

1 and 2 PETER



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1 CHAPTER

Meet the Author: Peter

The letters of Peter were written by a prominent disciple of Jesus¹ who became a significant leader in early Christianity. We probably know more about Peter than any of the other disciples—both positive and negative. It is not surprising that we know a lot of good things about such a very prominent leader among the earliest followers of Jesus. After all, positive stories are usually circulated about the prominent leaders of groups. So when you think about it, it is remarkable how many *negative* things we know about Peter given his leadership role.

As we review some of the major incidents in the New Testament that involve Peter to better understand his letters, we will discover anew that Peter was a person who made mistakes and was forgiven by his Lord. Peter, then, is somebody not unlike us when it comes to mistakes, and he can show us what it really means to be a true follower of Jesus in an imperfect world.

“Depart from me; for I am a sinful man” (Luke 5:1-11)

When we first meet Peter in the Gospels, he is working as a fisherman in the northern parts of the lake of Gennaserat (Luke 5:1; this lake is also known as the Sea of Galilee, e.g., Matthew 4:18). He worked with his brother, Andrew (Matthew 4:18), in partnership with James and John, the sons of Zebedee (Luke 5:10).

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Peter was originally from Bethsaida, a small fishing village on the northern shores of Lake Gennaserat (John 1:44). By the time Jesus moved to Capernaum at the beginning of His public ministry (Matthew 4:12, 13; Luke 4:31), Peter was apparently spending much of his time there (e.g., Matthew 17:24; the village where his mother-in-law lived, Luke 4:31, 38, 39). Like Bethsaida, Capernaum was a small fishing village. Its mainly one-story, stone-walled houses were spread along the lakeshore, where there was a seawall and paved promenade. There were several piers against which boats could be moored. In the time of Jesus there were between eight hundred and fifteen hundred inhabitants.²

Luke 5:1–11 records the dramatic occurrences surrounding the moment Peter accepted Jesus' call to become His disciple. Along the lakeshore between Capernaum and Bethsaida there are a number of inlets that are shaped like natural amphitheaters, and apparently Peter and the others had chosen such an inlet to bring their boats ashore after an unsuccessful night's fishing. A large crowd had gathered around Jesus, and He asked Peter to move the boat a little way from the shore so that He could speak to the crowds more easily. The natural shape of the shoreline would enable His voice to carry.

After Jesus finished speaking, He asked Peter to go out again into deep water to lower the nets. Peter explained that they had been doing this all night without result, but that because Jesus said to do so, they would do it. They caught so many fish they needed help to bring them to shore. Peter's response was to fall down at Jesus' knees and say, "Depart from me; for I am a sinful man, O Lord" (verse 8, KJV). Jesus responded by reassuring Peter, "Do not be afraid; from now on you will be catching people" (verse 10, NRSV). As a result of hearing Jesus' teaching, seeing the miracle of the fish, and hearing the words, "Follow me, and I will make you fishers of men" (Matthew 4:19, KJV), Peter, Andrew, James, and John left everything behind and followed Jesus—including their equipment and the miraculous catch of fish. If nothing else, this shows the life-changing effect that Jesus had on those with whom He came in contact.

Peter went on to become one of Jesus' closest disciples. For

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example, only Peter, James, and John were present when Jesus brought a dead girl back to life (Luke 8:49–59), only they accompanied Jesus to the Mount of Transfiguration (Luke 9:28–36), and they went farther than the other disciples with Him into the Garden of Gethsemane the night He was betrayed (Mark 14:32, 33). Peter usually acted as a spokesperson for the disciples, and in Matthew, the list of the twelve disciples is headed by “first Simon, who is called Peter” (Matthew 10:2).

Confessing Jesus as the Christ (Matthew 16:13-23)

Matthew 16:13–23, Mark 8:27–30, and Luke 9:18–20 all recount the incident when Jesus asked “Who do the crowds say that I am?” The disciples answered that He was called John the Baptist or Elijah. When Jesus asked, “But who do you say that I am?” Peter answered, “The Christ [Messiah] of God.” This is where the story finishes in both Mark and Luke. Matthew seems to have a special interest in Peter, who includes several sayings and even whole stories about Peter that are only found in his Gospel. One place where he does this is Matthew 16:17–23, which provides more details about what happened, including the very famous response that Jesus made to Peter’s words, “You are Peter [Greek *Petros*], and on this rock [Greek *petra*] I will build my church” (Matthew 16:18, NRSV). Jesus even goes on to say to Peter, “I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth will have been bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will have been loosed in heaven.”³

