

Peter, the Apostle – the Unlikely “Rock”

Introduction

Next week, we’re going to begin a journey through the epistles of 1st and 2nd Peter. I’ve always wanted to get to know Peter better—both as a letter, and as the Apostle (the man), so I’m really excited about the coming year. But most of all, I know that the themes of these two letters are themes that the church very much needs to hear today.

So, before we dive into Peter’s first letter, I want to start this morning with a sort of biographical sketch of Peter, the Apostle. Who is the man who writes this letter, and how might this help us to appreciate what he’s written all the more?

I. Childhood and upbringing in Bethsaida

Peter’s hometown, and likely also the place where he was born is the city of Bethsaida on the shores of the Sea of Galilee. (Jn. 1:44) [SEE MAP] Bethsaida means “house of fish” or “fisherman’s house” So, it’s easy to see both from its location on the shores of the lake and from the meaning of its name that the main livelihood in this city was fishing. Peter’s father’s name was Jonah (Mat. 16:17; cf. Jn. 1:42), and Jonah was almost certainly a fisherman. Of course, growing up in Galilee meant that you would learn to speak with what the sophisticated southerners in Judea would call the very “*unsophisticated*” accent of a northerner. It would seem that this accent stayed with Peter throughout his entire life, and was always a sure give-away of where he was from. (Mat. 26:73; Mk. 14:70; Acts 2:7)

When Peter was born, Jonah and his wife named him Simeon. (cf. Acts 15:14; 2 Pet. 1:1) He also had a brother named Andrew. Simeon was a very solid Hebrew name. We remember the Simeon who took Jesus in his arms when He was a baby and blessed the Lord (Luke 2:25-28), but we especially remember Simeon as the second son of Jacob and the father of one of the twelve tribes of Israel. (cf. Gen. 29:33) Simeon was a name steeped in the history of God’s people. Perhaps this might give us a little window into the kind of family that Simeon grew up in. The Greek equivalent of Simeon is Simon, and Simon is the name we usually find in the New Testament. But even more telling than Simon’s name is what he says to the Lord when he sees a sheet let down from heaven with all kinds of animals and reptiles and birds of the air, and he’s told to kill and eat. Peter answers: “By no means, Lord; for I have **never** eaten **anything** that is common or unclean.” (Acts 10:14) When we read the sermons Peter preached and the letters he wrote, we see that they’re all literally *filled* with quotations from the Old Testament Scriptures. So, just like Timothy, we assume that Simon was taught the Scriptures from childhood (cf. 2 Tim. 3:14-15) and that he had come to love and believe those Scriptures from an early age.

To sum up, we know that Simon (along with his brother Andrew) was brought up in a God-fearing and faithful fisherman’s family in the Galilean village of Bethsaida on the north shore of the Sea of Galilee.

II. Marriage and business in Capernaum

Eventually, Simon grew up and married and moved about five miles west to the city of Capernaum, another city on the shores of the Sea of Galilee. [SEE MAP in PINK] Compared to Bethsaida, Capernaum was a much larger and more “urban” city. Here, Simon bought a house and lived with his wife, his mother-in-law, and also his brother Andrew. (cf. Mk. 1:21, 29-31) But one thing hadn’t changed. Simon and Andrew were still fishing together, and in fact, they had become partners in the fishing business with two other brothers named James and John, the sons of a man named Zebedee. (cf. Luke 5:9-10) We know that Zebedee was a fairly well-to-do fisherman because he was even able to hire servants to help him and his sons with the business. (cf. Mk. 1:20)

III. Listening to John and meeting Jesus in Judea

For a while, no doubt, it was all “life as usual” for Simon and his fishing partners. And then one day word came of a man who was preaching and baptizing people in the Jordan River further south in the province of Judea. (cf. John 3:22-23) [SEE MAP in YELLOW] It was said that this man (John the Baptist) was announcing that the promised kingdom of heaven was at hand. And so what did Simon and Andrew do – and likely also James and John? They took a break from their fishing (leaving Zebedee with the hired servants) and traveled south to hear this “John the Baptist” preach.

