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PETER THE MAN

Of the many individuals portrayed in the pages of the Holy Scriptures, the apostle Peter is outstanding. We are drawn to him because he was so typically human, and we can identify with his successes and failures. Peter was the kind of person who had an opinion on every subject and expressed it on every occasion. His forcefulness caused him to appear forward—and even rash.

On the positive side, Peter was eager, energetic, self-confident, daring, aggressive, hopeful, bold, and courageous. But, like most of us, Peter had a negative side to his character. At times before Christ's ascension, Peter was also fickle, weak, impulsive, cowardly, inconsistent, and sometimes unstable.

Who was this man whom the Lord called to be an apostle? Why did he change? What experiences influenced him?

HIS BACKGROUND

NAME AND FAMILY

Although this apostle is known primarily by the name Peter, his given name was Simon, or more properly, Simeon (John

1:40–42). “Simeon” is a Hebrew name, but there is no proof that Peter was a descendant of the tribe of Simeon. Concerning his family, we know only that he was the son of John (John 21:15) and that he had a brother named Andrew (John 1:40). The Bible does not say whether Peter was older or younger than Andrew.

PLACES OF RESIDENCE

The first mention of Peter’s residence appears in John 1:44, where we read: “Now Philip was from Bethsaida, of the city of Andrew and Peter.” Bethsaida is located on the northern shore of the Sea of Galilee. Later, after the Lord called Peter into His service, Peter was residing in Capernaum with Andrew (Mark 1:21, 29).

EDUCATION

The New Testament does not give specific details regarding Peter’s formal education. However, we read in Acts 4:13 that the religious leaders were amazed at the confidence of Peter and John because they were “uneducated and untrained men.” From this, some have concluded that Peter had not received any kind of formal schooling. Such a conclusion misrepresents the statement of the religious leaders and discredits Peter. The real implication of this statement is that Peter and John were unschooled in rabbinical lore, and the religious leaders marveled that Peter and John, being laymen, understood the meaning of the Scriptures they quoted. Peter undoubtedly had received the elementary education given Jewish boys of that day.

OCCUPATION

Like many others reared in a fishing village on the Sea of Galilee, Peter and his brother Andrew were fishermen by trade. Since a boy usually learned the trade of his father, it is reasonable to conclude that Peter’s father was also a fisherman. Peter and Andrew were partners in their business enterprise with a man

named Zebedee and his sons, James and John. The fact that Peter's father is not mentioned in connection with the business may imply that he was deceased (see Luke 5:7; cf. Mark 1:20). Apparently the business was very lucrative since Peter's home in Capernaum was large, accommodating at one time not only his immediate family, but also the Lord and the other disciples (Mark 1:29–34).

MARITAL STATUS

Although very little is known concerning the marital status of the rest of the disciples, there are several references to Peter being married. One of the early miracles of Jesus was the healing of Peter's mother-in-law (Mark 1:29–31). We know that his wife traveled with him in his ministry (1 Cor. 9:5; note that Cephas is the Aramaic form of the name "Peter"). It is possible that she was with Peter in "Babylon" when he wrote 1 Peter. The Greek text simply says, "she at Babylon" (1 Peter 5:13) and probably refers to Peter's wife, who was also sending her greeting.

HIS CALL TO SERVICE

IN BETHANY

When John the Baptist pointed his disciples to Jesus, the one named Andrew immediately went to find his brother Simon. When Jesus met Simon, He said, "You are Simon the son of John; you shall be called Cephas" (John 1:42). The writer of the fourth gospel added the explanatory note that Cephas is translated Peter, which means in Greek *a stone* (from *petros*). Jesus, no doubt, was giving Simon a descriptive title, but the title of "stone" became his personal name. He is the only individual in the New Testament called by this name.

IN CAPERNAUM

While John 1 records the first meeting of the Lord Jesus Christ and Peter, it is doubtful that Peter and the others mentioned

there became His constant companions immediately. They apparently went back to their fishing for a period of time. Later, when the Lord began His ministry in Capernaum, He enlisted His disciples on a permanent basis. We read: “When they had brought their boats to land, they left everything and followed Him” (Luke 5:11; see also Matt. 4:18–22; Mark 1:16–20).

