 Peter 2:2–10; and John 14:1–14.

[2] Paul N. Anderson, “A Theology of Presence,” *Evangelical Friend* 26, no. 6 (July/August 1993). Anderson identifies the healing and saving power of God’s presence as a major theme of Scripture, moving from Eden to Moses to wilderness guidance to Christ and into the life of God’s people.

[3] Anderson, “A Theology of Presence.” Anderson concludes that believers do not merely develop a living theology of presence; by God’s work, they become one.

[4] Alastair J. Roberts, *Self and Leadership: A Summary of and Engagement with Edwin Friedman’s A Failure of Nerve* (2016). Roberts summarizes Friedman’s argument that leadership strength lies in “presence” rather than mere method and that anxious systems require well-differentiated leadership.

[5] N. T. Wright, *Surprised by Hope: Rethinking Heaven, the Resurrection, and the Mission of the Church* (New York: HarperOne, 2008). Wright argues that Scripture is to be read as the story of creation and new creation, covenant and new covenant, in which Christians are called to participate.

[6] Justin Martyr, *First Apology*, chap. 39. Justin connects prophecy, apostolic witness from Jerusalem, enemy-love, truthfulness, and willingness to die confessing Christ.

[7] “St. Irenaeus,” *Catholic Encyclopedia*, New Advent. Irenaeus’ *Against Heresies* is described as a major early Christian refutation of false knowledge and a positive witness to early Christian doctrine.

[8] “Tertullian,” *Catholic Encyclopedia*, New Advent. The article notes Tertullian’s emphasis on martyr courage, victory over temptation, and Scripture’s promises attached to faithful suffering.

[9] Paul N. Anderson, “Primitive Christianity Revived—The Original Quaker Vision,” *Quaker Religious Thought* 131 (2018). Anderson argues that early Friends sought the recovery and restoration of apostolic Christianity rather than the perpetuation of a sectarian movement.

[10] Anderson, “Primitive Christianity Revived.” Anderson notes that the first generations of Friends sought “Basic Christianity” or “Primitive Christianity Revived,” seeking to be “Friends of Jesus.”

[11] Anderson, “Primitive Christianity Revived.” Anderson summarizes the interpretation, developed by Arthur Roberts and Carole Spencer, that early Quakerism was deeply concerned with personal transformation, holiness, and sanctification by the Holy Spirit.

[12] Anderson, “Primitive Christianity Revived.” Anderson notes D. Elton Trueblood’s attention to Barclay and Penn as key interpreters of the central Quaker vision and also cites Trueblood’s distinction between “knowledge about” and living acquaintance.

[13] Paul David Bravard, “Flow of Holiness” ministry and dissertation framework, defining holiness as grace-shaped relational fidelity: God’s steadfast presence with us in Christ and our Spirit-formed responsive presence with God and one another over time.