

Truth for Today

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Peter - the growth of a soul: The Believer

The story of Peter is a remarkable one. Peter was a man of great faith, love, and openness. He was a family man and a man of action. He was not afraid to say what was on his mind or to ask difficult questions. He also made the mistake of being self-confident which led him to deny the Lord he loved. But he also knew what it was to be restored by a resurrected Jesus and to become a remarkable servant of God.

Peter's life is described in graphic detail - in Cromwell's words, "warts and all". During his life, Peter witnessed the testimony, miracles, rejection, sufferings and death of Christ. He was there at the transfiguration (Matthew 17:1-13), and when Jairus' daughter was raised (Mark 5:35-43). He was in the garden of Gethsemane (Matthew 26:36-56). He saw Jesus in resurrection (John 20:1-10) and when He ascended to heaven (Acts 1:9-14). He preached at Pentecost (Acts 2:14-29) and in the house of Cornelius (Acts 10:34-43). He witnessed, taught, wrote, suffered, and was eventually martyred for his faith. It is tradition that he was crucified upside down because he did not feel worthy to die in the same way as Jesus. If this was true, it adds weight to the way the grace of God transformed this lowly fisherman.

We can often look at the outstanding events of Peter's life in isolation but a more careful observation reveals a pattern of growth. The story shows how Christ took this rough, uneducated, headstrong fisherman and made him into a great believer, a great disciple, a great evangelist and a great pastor. The story centres upon Peter's relationship with the Lord Jesus. We shall discover much we can identify with and even more that we can learn from. So, let us look at Peter the believer.

It was Andrew, Peter's brother, who led him to Christ. "[Andrew] first found his own brother Simon, and said to him, 'We have found the Messiah' (which is translated, the Christ). And he brought him to Jesus. Now when Jesus looked at him, He said, 'You are Simon the son of Jonah. You shall be called Cephas' (which is translated, A Stone)" (John 1:41-42).

Andrew brought his brother Peter to Christ. Peter later became a great evangelist. He was able to preach boldly to thousands of people. His brother, Andrew, was good at bringing individuals to Christ. Not only did he bring Peter to Jesus (John 1:41-42) but also the boy whose lunch fed five thousand people (John 6:1-14), and with Philip he was involved in telling Jesus about the Greeks who wanted to see Him (John 12:20-26). A simple brother preaching the Gospel on a rainy night when the expected speaker failed to turn up led Spurgeon to Christ. Spurgeon, in turn, was used to lead thousands to Christ. The work of personal and public evangelism is vital. Andrew started by witnessing at home - the most difficult place to start. But God blessed the way he shared his faith with his brother. Andrew must have been an effective personal evangelist because Peter is led immediately to Christ. This is where Peter starts on the pathway of faith. He was ready to believe. He does not question Andrew's testimony but simply follows his brother to Christ. Perhaps we should pray more that God would prepare the hearts of people to come to Christ so that when they hear the Gospel they are ready to respond to it. In coming to Christ we all need to take those small steps of faith. Small steps of faith lead to big steps of faith, as Peter was to learn.

When Jesus meets Peter, He immediately gives him a new name signifying his potential as a member of the body of Christ. In his first letter Peter writes about Christians being "living stones" built up into a "spiritual house" (1 Peter 2:5). Peter may have been a rough stone but, like the stones in Solomon's temple, the Saviour was about to start the process of shaping him for divine service (1 Kings 6:7). So it is with each one of us.

Peter was first called to Christ and afterwards he was called to be a 'fisher of men'. "And Jesus, walking by the Sea of Galilee, saw two brothers; Simon called Peter, and Andrew his brother, casting a net into the sea; for they were fishermen. Then He said to them, 'Follow Me, and I will make you fishers of men.' They immediately left their nets and followed Him" (Matthew 4:18-20).

This is the first indication of the Peter's future ministry of evangelism. But we must never forget we are first called to Christ before He sends us out in service. The call of Christ was dramatic and it required faith. Peter and Andrew immediately left their nets and followed Jesus. Theirs was a total faith in Christ and a commitment to serve Him. The call to service is a compelling one. The energies devoted to normal occupations are transferred to the furtherance of

the Gospel. They had to follow. Today there is a great need for evangelists who are gifted by God to lead people to Christ. The Lord Himself said, "The harvest truly is plentiful, but the labourers are few. Therefore pray the Lord of the harvest to send out labourers into the harvest" (Luke 10:2). This prayer is as relevant today as ever it was. I grew up in the Hull when it was the greatest fishing port in the country. The trawler skippers were renowned for their knowledge of where to fish in the dangerous Icelandic waters. They would endure all kinds of hardships to bring back the best catch.

Peter's life as a fisherman meant he was used to hard work, difficult circumstances, long hours, disappointment and perseverance. Good training for evangelism! But what an experience when the net is full! Peter later learned that to fish well you needed the guidance of the greatest fisherman of all, Jesus.