When Simon heard John preach, he knew that this was a true prophet; he recognized that his message was truly the word of the Lord announcing the fulfillment of all the Scriptures that he’d read and loved since childhood. It wasn’t long before Simon and Andrew (and probably also James and John) had become “official” disciples of this preacher in the wilderness. (cf. Jn. 1:35, 40; Acts 1:15-22) But who they were really waiting for and looking for was the Messiah – the one John was announcing. And so we read in John chapter one:

- John 1:35–37, 40–42 — John [the Baptist] was standing with two of his disciples, and he looked at Jesus as he walked by and said, “Behold, the Lamb of God!” The two disciples heard him say this, and they followed Jesus... One of the two who heard John speak and followed Jesus was Andrew, Simon Peter’s brother. He first found his own brother Simon and said to him, “We have found the Messiah” (which means Christ). He brought him to Jesus. Jesus looked at him and said, “You are Simon the son of John. You shall be called Cephas” (which means Peter).

Can you imagine? Here’s someone you’ve never met before identifying you very knowingly as **the son of John/Jonah** and right away(!), immediately(!) assigning you a brand new name. Here’s the man that John the Baptist has just identified as **the Messiah** “looking” at Simon and immediately giving him a brand new name.

“Cephas” is the Aramaic word for “rock” and the actual word that Jesus would have used. In Greek, however, the word for rock is “petra/petros,” and so “*Peter*” is the name we usually hear in the New Testament. But Cephas or Peter really makes no difference, because the main point is what this new name *means*: “You [Simon] shall be called **‘rock.’**” In other words, “You shall be

the “man of rock.” So what in the world will that *mean*? And is “man of rock” *really* a fitting description for Simon, the son of Jonah, the fisherman who grew up in Bethsaida?

IV. Jesus calls Peter in Capernaum

It was only one day after He met Simon Peter that Jesus decided to travel north to Galilee (cf. Jn. 1:43), and so we assume it was also at the same time that Simon and Andrew returned to their home in Capernaum. For a while, they returned to their boats and their nets and their fishing; but because Jesus was also staying in Galilee, they could still take time off from their work to follow Him and listen to Him teach. During this time, no doubt, Simon went on still being called Simon by everyone who knew him, but he wouldn't have forgotten the new name that Jesus had given him in Judea. As he fished and mended nets, and followed Jesus and listened to Him teach, he must have wondered what it would mean.

Then there came a day when Simon was on the shore washing nets, and Jesus came and was teaching the people by the lake, in the same place. Because the crowds were pressing in on Him to hear the word of God, Jesus got into Simon's boat and asked him to put out a little from the land. (cf. Lk. 5:1-3) So we read in Luke chapter five:

- Luke 5:4–11 (cf. Mat. 4:18-20) — When [Jesus] had finished speaking [to the people], he said to Simon, “Put out into the deep and let down your nets for a catch.” And Simon answered, “Master, we toiled all night and took nothing! But at your word I will let down the nets.” And when they had done this, they enclosed a large number of fish, and their nets were breaking. They signaled to their partners in the other boat to come and help them. And they came and filled both the boats, so that they began to sink. But when Simon Peter saw it, he fell down at Jesus' knees, saying, “Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord.” For he and all who were with him were astonished at the catch of fish that they had taken, and so also were James and John, sons of Zebedee, who were partners with Simon. And Jesus said to Simon, “Do not be afraid; from now on you will be catching men.” And when they had brought their boats to land, they left everything and followed him.

In a sense, this is where it *really* all begins. And right here at the beginning we begin to get an intimate glimpse into who Peter was. Notice that they were **all** “astonished” at the catch of fish, but it's **Simon Peter** who's the most demonstrative and vocal of them all. Right away, he **falls down** at Jesus' knees. “**Depart from me,**” he said, “**for I am a sinful man, O Lord.**”

There's never any mistaking what Peter is feeling, or what he's thinking. You can see already that he's a man who lays it all “out there.” But we also see even more evidence of Peter's godly upbringing and his spiritual insight and perceptiveness. Peter sees that when this catch of fish reveals the glory of Jesus, the Messiah, it's also laying bare his own sinfulness and unworthiness in comparison. “Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord.” Would we all have seen the same thing? Would we have had the same spiritual perceptiveness and been made equally as aware of our own sin? So it's to Simon, in particular (apparently representing the others in the boat), that Jesus says: “Do not be afraid; from now on you will be catching men.” And it was from that moment on that Simon “**left everything** [the nets and the boats and the fish] and followed [Jesus].”