HIS SERVICE UNDER JESUS CHRIST

THE RANKING OF THE DISCIPLES

Whenever the disciples are listed in the New Testament, Simon Peter’s name always appears first (Matt. 10:2–4; Mark 3:16–19; Luke 6:13–16; Acts 1:13). Some reason that this is because Peter was one of the first chosen to follow the Lord. Others believe Peter’s natural aggressiveness marked him out as the leader of the disciples. Peter often spoke on behalf of the disciples, and the Lord occasionally addressed Peter as representing the entire body of disciples. The disciples, however, never conceded the place of leadership to Peter, as evidenced by their continual arguments about greatness (Matt. 20:20–28; Mark 9:33–34; Luke 22:24–27). While Peter’s name appears first in every list, it is clear that the Lord Jesus was the leader of the disciples, each of whom had equally important responsibilities to fulfill.

THE INNER CIRCLE

Among Jesus’ disciples, Peter, James, and John enjoyed a unique position, which has resulted in their being referred to as “the inner circle.” The New Testament does not explain why the Lord permitted only these disciples to share three special experiences. Perhaps it was related to their future ministries.

The first special experience that these three disciples witnessed was the restoration of the daughter of Jairus back to life (Mark 5:37–43; Luke 8:51–56). Only her mother, her father, Peter, James, and John were permitted to view the actual miracle.

The second event took place on the Mount of Transfiguration when Jesus talked with Moses and Elijah concerning His coming death (Matt. 17:1–9; Mark 9:2–9; Luke 9:28–36). Peter was correct in understanding that this event foreshadowed the kingdom of Jesus Christ on earth, and he wanted to enter it immediately. Peter was wrong, however, in his expectation that the kingdom would be established at once.

The third event witnessed by these three took place in the Garden of Gethsemane (Matt. 26:37–46; Mark 14:33–42). There they saw the agony of our Lord as He talked with His heavenly Father concerning the trials before Him. These events undoubtedly made indelible impressions on Peter’s mind and affected his later ministry.

THE GREAT TESTIMONY

Peter made a key statement in response to a question from Jesus: “Who do people say that the Son of man is?” (Matt. 16:13). Various disciples answered, “John the Baptist . . . Elijah . . . Jeremiah, or one of the prophets.” The Lord’s next question was, “But who do you say that I am?” It was Peter who answered, “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God” (vv. 14–16), thereby demonstrating divinely given insight. Most people believed that the Messiah would be a man elevated to the office of Messiah, but Peter’s answer revealed that he believed Jesus was the Messiah and the Son of God.

The Lord’s response to Peter’s confession has been the subject of great debate throughout church history. It is the author’s opinion that Peter is *not* the rock on which the church was to be built. Peter, as well as the other apostles, was one of the foundation stones (Eph. 2:20), but the Christ, as professed by Peter in Matthew 16, is *the* rock (the *petra* in the Greek) on which the church has been built. That Peter (*petros* in the Greek) never considered himself to be the rock, is clear from 1 Peter 2:4–8.

The nature of the “keys” that were given to Peter (Matt. 16:19) has also been the subject of much debate. The “keys” were probably symbols of authority that the apostles possessed relating to the proclamation of the gospel of Jesus Christ. Peter

did not have exclusive possession of this authority (see Matt. 18:18 and John 20:23); rather it was possessed by the entire apostolic band. Peter clearly used his authority in opening the Gospel to the Jews on the day of Pentecost (Acts 2), to the people of Samaria (Acts 8), and to Gentile believers (Acts 10–11).

THE GREAT STUMBLING BLOCK

Shortly after Peter had made the greatest statement in his life, he clearly revealed his fallibility. Matthew 16:21 relates that Jesus began to tell the disciples that He must go to Jerusalem, be killed, and then be raised on the third day. It seems that Peter heard only that Jesus must be killed. Matthew tells us that Peter took the Lord aside and began to rebuke Him saying, “God forbid it, Lord! This shall never happen to You” (v. 22). Peter tried to persuade Jesus from His announced path of suffering and death. The Lord, however, saw in Peter’s action Satan working to keep Him from the cross. He rebuked Peter with the sharp retort, “Get behind Me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to Me” (v. 23).

