

Truth for Today

The Bible Explained

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Problems Christians Face: Peter - Dealing with self

The phrase “warts and all” is said to derive from Oliver Cromwell's instructions to the painter Sir Peter Lely, about his painting of Cromwell's portrait, when he was Lord Protector of England. We can never be certain Cromwell actually used the words, “warts and all” but the phrase has entered our language as shorthand for presenting things truthfully and not hiding unattractive details.

God does this in the Bible when he unfolds the lives of great men and women of faith. He doesn't hide from us the frailties and failings of His people. We only have to look at the experiences of men like Abraham, Jacob, Moses and David in the Old Testament. And, when we come to the New Testament, there is one disciple of Jesus Christ whose life is completely exposed - Peter.

This morning we going start a new series entitled, “Problems Christians Face”. Our first character is Peter and our subject is “Dealing with self”.

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. But he was a very self-confident man and this self-confidence ultimately led him to deny the Lord he loved. Praise God, he also knew what it was to be restored by the resurrected Jesus and to become a remarkable servant of God.

Peter's story shows how Christ took this rough, uneducated and headstrong man and made him into a great believer, a great disciple, a great evangelist and a great pastor.

However, during his relationship with Jesus, Peter was engaged in a great battle - a battle with himself. I don't think, at the time, he understood that he was in this battle but Jesus makes it clear when prophesies how Peter would deny Him in Luke 22:31-34.

Peter is used by God to make us aware that there is something fundamental in each of us that has to be dealt with. That thing is self. What is particularly striking about Peter is that, although he often had remarkable spiritual insight and genuine love for the Saviour, his experience and attributes appeared to fuel his self-confidence. This in turn led him into a bitter understanding of what self is really like and thankfully to a wonderful transformation.

I would like to look at the key steps in Peter's discipleship and highlight the occasions which led to his profound understanding of the self and how it is overcome.

It was Andrew, Peter's brother, who led him to Christ. *“He [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).

This is where Peter starts on the pathway of faith in Christ. 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.

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”* (see 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. So it is with each one of us.

When Peter was brought to Jesus, at the beginning of John's Gospel, he doesn't speak. Rather than being a leader he is led by his brother, Andrew. Afterwards, when Jesus calls Peter to follow him, we begin to get an understanding of Peter's character.

We learn straightaway that Peter was never afraid of questioning the Lord Jesus or giving his opinion. In Luke 5:1-11 his confidence as a fisherman of considerable experience, explains why he said to the Lord Jesus, *"We have toiled all night and caught nothing"* (Luke 5:5). Peter's instinct was that he knew better than the Lord. But he does obey the Lord's command and says, *"Nevertheless at Your word I will let down the net"* (Luke 5:5). We are sometimes like this in our relationship with the Lord. We think we know better than the Lord in those areas in which we have experience. Sometimes we even think we know better in areas in which we have no experience! It is a great step forward when we realise that there are no areas in our lives where this is the case and we being to trust God completely.

After obeying the Lord's command the fisherman struggle to land the great the catch Jesus provided (Luke 5:6). They discovered that Jesus knew exactly where the fish where. The miracle produced a complete change of heart in Peter and he exclaims, *"Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord!"* (Luke 5:8). In an instant, Peter had the faith to recognise who Jesus was, and at the same time, to recognise his own sinfulness and unworthiness. It was a powerful lesson yet one he gradually appears to forget over the course of his discipleship. Beginning well in following the Lord Jesus is not a guarantee that we will continue along the pathway of faith. We need above all to stay close to the Saviour.

Let's turn now to 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.'"*

The Lord Jesus always took responsibility for those who came to Him and, despite having had an arduous day, He personally dismisses the multitude (Matthew 14:23). You get a great sense of the service of Christ being marked by gentleness and orderliness. After the crowds are sent quietly away, Jesus climbs the mountain to pray (Matthew 14:23). 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 in prayer how much we need to cultivate this practice! I am sure that He prayed for the multitude as well and 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 (Matthew 14:25). It must have been an amazing sight to see the Upholder of the universe walking through the waves He created. The disciples' fear (Matthew 14:26), as they witnessed 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).