V. Peter, the disciple – believing and resisting

It seems very likely that for a large part of Jesus' ministry in Galilee, He actually stayed at Peter's house – along with Peter's wife and mother-in-law, and his brother Andrew. (cf. Mat. 8:14-16) But, of course, Jesus also did a great deal of traveling, and wherever Jesus went Simon Peter and the other disciples followed. As *we* follow *Peter* through the Gospels, we see a picture full of contrasts. On the one hand, Peter continues to show much insight and spiritual discernment. After some of Jesus' harder teachings, when many of His disciples turned away and were no longer following Him, Jesus said to the twelve [in Capernaum]:

- John 6:66–69 — “Do you want to go away as well?” Simon Peter answered him, “Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life, and we have believed, and have come to know, that you are the Holy One of God.”

If you want to understand Peter, then you have to understand these verses. Peter was devoted to Jesus. He was the *spokesperson* for all the rest of the twelve who were also devoted to Jesus. Peter knows that Jesus has the words of eternal life; Peter believes and knows that Jesus is the promised Messiah sent from God. This will never change – not ultimately. And yet for all this, Peter is the one more often chided and rebuked by Jesus for his lack of understanding and his lack of faith than any other of the disciples. Remember the account of when Jesus came to His disciples walking on the water:

- Matthew 14:25–31 (cf. Mat. 15:13-16) — When the disciples saw him walking on the sea, they were terrified, and said, “It is a ghost!” and they cried out in fear. But immediately Jesus spoke to them, saying, “Take heart; it is I. Do not be afraid.” And Peter answered him, “Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water.” He said, “Come.” So Peter got out of the boat and walked on the water and came to Jesus. But when he saw the wind, he was afraid, and beginning to sink he cried out, “Lord, save me.” Jesus immediately reached out his hand and took hold of him, saying to him, “**O you of little faith, why did you doubt?**”

On the one hand, we see that no other disciple asked the Lord to command him to come to Him on the water. On the other hand, we see that for all his faith and boldness, in the actual event, Peter's faith failed. And so the same Jesus who gave Simon the name “Peter” and called him “rock” we now hear rebuking Peter for his doubt and his “little faith.”

In Matthew 16, however, the “old” Peter—*the man of faith*—appears to be back. More than that, Jesus reminds Simon of the name that He gave him at the very beginning in Judea, and then He says something staggering.

- Matthew 16:13–19 — When Jesus came into the district of Caesarea Philippi [SEE MAP], he asked his disciples, “Who do people say that the Son of Man is?” And they said, “Some say John the Baptist, others say Elijah, and others Jeremiah or one of the prophets.” He said to them, “But who do you say that I am?” Simon Peter replied, “You are the Christ [the Messiah], the Son of the living God.” And Jesus answered him, “Blessed are you, Simon [son of] Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father who is in

heaven. And I tell you, you are Peter [rock], and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it.”

There’s a whole lot of debate about these verses, but I think it’s simple and clear enough. Peter *himself* will be a “rock” on which *Jesus* will build *His* church. There’s no support here for any apostolic succession from Peter down through the Roman Catholic Popes. This is simply an announcement of the foundational role that Peter will play as the leader of the Apostles in the establishing of Christ’s church. Jesus isn’t “praising” Peter or puffing him up. Look what He says: “Blessed are you, Simon [son of] Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father who is in heaven. And I tell you, you are Peter [rock], and on this rock I will build my church.” Could there be any announcement more overwhelming, or more humbling, or more “big” than this one? But then we’re brought right back down to earth in the very next verses.

- Matthew 16:21–23 — From that time Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things from the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him, saying, “Far be it from you, Lord! This shall never happen to you.” But he turned and said to Peter, “Get behind me, Satan! You are a hindrance to me. For you are not setting your mind on the things of God, but on the things of man.”