HIS ACTIVITIES DURING PASSION WEEK

OPENING EVENTS

The Scriptures do not record that Peter was involved in the early events of Passion Week, but it is quite probable he and other disciples were present when Jesus rode into Jerusalem on the colt, when many of them recognized His entry to be the fulfillment of Messianic prophecies in Zechariah 9:9 and Psalm 118:26 (see Luke 19:37–38). They probably saw Him cleanse the temple and listened to Him debate with the Jewish leaders.

THE PASSOVER FEAST

The Lord visited Jerusalem in order to celebrate the Passover feast. According to Luke 22:8, He sent Peter and John to make preparations for the observances of the Passover. This

meant finding the Upper Room where the meal would take place, securing the proper sacrifice, offering the sacrifice in the temple, and preparing the meal for the evening. At dinner, Jesus began to wash the feet of the disciples (John 13:2–20), which was the task of the host. Peter objected, for he felt it was not fitting for him to be served in this way by his Lord. Jesus performed this symbolic act to show the necessity for daily cleansing from sin for the child of God. The Lord told Peter that unless He washed his feet, Peter could not share His blessing. Peter then asked the Lord to wash his hands and head also. But the Lord patiently reminded Peter that he had already bathed and therefore he needed only to wash his feet. The child of God receives a complete “bath” when he comes to know Christ as his Savior. Therefore, he does not need another “bath” when he sins. He needs only to “wash his feet,” that is, to confess his sin and receive forgiveness (cf. 1 John 1:9).

During the Passover feast, it was Peter who prompted John to ask the Lord who would betray Him (John 13:24), and the Lord predicted that Peter would deny Him three times before the cock would crow (John 13:38).

THE GARDEN AND TRIALS

From the Upper Room, the disciples (including Peter) went with Jesus to Gethsemane, where they were privileged to see Him in prayer. When the Roman soldiers, accompanied by Judas, came to arrest the Lord, Peter stepped forward and drew his sword in Christ’s defense (John 18:10). He cut off the ear of Malchus, a servant of the high priest, but the Lord stopped him, touched the ear, and healed the man (Luke 22:51).

When the other disciples fled into the night, Peter and “another disciple” (probably John; [John 18:15]) followed his Master from a distance. Later, as he sat around a campfire, Peter was identified as an associate of the Lord. As had been predicted, Peter then denied Jesus three times. As He was being led from one trial to another, Jesus turned and looked at Peter (Luke 22:61). When Peter met his Master’s gaze, he was filled

with remorse and went out and wept bitterly in deep repentance over his sin.

THE MORNING OF THE RESURRECTION

We do not know whether Peter witnessed the crucifixion of the Lord, for the Scripture is silent on that fact. But we do know he was in Jerusalem on the morning of the Resurrection, since the angel that appeared to the women instructed them to tell Peter that Jesus had arisen (Mark 16:7). When Peter heard the news, he ran with John to the tomb. Peter was the first disciple to enter the tomb and see the grave clothes (John 20:2–8). It has been assumed by many that the Lord appeared to Peter on the day of His resurrection. According to Paul, He appeared to Peter after the Resurrection, before He appeared to the Twelve (1 Cor. 15:5).

HIS MOVEMENT FROM CHRIST'S RESURRECTION TO THE ASCENSION

FISHING IN GALILEE

Some time after the Resurrection, Peter said, "I am going fishing" (John 21:3). In Galilee he was met by the Lord, who gave him a threefold commission to serve Him (John 21:15–23). Following this meeting, Peter returned to Jerusalem.

WAITING IN JERUSALEM

At His last appearance to the disciples, Jesus commanded them to wait in Jerusalem for the baptism of the Holy Spirit (Acts 1:4–5). Peter and the others were privileged to see Him ascend into heaven and heard the promise from the angel that the Lord would return to earth just as He had gone into heaven (Acts 1:11).

While the disciples were waiting, as they had been commanded, Peter urged his brethren to select someone to fill the position vacated by Judas. He pointed out that Judas' denial of

the Lord was a fulfillment of prophecy (Acts 1:15–22). Some expositors have criticized Peter's actions, saying that Paul, not Matthias, was the twelfth apostle. Yet, the term "the Twelve" had become a common designation for the disciples, and it must have been a source of great embarrassment that the Twelve had become eleven. Possibly their opponents made fun of the disciples, emphasizing that there had been a traitor within their ranks. Perhaps Peter wanted to squelch such criticism and make "the Twelve" really twelve again.