The Lord's presence not only takes away fear but also replaces it with joy. The Lord teaches us that His presence is assured in all the storms of life. Interestingly, Jesus does not take the difficult circumstances away but comes Himself into the circumstance we are passing through. Peter, uniquely, responds to this and becomes the only man, other than Jesus Christ to walk on water. He exercises faith by asking the Lord to invite him onto the water (Matthew 14:28) and Jesus does (Matthew 14:29). The Lord's simple invitation was *"Come"* (Matthew 14:29). Peter then takes the first step and what a step! This required great faith. Think of what it must have been like to place his foot on the water amidst the boisterous waves. His faith was rewarded and, whilst his eye was on the Saviour, he walked safely towards Him. But then his eyes move from the Saviour to the waves and he began to sink (Matthew 14:30). Do you recognise the experience? I do! How often we take our eyes off the Saviour to be submerged beneath the waves of difficult 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"* (see Hebrews 12:2) we flounder amidst the difficulties of life.

When my father was teaching me to ride a bike, I was constantly looking downwards and losing my balance. He stopped me and holding the bike steady he said to me, "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 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.

But Matthew 14:22-33 teaches us about Peter's character. He was often the first to act and the first to display great faith. But his faith also faltered when danger made its presence felt and he looked away from Jesus. Peter's belief in himself didn't only make him doubt the Saviour's command to cast the nets but it caused him to fear waves. Self-confidence and self-doubt are two sides of the same coin. We see these features in Peter's experience.

Now let's read about Peter at Caesarea Philippi in Matthew 16:13-20. *"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."*

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 (Matthew 16:13). The disciples had a few suggestions (Matthew 16:14). 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 and then to the Gentiles in the house of Cornelius in Acts 10. 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.

But, in Matthew 16:21-23, after Peter experiences this wonderful spiritual revelation, we also discover further evidence of Peter's tendency to be influenced by his own thoughts and not realise that these can have sometimes have a Satanic influence. *"Then Peter took Him aside and began to rebuke Him, saying, 'Far be it from You, Lord; this shall not happen to You!' But He turned and said to Peter, 'Get behind Me, Satan!'"*

Jesus reveals to His disciples that He would suffer, die and be raised again. Immediately Peter tries to divert Jesus from the pathway of redemption. The Lord Jesus does not hesitate to deal harshly with Peter's unspiritual intervention. The occasion demonstrates Peter's inclination to think he knows better than Christ. He could not accept that the Messiah would suffer and he didn't understand how Christ would bring about salvation. This was a time for Peter to listen and begin to understand the mind of God. Instead Peter tries to deflect Christ from the whole purpose of His coming into the world as the Saviour.

Notice how quickly Peter moves from being given divine revelation from the Father to being described as being under Satanic influence. Satan, from the very beginning of creation, is associated with influencing humankind to think they know better than God (See Genesis 3:1-7). The damage this has caused has been immense and it still lies at the basis of failure in the Christian life. We are all capable of acting as Peter did.

Peter, James and John were chosen by the Lord to be with Him on special occasions. They witnessed the raising of Jarius' daughter (see Mark 5:35-43), and the agony of Christ in the Garden of Gethsemane (see Mark 14:32-42). In Luke 9:28-36 the three friends also witness the transfiguration of Jesus and see Moses and Elijah. These two key men of the Old Testament are interesting. They represent the Law and the Prophets. Later on the road to Emmaus, in Luke 24:13-49, 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 at the end of Deuteronomy (see Deuteronomy 34:1-8). Elijah, the great prophet, did not die but was taken by God into heaven (see 2 Kings 2:1-18). He was raptured. Moses was not allowed to enter the Promised Land, only to see it from Mount Nebo, in Jordan. 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 (Luke 9:31). 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 (Luke 9:32-33).

Peter feels the need to do something and suggests making tabernacles for Moses and Elijah and the Lord (Luke 9:33). Here God the Father intervenes in a cloud of glory (Luke 9:34-35). 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. Once more it was a time for Peter to be quiet and to listen to the Son of God recognise his greatness. Peter again illustrates the change

between his first experience of Christ's greatness when he immediately understood his unworthiness and his growing tendency to feel he should in accordance with his own thoughts.

Happily, Peter's experience on the mount of transfiguration never left him. 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).

In Luke 22:24-28 we learn about the disciples disputing about which of them would be the greatest. It is difficult to think Peter would not be engaged in this conversation. Jesus explains to them that the greatest amongst them would be one who serves. Then he immediately turns to Peter and says, *"Simon, Simon! Indeed, Satan has asked for you, that he may sift you as wheat. But I have prayed for you, that your faith should not fail; and when you have returned to Me, strengthen your brethren."* But he said to Him, *'Lord, I am ready to go with You, both to prison and to death.'* Then He said, *'I tell you, Peter, the rooster shall not crow this day before you will deny three times that you know Me'"* (Luke 22:31-34).