How can the Peter of verses 13-19 also be the Peter of verses 21-23? How can the Peter who’s just shown such spiritual insight and perceptiveness be the same Peter who’s now rebuked by Jesus for taking the part of Satan himself? How can Peter ever really be a rock on which Jesus will build His church? And yet, despite all this, Jesus still includes Peter in that “inner circle” of His disciples (cf. Mk. 5:37; 13:3; 14:33; Mat. 10:2-4; Acts 1:13). In the very next chapter of Matthew, we read in verses 1-4:

- Matthew 17:1–4 — After six days Jesus took with him Peter and James, and John his brother, and led them up a high mountain by themselves [SLIDE; PINK]. And he was transfigured before them, and his face shone like the sun, and his clothes became white as light. And behold, there appeared to them Moses and Elijah, talking with him. And Peter said to Jesus, “Lord, it is good that we are here. If you wish, I will make three tents here, one for you and one for Moses and one for Elijah.”

Peter sees the glory of Jesus and wants it to stay forever. So his “advice” to Jesus is that Jesus should stay here permanently, revealed in all His glory as Israel’s King and Messiah. It’s really the *same thing* as what just happened when Peter said that Jesus would *never* have to suffer and die. And just like Peter was rebuked then, so now once again, Peter has to be rebuked. Luke says that Peter didn’t know what he was saying. (cf. Lk. 9:33) But the real rebuke seems to come this time from God Himself when He says to Peter and James and John, “This is my Son, my Chosen One; *listen to him!*”

In Peter’s world, the Messiah and glory go together (“It is good that we are here”), but *not* the Messiah and suffering. (“This shall never [be].”) On the night that Jesus was to be betrayed, Jesus poured water into a basin and began to wash the disciples’ feet.

- John 13:6–10 — He came to Simon Peter, who said to him, “Lord, do you wash my feet?” Jesus answered him, “What I am doing you do not understand now, but afterward you will understand.” Peter said to him, “You shall never wash my feet.” Jesus answered him, “If I do not wash you, you have no share with me.” Simon Peter said to him, “Lord, not my feet only but also my hands and my head!”

Maybe the other disciples were thinking the same thing, but only Peter was bold enough to say it: “You shall never wash my feet.” In Peter’s world, the Messiah and lordship go together, but not the Messiah and servanthood – and not the Messiah and suffering. And yet Jesus came precisely to *be* the suffering Servant. He Himself had already told the disciples – He Himself had told Peter:

- Matthew 20:28 — The Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.

And so once again, we find Peter resisting and fighting against and contradicting the very heart of Jesus’ mission. What a “rock” Peter is turning out to be. And yet the Jesus who knew Peter before Peter ever knew Him doesn’t seem to be at all taken off guard by these weaknesses and failings in Peter.

- Luke 22:31–34 (cf. Mat. 26:31-35) — “**Simon, Simon**, behold, Satan demanded to have you, that he might sift you like wheat, but I have prayed for you that your faith may not fail. And when you have turned again, strengthen your brothers.” Peter said to him, “Lord, I am ready to go with you both to prison and to death.” Jesus said, “I tell you, **Peter**, the rooster will not crow this day, until you deny three times that you know me.”

Notice how Jesus starts out by calling him “Simon, Simon.” Where’s the Peter, the “rock”? It’s only when Simon promises to go with Jesus even to prison and to death that Jesus says, “I tell you, **Peter**, the rooster will not crow this day, until you deny three times that you know me.” Where’s the “rock”? “But I have prayed for you,” Jesus says, “that your faith may not fail. And when you have turned again, strengthen your brothers.”

Being told it will happen isn’t quite the same thing as actually seeing it happen.

VI. Peter, the disciple – “sifted like wheat”

- Mark 14:32–42 — They went to a place called Gethsemane. And [Jesus] said to his disciples, “Sit here while I pray.” And he took with him **Peter** and James and John, and began to be greatly distressed and troubled. And he said to them, “My soul is very sorrowful, even to death. Remain here and watch.” And going a little farther, he fell on the ground and prayed that, if it were possible, the hour might pass from him. And he said, “Abba, Father, all things are possible for you. Remove this cup from me. Yet not what I will, but what you will.” And he came and found them sleeping, and he said to **Peter**, “**Simon**, are you asleep? Could you not watch one hour? Watch and pray that you may not enter into temptation. The spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak.” And again he went away and prayed, saying the same words. And again he came and found them sleeping, for their eyes were very heavy,

and they did not know what to answer him. And he came the third time and said to them, “Are you still sleeping and taking your rest? It is enough; the hour has come. The Son of Man is betrayed into the hands of sinners. Rise, let us be going; see, my betrayer is at hand.”