Peter exercised faith in being led to Christ and then in following Him into service as an evangelist. But his faith was to be exercised further as we see in Matthew 14:22-33. "Immediately Jesus made His disciples get into the boat and go before Him to the other side, while He sent the multitudes away. And when He had sent the multitudes away, He went up on the mountain by Himself to pray. Now when evening came, He was alone there. But the boat was now in the middle of the sea, tossed by the waves, for the wind was contrary. Now in the fourth watch of the night Jesus went to them, walking on the sea. And when the disciples saw Him walking on the sea, they were troubled, saying, 'It is a ghost!' And they cried out for fear. But immediately Jesus spoke to them, saying, 'Be of good cheer! It is I; do not be afraid.' And Peter answered Him and said, 'Lord, if it is You, command me to come to You on the water.' So He said, 'Come.' And when Peter had come down out of the boat, he walked on the water to go to Jesus. But when he saw that the wind was boisterous, he was afraid; and beginning to sink he cried out, saying, 'Lord, save me!' And immediately Jesus stretched out His hand and caught him, and said to him, 'O you of little faith, why did you doubt?' And when they got into the boat, the wind ceased. Then those who were in the boat came and worshipped Him, saying, 'Truly You are the Son of God.'"

This wonderful passage teaches much about Christ and His disciple Peter. The Lord Jesus always took responsibility for those who came to Him and, despite having had an arduous day, He personally dismisses the multitude. You get a great sense of the service of Christ being marked by gentleness and orderliness, like a true shepherd. He was often observing the multitudes as sheep without a shepherd, He takes responsibility for their welfare. After the crowds are sent quietly away, He climbs the mountain to pray. The practice of being alone in communion with His Father is a vivid aspect of Christ's life. If Christ found it necessary to be alone with God how much we need to cultivate this practice! I am sure He prayed for the multitude as well as His disciples struggling in the boat. Only after praying for them does He go to them walking amidst the storm as the God of creation.

It must have been an amazing sight to see the upholder of the universe walking through the waves He created. The disciples' fear, as they saw this remarkable event, is addressed by the Lord's calming words, "Be of good cheer! It is I; do not be afraid." (Matthew 14:27) He did not simply say, "Do not be afraid but be happy". The Lord's presence not only takes away fear but replaces it with joy. The Lord would ever teach us that in all the storms of life His presence is assured. At first, He does not take the difficult circumstances away but brings Himself into the difficulties. Peter, uniquely, responds to this and becomes the only man other than Christ to walk on water. He exercises faith by asking the Lord to invite him onto the water and Jesus does. The Lord's simple invitation was "Come". Peter then takes the first step and what a step! This required great faith – think of the moment Peter placed his foot on the water amidst the boisterous waves. But his faith was rewarded and, whilst his eye was on the Saviour, he walked safely towards Him. Once his eye moved from the Saviour to the waves he began to sink. Do you recognise the experience? I do!

How often we take our eyes off the Saviour to be submerged beneath the waves of circumstances which so often engulf us and the Lord has to say to us, "O you of little faith, why did you doubt?" (Matthew 14:31) Instead of "Looking unto Jesus the Author and Finisher of our faith" (Hebrews 12:2), we flounder amidst the difficulties of life. When my father was teaching me to ride a bike, he saw that I was constantly looking downwards and losing my balance. He stopped me and said, "Gordon, you will never ride a bike until you learn to look ahead." Moments later I was off! Christianity is the same. We become successful disciples when we learn daily to look up to Christ and follow Him. But even when we fail He will always respond to the cry, "Lord, save me!" (Matthew 14:30) He takes us by the hand and brings us back to safety and brings calmness to our hearts.

Peter the believer was led to Christ for salvation, followed Christ into service and responded to Christ in the storm. Then, at Caesarea Philippi, Peter confesses Jesus as the Son of God. "When Jesus came into the region of Caesarea Philippi, He asked His disciples, saying, 'Who do men say that I, the Son of Man, am?' So they said, 'Some say John the Baptist, some Elijah, and others Jeremiah or one of the prophets.' He said to them, 'But who do you say that I am?' Simon Peter answered and said, 'You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.' Jesus answered and said to him, 'Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jonah, for flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but My Father who is in heaven. And I also say to you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build My church, and the gates of Hades shall not prevail against it. And I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth will be

bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.' Then He commanded His disciples that they should tell no one that He was Jesus the Christ" (Matthew 16:13-20).

Caesarea Philippi was a monument to two important men, Caesar and Philip the tetrarch, who enlarged the city in honour of Caesar. As the Lord looked upon this city built to the glory of men, He asks His disciples what men thought of Him. The disciples had a few suggestions. But then Jesus asks a more personal question, "But who do you say that I am?" (Matthew 16:15) Peter responds immediately from a heart touched by God the Father, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God." (Matthew 16:16)

Of course, it is not Peter, but Christ, who is the Rock upon which His Church is built. Ephesians 2:20 confirms this vital point and also teaches that Peter, and the other apostles and New Testament prophets, had a foundational ministry. Indeed, it has been suggested that Peter uses the "keys of the kingdom" when he preached first to the Jews at Pentecost in Acts 2:14-41 and then to the Gentiles in the house of Cornelius in Acts 10:34-43. He was certainly instrumental in bringing both Jew and Gentile to Christ. But the great theme of the verses is that Christ is the Son of the Living God who alone builds His Church made up of living stones. These living stones are people who, like Peter, confess Christ to the glory of God the Father. This is a fulfilment in the hearts and lives of Christians of what will be a universal confession, read Philippians 2:9-11. Perhaps we do not understand how much it means to the heart of God the Father for His Son to be enthroned in the hearts of Christians in a world where the Son of God is rejected and man is glorified. What a wonderful thing to say that Jesus is the Son of the Living God.