These words were used by the medieval papacy to assert their right to lock the kingdom of heaven against those whom they excommunicated. Luther took exception to this interpretation, and debate has raged as to the meaning of these words to this day. Some scholars wish to see Peter as the chief rabbi and understand these words as giving him authority to interpret the law for early Christianity. Others point out that what is said of Peter here is also said of the whole Christian community in Matthew 18:18 and conclude that Peter is portrayed in the Gospel of Matthew as nothing more than an ideal disciple.⁴ It will not be possible to explore all the arguments here,⁵ but three observations may be made:

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1. Jesus' approval of Peter is bound up with his confession that Jesus is the Messiah. But Peter and Jesus have different conceptions of the Messiah. For Jesus, the Messiah will suffer and die (Matthew 16:21), yet Peter would not hear of it (verse 22). Jesus was so concerned about this response He said to Peter, "Get behind me, Satan!" (verse 23, NRSV). From this it is clear that Jesus' affirmation of Peter is conditional on him understanding that Jesus is the Messiah who suffers.
2. When Peter (and the community) bind or loose on earth, they are only making real something that has already happened in heaven (notice the tense, "will have bound . . . will have loosed"). It is not Peter who is shutting up heaven, but Peter reflecting on earth a decision that has already been made in heaven.
3. Peter does have the authority of a leader in the early church, but this authority flows from the fact that he is a follower of Jesus. Peter is, in this way, the ideal disciple, the spokesman of the disciples, and an example to all Christians, at least as long as he is following his Lord.

Walking on water (Matthew 14:22-33)

The story of Jesus walking on the water to join His disciples in their boat while caught in a storm is recounted in three of the four Gospels (Matthew 14:22–33; Mark 6:45–52; John 6:15–21). Only Matthew records Peter's request to Jesus that he come join Him on the water (Matthew 14:28–33). Jesus replied, "Come," and Peter stepped out onto the water and started walking toward Jesus. "But when he noticed the strong wind, he became frightened, and beginning to sink, he cried out, 'Lord, save me!'" (Matthew 14:30, NRSV). Jesus rescues Peter, and on their joining the rest of the disciples in the boat, the storm immediately ceased, whereupon the disciples worshiped Jesus, saying, "Truly you are the Son of God" (verse 33, NRSV).

In this story Peter is able to perform an amazing feat—walking on water. But he can do this only while his eyes are fixed on Jesus. As soon as his attention wanders from Jesus, he begins

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to sink. As Ellen G. White says, “When trouble comes upon us, how often we are like Peter! We look upon the waves, instead of keeping our eyes fixed upon the Saviour.”⁶

Denying his Lord (Luke 22:31-33; 22:54-62)

All four Gospels record that Peter denied Jesus. The story they recount is this: Following the arrest of Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane, all but two of the disciples fled. A combination of loyalty and courage led Peter and John to separately follow Jesus (John 18:15, 16). Who knows what was going through Peter’s head? But given his impetuosity, he may have been looking for an opportunity to rescue Jesus, or at least find out what was happening to Him. Well aware of the danger, he decided to keep a low profile, and when accused of being a follower of Jesus, he denied it on three separate occasions (Luke 22:54–62). At that moment Jesus turned and looked at Peter, and Peter remembered what Jesus had told him earlier, “ ‘Before the cock crows today, you will deny me three times.’ And he went out and wept bitterly” (verses 61, 62, NRSV).

Two of the disciples denied Jesus that night—Judas Iscariot and Peter. Judas tried to undo the evil he had done, and when he could not, he committed suicide (Matthew 27:3–10). Peter was sorry for what he had done, but he clung to Jesus’ assurance that Jesus Himself had prayed for him. Peter was able to repent and go on to meet the risen Jesus. During that meeting Jesus gave Peter opportunity to express his love three times (John 21:15–23).⁷

Early church leader (Acts 2-11; Galatians 1:18, 19; 2:9, 11-14)

Peter’s prominent role in the early Christian church is revealed by how frequently his name appears in the early chapters of Acts. After the Holy Spirit descended on the disciples, it was Peter who gave the first public speech/sermon about Jesus (Acts 2:1–36, esp. verse 14). As a result of this speech, about three thousand believers were “added” to the number who followed Jesus (verse 41). It was Peter (and John) who healed the crippled beggar (Acts 3:1–8), and again, Peter preached publically in the temple (verses 11–16).