HIS MINISTRY IN THE CHURCH

ON THE DAY OF PENTECOST

When the Holy Spirit came upon the disciples on the Day of Pentecost, the disciples began to speak in the languages of the Jews who were gathered from all over the Roman Empire to celebrate the feast (Acts 2:4–11). It was Peter, however, who stood up to deliver what could be called the main address of the day. The theme of his message to the nation of Israel was that Jesus of Nazareth, whom they had crucified, is "both Lord and Christ," that is, the Messiah (Acts 2:36). The only avenue open to the nation was to repent (change their minds) concerning Jesus of Nazareth, and accept Him as their Savior (Acts 2:38–39). The power of the Holy Spirit in the life of Peter and the other disciples was evident on this occasion, for three thousand persons came to know Jesus Christ as Savior that day (Acts 2:41, 47).

IN DEVELOPMENTS IN THE CHURCH

Peter played a central role in the development of the church as recorded in the first portion of Acts. When persecution developed, it was Peter who stood to defend the action that he and the other disciples had taken (Acts 4:1–12, 19–20). When the first serious case of sin entered the church through the deception of Ananias and Sapphira, it was Peter who announced God's judgment on the couple (5:1–11). It was Peter and John who

went to Samaria to check the claim that the Samaritans had received the Word of God (8:14).

In Acts 10 and 11, we read about a most significant event. Peter was shown, through a vision, that foods which had been forbidden as unclean by the Mosaic Law were now permitted. Because of this vision, Peter proclaimed the good news of Jesus Christ to the Gentile Cornelius and to his household. The Holy Spirit fell on Cornelius and his household in Caesarea, just as He had on the disciples in Jerusalem on the day of Pentecost (11:15). From this experience, Peter learned that Gentiles were to be included in the church on an equal basis with Jews.

When the question of Gentile status in the church finally came to a “showdown,” Peter, along with Paul and Barnabas, were there to testify concerning the facts as they knew them (Acts 15:7–12). The Jerusalem council decided that it was unnecessary for Gentiles to become Jews in order to obtain salvation in Jesus Christ.

HIS FINAL YEARS AND DEATH

After Peter’s miraculous deliverance from prison, “he left and went to another place” (Acts 12:17). Exactly where he went has been the subject of speculation throughout church history. Except for his participation in the Jerusalem council (Acts 15), there are no further references in the book of Acts to Peter or his ministry.

Paul mentioned Peter and his travels with his wife in the first letter to the Corinthians (9:5). Galatians 2:7–9 states that Peter carried on a ministry mainly to Jewish believers. He did not minister to Jewish brethren exclusively, however, for Paul noted in this same passage that Peter was guilty of inconsistent conduct (Gal. 2:11–14). Peter apparently had been eating with Gentile Christians and enjoying their fellowship. When Jewish brethren came from James, he refrained from eating with the Gentile Christians and thereby caused a rift. Paul said that he opposed Peter to his face because he was acting wrongly toward the Gentile believers.

Peter probably did not spend much time in Rome. It is

doubtful that he was in Rome before Paul wrote his letter to the Romans. Had Peter been there, surely Paul would have known it and greeted him by name. Many believe that Peter went to Rome about the time of Paul's release from his first Roman imprisonment (about A.D. 62). Whether 1 Peter was actually written from Babylon on the Euphrates River (1 Peter 5:13), or whether Peter was in Rome using the term "Babylon" symbolically has been debated for centuries. (See further discussion in chapter 2.)

Tradition states that Peter was crucified in Rome during the persecutions of Nero sometime late in A.D. 67 or early in A.D. 68, when he was approximately seventy-five years old. Though there is little evidence to support the tradition that he was crucified upside down, this may, in fact, have been the case.

SOME REVIEW QUESTIONS

1. What biographical facts are found in Scripture concerning the man named Peter?
2. When did Peter's relationship with Jesus Christ begin and what special privilege did he have as one of Jesus' disciples?
3. What was the significant testimony that Peter gave concerning the person of Jesus? Did that make Peter "the rock" on which the church has been built?
4. What was Peter's role in the early development of the church? How was he involved in the spread of the Gospel to the Gentiles?
5. What do we know biblically of Peter's final years? According to church tradition, how and when did he die?