If Peter the believer had been led to confess Jesus as the Son of God he was also privileged to see Jesus in glory on the mount of transfiguration (Matthew 17:1-13; Luke 9:28-36). It was an experience Peter clearly remembered all his life (2 Peter 1:16-18).

"Now it came to pass, about eight days after these sayings, that He took Peter, John, and James and went up on the mountain to pray. As He prayed, the appearance of His face was altered, and His robe became white and glistening. And behold, two men talked with Him, who were Moses and Elijah, who appeared in glory and spoke of His decease which He was about to accomplish at Jerusalem. But Peter and those with him were heavy with sleep; and when they were fully awake, they saw His glory and the two men who stood with Him. Then it happened, as they were parting from Him, that Peter said to Jesus, 'Master, it is good for us to be here; and let us make three tabernacles: one for You, one for Moses, and one for Elijah' - not knowing what he said. While he was saying this, a cloud came and overshadowed them; and they were fearful as they entered the cloud. And a voice came out of the cloud, saying, 'This is My beloved Son. Hear Him!' When the voice had ceased, Jesus was found alone. But they kept quiet, and told no one in those days any of the things they had seen" (Luke 9:28-36).

Peter, James and John were chosen by the Lord to be with Him on special occasions. They witnessed the raising of Jairus' daughter (Mark 5:35-43) and the agony of Christ in the Garden of Gethsemane (Matthew 26:36-56). On the mount of transfiguration, (Luke 9:28-36) Jesus appears before them with Moses and Elijah. These two key men of the Old Testament are interesting. They represent the Law and the Prophets. On the road to Emmaus in Luke 24:13-35, Jesus expounds "the things concerning Himself" (Luke 24:27) in the Law and Prophets. Moses, the giver of the Law, died and was buried by God, as we read in Deuteronomy 34:5-6. Elijah, the great prophet, did not die but was taken by God into heaven (2 Kings 2:11). He was raptured. Moses was not allowed to enter the Promised Land, only to see it from Mount Nebo, in Jordan (Deuteronomy 34:1-5). But in this story, by grace, he stands on another mountain inside Israel. The conversation focuses on the death of Christ to be accomplished at Jerusalem. The scene is one in which Christ is the centre and the Law and Prophets witness to His deity and His work of redemption. The disciples, awaking from sleep, see Christ's glory and Moses and Elijah departing. Peter, feeling the need to do something, suggests making tabernacles for Moses and Elijah and the Lord. Here God the Father intervenes in a cloud of glory. In spite of the greatness of the Old Testament saints, Christ is uniquely the Son of God and object the Father's love and pleasure.

It is interesting that when Moses built the tabernacle at the end of Exodus and God's glory filled it, that Moses could not enter it (Exodus 40:35). When Solomon completed his temple the same glory filled it and the priests could not continue ministering because of the cloud (2 Chronicles 5:14). On the mount of transfiguration, however, the lowly disciples through the presence and grace of Christ enter the cloud and the presence of God. The Law could never bring us to God. Only Christ the Son of God and the Redeemer can bring us into a place of nearness. "You who once were afar off have been brought near by the blood of Christ" (Ephesians 2:13).

Peter's experience on the mount of transfiguration never left him. Although he had been overcome by sleep, his subsequent experience marked his faith to the end of his life. He writes, "For He [Jesus] received from God the Father honour and glory when such a voice came to Him from the Excellent Glory: 'This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased.' And we heard this voice which came from heaven when we were with Him on the holy mountain" (2 Peter 1:17-18).

This morning we have explored the faith of Peter rather than his faults, of which there were many. In the forthcoming weeks we shall look at him as a disciple, an evangelist and finally as a pastor. But the foundation of all Peter's service to God was his simple faith in Christ. It was a relationship in which he was always honest and open even though he made considerable errors. But Peter had a childlike trust which enabled the Lord to transform him into a great servant of God. Above all the disciples he was the first to step out in faith whether in the sea or on the mountain. He had the faith of which the Lord said, "And I have prayed for you, that your faith should not fail; and when you have returned to Me, strengthen your brethren" (Luke 22:32). The Lord saw when he first met Peter what he could become through His grace. He sees the same in each one of us.

Peter wrote in his first letter "...that you may grow..." (1 Peter 2:2). The Lord Jesus wants us "to grow up... into Him" (Ephesians 4:15). Growth is sometimes a painful experience but it is an essential one. Peter's story is about the growth of a soul. He grew because he learnt from the last recorded words of the Lord Jesus spoken to him: "...you follow Me." The Spirit of God has recorded the life of Peter so that the Lord Jesus might speak directly to each one of us: "You follow Me." The challenge this morning is to listen and to respond! Get ready to step on the water!!

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