

Chapter 1

Peter

Two texts from the Bible tell us a great deal about Peter the Impetuous. First, consider the words of Luke 5:8: “Depart from me; for I am a sinful man, O Lord.” Peter spoke these words right after a miraculous catch offish. He fell at the feet of Jesus, displaying his weakness and need. And Jesus assured him that one day he would become a “fisher of men.”

The second text is Matthew 14:28: “Lord, if it be thou, bid me come unto thee on the water.” When Peter spoke these words, he was in a boat during a storm on the Sea of Galilee. Then Peter stepped out of the boat and actually walked on the water. As long as he kept his eyes on Christ, he was fine; but when he took his eyes from the Master, he sank into the waves. Jesus said, “O man of little faith, why do you doubt?”

In these two episodes is revealed a man who was brave yet cowardly, fearless yet fearful, accepting yet rejecting, wise yet foolish; a man of doubt, and a man of faith.

The Bible reveals Simon Peter as a man endowed with a complex set of feelings and emotions. Impetuous, uninhibited, impulsive, he often talked and acted before he thought. He, along with a great many of us, might well have heeded the sign I saw in an office not long ago: “BE SURE THAT BRAIN IS ENGAGED BEFORE PUTTING MOUTH IN GEAR.”

The record of Peter as reported in the New Testament establishes his nature - the only constant about him was his changeableness.

But Simon, though rough and coarse, was in reality a deeply spiritual man. He seems to have been the first of the disciples to recognize Christ as the Son of God. In Mark the eighth chapter when asked about Jesus’ true identity, Peter responded, “Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God.”

“From the first, Peter had believed Jesus to be the Messiah.... He waited not for kingly honors to crown his Lord, but accepted Him in His humiliation. Peter had expressed the faith of the twelve.” - *The Desire of Ages*, pp. 411,412.

Thus it was that whenever one of the disciples would speak, it was more often than not Peter who was doing all the talking. “Lord, are you

telling this parable for us all?” “Lo, we have left everything and followed you.” “Master, look, the fig tree you cursed has withered.” It is no wonder then that Chrysostom (church writer who lived some 300 years later) called Peter “the mouthpiece of the disciples.”

The uninhibited personality, impulsive, guided by feeling, is capable of great heights and great depths. So was Peter. One day he was full of vigor; the next day he was depressed. Ups and downs. Psychologists call this a “mood swing” personality. And Peter was subject to moods. At times Peter was an instrument of God, and at other times a tool of Satan.

Note one passage of Scripture found in Matthew the sixteenth chapter. When Peter confessed that Christ was the Son of God, Jesus responded, “Blessed art thou, Simon... for flesh and blood hath not revealed it unto thee, but my Father which is in heaven.” Verse 17. But just a few moments later, when Jesus was speaking of His imminent death at the hands of the priests and scribes, Peter rebuked Christ. It was then that Jesus said to Peter, “Get thee behind me, Satan: thou art an offense unto me.” Verse 23.

Thus, in a matter of moments, Peter was commended by Jesus as being inspired by God, and then condemned as being used by Satan. What ups and downs!

Then there is the story found in John 13. Peter, at the Last Supper, had refused to allow Christ to wash his feet. But when Jesus told Peter that unless He washed his feet Peter could have no part in His kingdom, Peter exclaimed, “Lord, wash me all over!” One minute Peter would not permit the Master to touch him with even a drop of water; then suddenly he wanted a bath!

Yet with all of Peter’s weaknesses, Jesus characterized him as a rock. He used Peter to preach the gospel and to help establish His church. “Before his fall, Peter was always speaking unadvisedly, from the impulse of the moment. He was always ready to correct others, and to express his mind, before he had a clear comprehension of himself or of what he had to say. But the converted Peter was very different. He retained his former fervor, but the grace of Christ regulated his zeal. He was no longer impetuous, self-confident, and self-exalted, but calm, self-possessed, and teachable.” - *The Desire of Ages*, pp. 812-815.

After his conversion, Peter became a leader in the early church. His sermon was used by God at Pentecost to convert 3000 people in a single day. The birth of the Christian church can be dated from the time of that sermon. Peter was a powerful preacher.

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And he continued to match his words with action. It was Peter who suggested the election of another disciple - Matthias - to take the place of Judas.

It was Peter who clashed with the apostle Paul over the issue of eating with Gentiles. In this case it was a difference of both principles and personalities. And Simon Peter apparently had to back down. In Galatians 2:11 Paul says that he confronted Peter and “withstood him to his face.” Yet Peter and Paul remained friends because of their brotherhood in Christ. This was their common bond.

In Acts the tenth chapter we read of a vision that was given to Peter whereby his concept of the Christian church was enlarged to embrace both Jews and Gentiles. Peter accepted this lesson and added a new dimension to the Christian message. Listen to his clear statement regarding receiving Gentiles into the Christian church: “God hath showed me that I should not call any man common or unclean.... Of a truth I perceive that God is no respecter of persons.” Acts 10:28, 34. Peter had difficulty coming to that conclusion, but he was willing to understand and change.