When it came to watching with Jesus, and praying, Peter failed. But when the men came to arrest Jesus, Peter was determined to do better.

- John 18:10–11 — Then Simon Peter, having a sword, drew it and struck the high priest’s servant and cut off his right ear... Jesus said to Peter, “Put your sword into its sheath; shall I not drink the cup that the Father has given me?”

Peter would gladly have given his life fighting for Jesus, but for all his devotion, all he earned was yet another rebuke from Jesus. Peter would gladly have died fighting for Jesus, but now Jesus was willingly, without any kind of resistance at all, going to His death. So Peter fled. And then, sufficiently mastering his fear, he dared to follow Jesus into the courtyard of the High Priest where Jesus was being held.

- Matthew 26:69–75 & Luke 22:61a — A servant girl came up to him and said, “You also were with Jesus the Galilean.” But he denied it before them all, saying, “I do not know what you mean.” And when he went out to the entrance, another servant girl saw him, and she said to the bystanders, “This man was with Jesus of Nazareth.” And again he denied it with an oath: “I do not know the man.” After a little while the bystanders came up and said to Peter, “Certainly you too are one of them, for your accent betrays you.” Then he began to invoke a curse on himself and to swear, “I do not know the man.” And immediately the rooster crowed. And the Lord turned and looked at Peter. And Peter remembered the saying of Jesus, “Before the rooster crows, you will deny me three times.” And he went out and wept bitterly.

I wonder if Peter was remembering the first time Jesus ever looked at him and said, “You are Simon the son of John. You shall be called Cephas [rock]” For all of Peter’s many confessions of faith and devotion and allegiance, *in the end*, he had failed utterly. Where was the “rock”? Where was the man that Jesus had called “Cephas” – “Peter” – “rock”?

VII. Peter, the disciple – restored and commissioned

Passing by those dark, dark days when Jesus was crucified and his body laid in the grave, we come to the day when the women came and found the stone rolled away from the tomb and an angel sitting inside. Listen to what the angel said to the women:

- Mark 16:6–7 (cf. Luke 24:12) — “Do not be alarmed. You seek Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He has risen; he is not here. See the place where they laid him. But go, tell his disciples *and Peter* that he is going before you to Galilee. There you will see him, just as he told you.”

When the women went and told these words to the disciples, they seemed to them like an idle tale. But there were two disciples who ran to the tomb to see for themselves. Peter was one of them.

- Luke 24:12 (cf. Jn. 20:3-6) — Peter rose and ran to the tomb; stooping and looking in, he saw the linen cloths by themselves; and he went home marveling at what had happened.

We have no idea *when* it happened or any of the details of *what* happened, but in Luke’s Gospel we learn that before Jesus appeared to the disciples all together, He came *first* to Peter, and appeared to him, *alone*. (cf. Luke 24:34) Peter, the failed “rock,” the one who even denied that he knew who Jesus was, has not been forgotten, or cast off by Jesus. Remember the words of Jesus: “But I have prayed for you that your faith may not fail. And when you have turned again, strengthen your brothers.”

But the disciples are still really confused. Peter is still confused. And certainly he feels still very deeply the failure that he’s been. So what are they supposed to do now?—The only other thing they know – and that’s fishing.