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Later, Peter and John spoke to the rulers, elders, and scribes to defend their actions (Acts 4:1–22). It was Peter who spoke up from prison that they “must obey God rather than any human authority” (Acts 5:29, NRSV). It was Peter who was there when the first Gentiles joined the followers of Jesus (Acts 10:1–48) and who reported back to the rest of the believers that since Gentiles had received the Holy Spirit they should be considered part of the group (Acts 11:1–18). Finally, Paul speaks of Peter when describing his visit to Jerusalem, where he met with James and Cephas (i.e., Peter) and John, “who were acknowledged pillars” (Galatians 2:9).

How knowing about the author helps in understanding 1 and 2 Peter

As we consider 1 and 2 Peter in the following chapters, we will have occasion to look back on what we know about Peter many times. For example:

1. Peter’s status as a prominent disciple of Jesus and early leader of Christianity gives him the authority to write a letter to the Christian communities scattered across Asia Minor. His position also makes it more likely that his letters would be attended to with great interest and is no doubt the reason they were preserved and included in the works of the New Testament.

2. Peter’s background as a Galilean fisherman means we know his primary language (Aramaic) and can deduce much about his education. Like others of his time and place, he would have received some formal instruction at the local synagogue and learned to read from the Hebrew Scriptures.⁸ It is highly unlikely that Peter had a formal introduction to Greek as a youth. While it is possible that Peter was one of those rare individuals who quickly learns a language well enough to pass as a local, it is more likely that his Greek was of a very rough-and-ready nature. Given the very high quality of the Greek in both 1 and 2 Peter, I think it very probable that Peter relied very heavily on his secretaries in polishing his letters (see comments on Silvanus in chapter 2 and in the first footnote of this chapter).

3. In 2 Peter 1:16–18, Peter emphasizes the fact that he was an eyewitness of the majesty of Jesus. In fact, Peter and the other

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disciples were in the front row, as it were, when Jesus was teaching, healing, and talking with others. Peter says many things about Jesus in his letters; and when Peter talks about Jesus, he speaks with the authority of one who knows Him well.

4. When Peter emphasizes the centrality of forgiveness and love in the life of the Christian, we know that he does so because he has experienced the love and forgiveness of Jesus. Peter deserves a good hearing, because when he speaks of the essentials of Christianity, he is speaking of what he knows personally!

Knowing Peter's story provides a very helpful background that gives his writing added credibility and brings understanding to many crucial points.

1. It would be more accurate to say that the letters were "dictated" by Peter, as it was common in the first century to use an amanuensis (secretary) when composing letters. Even Paul did this. I often ask my classes, "Who wrote Romans?" Their answer, "Paul," is technically incorrect, because as Romans 16:22 says, "I Tertius, the writer of this letter, greet you in the Lord." Strictly, then, Tertius "wrote" the letter to the Romans; Paul dictated it to him. Peter would have done the same if he was the author of 1 and 2 Peter. It must be admitted that academics debate whether or not Peter was actually involved in the writing of 1 and 2 Peter, but most conservative scholars consider that Peter the apostle is responsible for 1 Peter. Peter does say, though, in 1 Peter 5:12 that he wrote the letter with the help of Silvanus (or Silas), who was at the very least an amanuensis, but may have given more substantial help in improving the language of the letter. While there are some exceptions (e.g., N. T. Wright, *1 & 2 Peter and Jude* [Downers Grove, IL: IVP Connect, 2012], 5; Richard Bauckham, *Jude–2 Peter*, Word Biblical Commentary, rev. ed. [Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2014], 143–151), many, if not most, conservative scholars would agree with me that 2 Peter also comes from Peter the apostle (e.g., Gene L. Green, *Jude & 2 Peter*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament [Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2008], 139–150; F. D. Nichol, ed., *The Seventh-day Adventist Bible Commentary*, rev. ed. [Washington, DC: Review and Herald®, 1980], 5:185, 186; 7:593). The Greek of both letters is described as very good Greek by ancient and modern readers alike (e.g., it is composed using very long and complex sentences), although the Greek of 2 Peter is slightly different than that of 1 Peter. The thoughts are those of Peter, but how much of the style of the letter should be attributed to him and how much to his amanuensis/helpers is hard to say. We know Peter was a Galilean fisherman who most likely grew up speaking Aramaic, so Greek would be a second language to him, and his Greek may have been