Peter not only became a church leader, but he became a writer as well. It was Simon who wrote 1 and 2 Peter. And the ideas expressed in these writings are unmistakably from the heart of the big fisherman.

The young Christians were to keep their tongues from evil. 1 Peter 3:10. They were to live, not by the “lusts of the flesh,” but by the will of God. 1 Peter 4:2. They were to resist their “adversary, the devil.” 1 Peter 5:8, 9. Doesn’t that sound like Peter?

These injunctions were born of experience. They were ideas tried in adversity, forged out of conflict.

In addition, the Gospel of Mark, it is believed by some, was dictated to young John Mark by the apostle Peter. See Eusebius, Ecclesiastical History, III, 39.

And this work - was it Peter’s recollections of Jesus? - remains one of the great contributions to the Christian church.

What happened to Peter? How did he ultimately die?

In the Bible we read a prophecy by Christ Himself regarding Peter’s death: “Verily, verily, I say unto thee, when thou wast young, thou girdest thyself, and walkest whither thou wouldest: but when thou shalt be old, thou shalt stretch forth thy hands, and another shall gird thee, and carry thee whither thou wouldest not. This spake he, signifying by what death he should glorify God.” John 21:18, 19.

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After Acts 15, which speaks of the Council of Jerusalem held in A.D. 49, Peter no longer appears.

Peter's ministry does not seem to have been confined to Jerusalem. He took literally his Master's commission to go "to the uttermost parts of the world." Certainly he was a central figure in the young church in Jerusalem, but from there he went to Samaria (Acts 8:14), to Lydda and Joppa (Acts 9:32-43), to Caesarea (Acts 10:1-11:18.)

After his miraculous release from prison he went "to another place." Acts 12:17. This probably means that he had to flee to an area outside the jurisdiction of Herod. His travels took him to Antioch in Syria (Galatians 2:11), and his first letter seems to imply that he visited Asia Minor: "Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia." 1 Peter 1:1. He may also have visited Corinth. 1 Corinthians 1:12. That he took his wife with him on at least some of these missionary journeys seems evident from 1 Corinthians 9:5.

In 1 Peter 5:13, Peter sends greetings to the church from "Babylon," which many scholars take to be a cryptic allusion to Rome. Clement of Rome, an early church leader who wrote in about A.D. 96, seems to imply that both Peter and Paul were martyred in Italy. - Eusebius, Ecclesiastical History, II 25.8.

One legend has it that Peter even visited Britain, although this is highly doubtful and is discredited by most Bible scholars. See Search for the Twelve Apostles, William Steuart McBirnie, pp. 58, 59.

An apocryphal book probably written sometime before A.D. 200, and known as the Acts of Peter, tells how Peter, against his wishes, yielded to his friends and fled from Rome down the Appian Way. On his flight he saw a vision of his Master. Peter fell to the ground, then looking up inquired, "Quo vadis, Domine?" (Where are you going, Master?)

Jesus replied, "To Rome to be crucified anew."

After this vision, Peter is said to have turned back to the city to certain martyrdom.

Though this story is probably fiction, there is a strong tradition that Peter did meet his death on a cross in Rome. He is said to have requested that he be crucified head downward, thinking it too great an honor to meet death in the same way as did Jesus. - Eusebius, Ecclesiastical History, III, 1.2.

Two burial places are claimed for Peter. The first is under the Cathedral of St. Peter in Rome. The second is the Catacombs of St. Sebastian, outside the city on the Appian Way. It has not been

conclusively established which, if either, is actually the place of Peter's burial.

At the ruins of Tell Hum on the north shore of the Sea of Galilee, tourists today can see the results of some archaeological digging that has exposed the ancient city of Capernaum, sometime hometown of Andrew and Peter. There, near the synagogue, guides will point out the octagon-shaped foundation of a building they say was the home of the apostle Peter. Other archaeologists believe this to be the remains of a church that was mentioned by Etheria (A.D. 385) as having been built on the site of Peter's home. This would have been the house Jesus entered at the time He visited Capernaum and healed Peter's mother-in-law. Mark 1:29-37.

Another interesting event that may well have taken place at the home of Peter is mentioned in Mark 2:1-12.

But Peter the Impetuous, the big fisherman, calls to us even now, over the wide space of the years. "Simon Peter, a servant and an apostle of Jesus Christ, to them that have obtained like precious faith with us... add to your faith virtue; and to virtue knowledge; and to knowledge temperance; and to temperance patience; and to patience godliness; and to godliness brotherly kindness; and to brotherly kindness charity. For if these things be in you, and abound, ye shall neither be barren nor unfruitful in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ." 2 Peter 1:1-8.

This ladder led Peter to the discovery of eternal life; and it can do the same for you and me.