- John 21:2–12, 15a — Simon Peter, Thomas (called the Twin), Nathanael of Cana in Galilee, the sons of Zebedee, and two others of his disciples were together. Simon Peter said to them, “I am going fishing.” They said to him, “We will go with you.” They went out and got into the boat, but that night they caught nothing. Just as day was breaking, Jesus stood on the shore; yet the disciples did not know that it was Jesus. Jesus said to them, “Children, do you have any fish?” They answered him, “No.” He said to them, “Cast the net on the right side of the boat, and you will find some.” So they cast it, and now they were not able to haul it in, because of the quantity of fish. That disciple whom Jesus loved therefore said to Peter, “It is the Lord!” When Simon Peter heard that it was the Lord, he put on his outer garment, for he was stripped for work, and threw himself into the sea. The other disciples came in the boat, dragging the net full of fish, for they were not far from the land, but about a hundred yards off. When they got out on land, they saw a charcoal fire in place, with fish laid out on it, and bread. Jesus said to them, “Bring some of the fish that you have just caught.” So Simon Peter went aboard and hauled the net ashore, full of large fish, 153 of them. And although there were so many, the net was not torn. Jesus said to them, “Come and have breakfast.” ... When they had finished breakfast, Jesus said to Simon Peter, “Simon, son of John, do you love me more than these?”

How can Peter not remember what he said to Jesus the very night of his betrayal:

- Mark 14:29 — Peter said to him, “Even though *they* all fall away, *I* will not.”

In other words, “Even if *they* will not love you to the end, *I will always love you.*” So, what does Peter say now? “Simon, son of John, do you love me more than these?” Simon had not wanted a Messiah who would be a suffering servant. So, what does Simon say now? Is he ready to love Jesus as He is, and not as he had wished him to be? (cf. Morris)

- John 21:15b —He said to him, “Yes, Lord; you know that I love you.”

Notice that Peter drops the comparison. He doesn’t say, “you know that I love you more than these,” but just, “yes, Lord; *you* know that I love you.” Peter isn’t in any position to argue from

his past good record. All he can do is appeal to Jesus Himself, who knows all that is in him. “Yes, Lord; *you* know that I love you.”

- John 21:15c — [Jesus] said to [Peter], “Feed my lambs.”

Remember the day in Caesarea Philippi when Jesus said to Simon, “You are Peter [rock], and on this rock I will build my church.” Now Jesus comes to Peter after all his resistance, and all his denials, and his final failure and commissions *him*—**PETER**—to feed and shepherd His sheep.

- John 21:16–17a — He said to him a second time, “Simon, son of John, do you love me?” He said to him, “Yes, Lord; you know that I love you.” He said to him, “Tend my sheep.” He said to him the third time, “Simon, son of John, do you love me?” Peter was grieved because he said to him the third time, “Do you love me?” and he said to him, “Lord, you know everything; you know that I love you.”

Why was Peter grieved? Because Jesus said to him the *third* time, “Do you love me?” In other words, Peter is grieved because he knows that just days ago, he had *three times* denied that he even *knew* Jesus. And yet in the midst of Peter’s grief, Jesus says to Peter the third time:

- John 21:17b–19 — “Feed my sheep. Truly, truly, I say to you, when you were young, you used to dress yourself and walk wherever you wanted, but when you are old, you will stretch out your hands, and another will dress you and carry you where you do not want to go.” (This he said to show by what kind of death he was to glorify God.) And after saying this he said to him, “Follow me.”

Conclusion

The Peter for whom the **Messiah** and **servanthood**—the **Messiah** and **suffering**—could *not* possibly go together will one day give his own life for Jesus’ sake, and for the sake of all His sheep. We’ll come back to this next week, when we finish the story of Peter. But for right now, we remember the day on the shores of Galilee when Jesus first said to Peter and his brother Andrew, “Follow me.” (cf. Mat. 4:18-19) Now, some three years later, and after all that’s happened, what does Jesus say to Peter *again*? “Follow me.” *This* is the Peter who writes the letter in the Bible that we’ll be studying in the coming year.

Now, none of us will ever be the Apostle Peter. That’s not who Jesus has called us to be. But He has called us **all as His disciples to love Him** and to **follow Him** in the path of servanthood, and self-denial, and suffering. If Jesus were to look into your eyes or my eyes today, and ask, “Do you love me?” what would we say? Will we follow Him where He leads on the path that He walked?

No matter what our past failures or future failures may be, Jesus is gentle and compassionate and ready to restore when we turn again. *Can we* say to Jesus today, in all humility and dependence **on Him**, “Yes, Lord; You know that I love you”?