In John 13:37, Peter is so full of self-belief he says to the Lord, *"Lord, why can I not follow You now? I will lay down my life for Your sake."* Astonishingly this is the same expression used by the Lord Jesus, as the Good Shepherd, in John 10:15 *"I lay down My life for the sheep."*

Peter's self-belief was about to lead him into a very dark place. In Matthew 26:69-75, Mark 14:66-72, Luke 22:54-62 and John 18:15-27) the details are given of Peter's denial of Jesus. After his final denial Luke writes, *"Immediately, while he was still speaking, the rooster crowed. And the Lord turned and looked at Peter. Then Peter remembered the word of the Lord, how He had said to him, 'Before the rooster crows, you will deny Me three times.'* So Peter went out and wept bitterly" (Luke 22:60-62).

The only way Peter could be brought to understand how to deal with self was to experience the dark places it takes us. Peter's experience was unique but the lessons it teaches are for us all. What is beautiful about this story is that the Lord, during the torment he was enduring, took the time to look at his dear disciple at the moment of his greatest failure. I believe it was a look of compassion which brought home to Peter the words of Jesus, *"But I have prayed for you..."* (Luke 22:32).

After the resurrection (John 20:1-10), in John 21:1-14, Jesus appears beside the Sea of Tiberias as the disciples, led by Peter, are fishing. Jesus asks them in John 21:5 if they had caught anything. They say, "No". Jesus tells them to cast the net on the right side of the boat and they catch a great number of fish (John 21:6). It is surprising that the catch of fish did not remind Peter of the day when he was called by Jesus to be a fisher of men (see Matthew 4:19). It is John who has the insight to realise it was Jesus (John 21:7) and only then does Peter immediately dive into the sea and swim to shore (John 21:7). This is an interesting reaction. Perhaps we might have held back or tried to hide in the background but Peter feels instinctively that he needs to meet Jesus. It teaches us that even when we fail the safest place to be is close to the Saviour and His people.

Eventually the disciples sit around a fire over which the Saviour had prepared a meal (John 21:12-13). The scene is reminiscent in some ways of a fireside where Peter denied Jesus three times. But this fireside is populated by friends and the Saviour wants to teach Peter how to deal with self and be transformed into remarkable pastor (John 21:15-19). After the meal Jesus speaks to Peter, and asks him, *"Simon, son of Jonah, do you love Me more than these?"* (John 21:15). He did this because Peter had said that if the other disciples forsook the Lord he would not (see Matthew 26:33). Peter says *"Yes, Lord; You know that I love You"* (John 21:15). The Lord asks him to *"Feed My lambs"* (John 21:15). The second time the Lord simply asks, *"Simon, son of Jonah, do you love Me?"* (John 21:16). Peter replies, *"Yes, Lord; You know that I love You"* (John 21:16). Jesus then asks him to, *"Tend My sheep"* (John 21:16). The third time Jesus asks Peter, *"Simon, son of Jonah, do you love Me?"* (John 21:17). Peter was affected by this probing question and replies, *"Lord, You know all things; You know that I love You"* (John 21:17). Jesus said to him, *"Feed My sheep"* (John 21:17).

In the first two questions Jesus uses the Greek word *agapaō*, which is used to describe the unconditional love of God. But Peter replies using the Greek word *phileō*, which expresses attachment and affection. Jesus uses the word *phileō* in His last question as does Peter in his reply. But what is most touching is Peter's appeal to the Lord who knows everything. Peter was saying, "Lord you know my history, my terrible failure, you how I trusted in myself and the damage that caused, and you know the desire in my heart to follow you." Peter understood at last what he was naturally and how he needed to find all his resources in the Person of Christ.

The Lord Jesus explains that Peter would be a martyr and be faithful to the Lord to the end of his life and the power of that life would be because from then on he would respond to the Lord's words, *"Follow Me"* (John 21:19).

The journey Peter took is the same for each one of us. It is not journey which undermines our potential as individual Christians but one which connects us to Christ and teaches us the reality of abiding and growing in Him, as Peter expressed in the final words of his second letter, "*Grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ*" (2 Peter 3:18).

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