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poor. Yet he is comfortable traveling through the Greek and Latin-speaking parts of the Roman Empire and may have had a natural ear for languages—some people do. Or he may have done what many leaders today do when they are sending out letters that will be read by many people—work closely with others to improve the quality of the writing expressing his thoughts. *The Seventh-day Adventist Bible Commentary* suggests that the differences in the language between 1 and 2 Peter would most likely be attributed to Peter using a different amanuensis for 2 Peter (*The Seventh-day Adventist Bible Commentary* 5:185, 186; cf. a very similar suggestion made by Michael Green, *The Second Epistle General of Peter and the General Epistle of Jude* [Leicester/Grand Rapids, MI: IVP/Eerdmans, 1987], 15, 16).

2. See discussion of what archaeology has revealed about Capernaum in Robert K. McIver, “Archaeology of Galilee,” in Mark Harding and Alana Nobbs, eds., *Content and Setting of the Gospel Tradition* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2010), 9–12.

3. “. . . will have been bound . . . will have been loosed” is my own translation that matches the underlying Greek tense (a future perfect periphrastic for the technically inclined; see list of periphrastic tenses in Robert K. McIver, *Intermediate New Testament Greek Made Easier* [Cooranbong, NSW, Australia: Barnard, 2015], 128, 129; Daniel B. Wallace, *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics* [Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1996], 647–649). The KJV, NKJV, NIV, RSV, and NRSV all translate this as “. . . shall/will be bound . . . shall/will be loosed,” which is a translation that poorly represents the tense of the Greek text reporting the words of Jesus.

4. See the arguments for and against these two positions in Jack Dean Kingsbury, “The Figure of Peter in Matthew’s Gospel as a Theological Problem,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 98 (1979): 67–83. This is an older article but still one of the clearest explanations of the various options that have been argued for the role of Peter as he is portrayed in the Gospel of Matthew.

5. See Robert K. McIver, *Mainstream or Marginal? The Matthean Community in Early Christianity* (Frankfurt am Main, Germany: Lang, 2012), 117–123, for a more detailed (if somewhat technical because it relies on the Greek of the passage and the Hebrew background of some of the terms) examination of the evidence regarding Peter in the Gospel of Matthew.

6. Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press®, 1940), 382. In a famous essay, first published in German in 1948, Günther Bornkamm suggests, “Matthew is not only a hander-on of the narrative, but also its oldest exegete [interpreter], and in fact the first to interpret the journey of the disciples with Jesus in the storm as the stilling of the storm with reference to discipleship, and that means with reference to the little ship of the Church.” “The Stilling of the Storm in Matthew,” in Günther Bornkamm, Gerhard Bath, and Heinz Joachim Held, *Tradition and Interpretation in Matthew* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1963), 55. This article is included in the collection of Bornkamm’s works edited by Werner Zager, *Studien zum Mat-*

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thäus-Evangelium (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener, 2009), 73–78.

7. There is a subtle interplay in these verses between two Greek words for love that are almost synonymous (*agapaō* and *phileō*). In John 21:15, 16, Jesus twice asks Peter “Do you love (*agapaō*) me?” Peter replies, “I love (*philō*) you.” Finally, Jesus asks Peter, “Do you love (*fileis*) me?” (verse 17). Whereupon Peter states again, “I love (*philō*) you.” David Shepherd has argued (successfully I think) that the appearance of *agapaō* in Jesus first two questions points back to the discussion of love in John 13 through 17. Particularly such verses as John 15:13, that there is no greater love (*apapēn*, the noun that corresponds to the verb *agapaō*) than that somebody should lay down their life for their friends. See David Shepherd, “‘Do You Love Me?’ A Narrative-Critical Reappraisal of ἀγαπάω and φιλέω in John 21:15–17,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 129 (2010): 777–792. It seems that even after the lessons of the crucifixion of Jesus, Peter still had things yet to learn!

8. Birger Gerhardsson, *Memory and Manuscript* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1998), 85–92; S. Safrai, “Education and the Study of the Torah,” in S. Safrai and M. Stern, eds., *The Jewish People in the First Century* (Amsterdam: Van Gorcum, 1976), 2:949. Catherine Hezser suggests, “The Jewish schools to which rabbinic sources refer are likely to have taught reading skills only.” *Jewish Literacy in Roman Palestine* (Tübingen, Germany: Mohr Siebeck, 2001), 39.