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Lesson 1

The Man Peter

The recommended order of study of any book of the Bible is background, survey, and analysis. Background and survey are of an introductory nature. Analysis, which is a careful scrutiny of every part of a particular Bible book, takes up most of one's study of the Bible text.

This lesson is devoted to one phase of the general background of Peter's epistles—that of Peter's biography. Further background and survey of 1 Peter is the subject of Lesson 2. Analysis of the Bible text of 1 Peter follows, beginning with Lesson 3. The same order is followed in the latter half of this manual.

* * *

Peter wrote only two New Testament books. It is interesting to observe that of the notable "triumvirate" of New Testament writers—Paul, apostle of faith; John, apostle of love; and Peter, apostle of hope—the man who does not appear in the gospels (Paul) wrote most of the New Testament books, and the man who is most prominent in the gospels (Peter) wrote the least number of New Testament books.¹

For some Bible books, we cannot be sure of the identity of authorship (e.g., Hebrews). For some books whose authorship is known, we have sparse biographical information concerning the author (e.g., Jude). However, in the case of 1 and 2 Peter, the gospels and Acts furnish much information concerning the life and character of those epistles' author.

Peter is one of the most interesting characters of the New Testament. More personal information is given by the New Testa-

1. Paul wrote thirteen epistles (fourteen, if he wrote Hebrews); Peter, two; John, five books (the gospel, three epistles, Revelation).

ment concerning Peter than concerning any of the other apostles. Spend much time in this part of the lesson, reading all Bible verses cited, so that you can become intimately acquainted with the man who was inspired to write such marvelous books for God's people.

I. NAME

Originally Peter's name was Simon (a common Greek name), the Hebrew equivalent being Symeon (Acts 15:14). Jesus gave Simon a new name, prophetically pointing to his future status and position among the Christian circle. That new name was Cephas (Aramaic), or Peter (Greek; John 1:42; consult an exhaustive concordance to observe how frequently the name *Peter* appears in the New Testament, as over against only six references to the Aramaic name Cephas. It may be noted here that there is no other Peter in the New Testament.)

II. BIRTH

We do not know the date of Peter's birth. His father was a Jew named John or Jonas (also Jona). (Read John 1:42; 21:15-17; Matt. 16:17.) Peter had at least one brother, whose name was Andrew. The family's hometown was Bethsaida of Galilee (John 1:44), located near the north shore of the Sea of Tiberias (Galilee). (See map, p. 94.)

III. FOUR PERIODS OF LIFE

The biography of Peter can be divided into four parts: (1) pre-gospel period, (2) gospel period, (3) early church period, (4) later life period. The highlights of each of these are shown below.

A. Pre-gospel Period

1. *Education.* Peter probably had the normal elementary education of a Jewish boy in a small town. The description "unlearned and ignorant" of Acts 4:13 is better translated "without schooling or skill" (Berkeley) and refers to the fact that Peter did not have rabbinical training. What amazed the rulers and people was the fact that unschooled laymen such as Peter and John preached and performed with such mighty power.

2. *Occupation.* Many boys raised in the environs of the Sea of Galilee eventually entered the fishing trade. Peter and his brother, Andrew, were among these. When Jesus first met them, they were

busy about their trade (Matt. 4:18). James and John were partner: with Peter and Andrew (Luke 5:10), who were living at this time in the coastal town of Capernaum (cf. Mark 1:29).

3. *Marital status.* From Mark 1:30 and 1 Corinthians 9:5 we learn that Peter was a married man during the period of the gospels. We do not know if he had children. (The gospels and Acts provide comparatively little information concerning the families of the disciples and apostles.)

B. Gospel Period

The highlights of Peter's life during Jesus' public ministry are listed below. Be sure to read all the Bible passages cited.

1. *Connection with John the Baptist.* Peter likely attended the preaching services of John the Baptist, as did Andrew (cf. John 1:35-37, 41-42).

2. *There were three calls by Jesus to Peter.*

(a) The new-name call: "Thou shalt be called" (John 1:42)

(b) The new-vocation call: "Thou shalt catch men" (Luke 5:11)

(c) The new-association call: "He ordained twelve" (Matt 3:13-19)

What three aspects of this ordination are mentioned in Mark 3:14-15? It is interesting to observe that in the four passages where the names of the twelve apostles are listed, Peter's name heads each list (Matt. 10:2-4; Mark 3:16-19; Luke 6:14-16; Acts 1:13-14). At least two reasons may be given for this priority: (1) Peter was among the first disciples called by Jesus for the evangelistic ministry, and (2) Peter's natural aggressiveness made him the spokesman and leader of the group, at least in an unofficial way. Two examples of Peter acting as spokesman are given in John 6:66-69 and Matthew 16:16-20.

3. *Peter was one of Jesus' "inner circle."* It was natural for Jesus to have in His company from time to time a small segment of the twelve disciples. Peter, James, and John composed this inner circle. The gospels record three occasions when these three were the only apostles accompanying Him. Read the passages and determine the reasons for the limited company:

(a) At the house of Jairus—Mark 5:37 (Luke 8:51)

(b) Mount of Transfiguration—Matthew 17:1 (Mark 9:2; Luke 9:28)

(c) Garden of Gethsemane—Matthew 26:37 (Mark 14:33)

4. *Peter was a prominent character during Jesus' passion week.* Read carefully each of the following passages, and record below

(a) an identification of the occasion and (b) what is revealed about Peter’s character.

Passage	Occasion	Peter’s Character
Mark 11:21		
Mark 13:3		
Luke 22:8		
John 13:1-11		
Matthew 26:33-46		
John 18:10-11		
Matthew 26:58, 69-75		
Luke 22:61-62		

5. *Key role among apostles.* Peter also played a key role among the apostles during the forty days between Jesus’ resurrection and ascension. Before Peter could begin to minister as a “rock” in the gospel’s witness, he needed to be restored to fellowship with Christ, which had been broken during the week of Jesus’ trial. Read the following passages, and note what is said about Peter in each case:

John 20:1-10 (Luke 24:12; Mark 16:7):

1 Corinthians 15:5:

John 21:1-23:

In your own words describe the “new ” Peter as of the end of the gospel account.

C. Early Church Period

The most active and eventful period of Peter’s life was during the years of the first twelve chapters of Acts, or A.D. 30 to A.D. 47. Chart

A shows the major events and movements of those chapters, and also indicates that Peter was *the* main character in chapters 1-7 and that in chapters 8-12 he shared the spotlight with such men as Philip, Barnabas, and Paul.²

ACTIVE PERIOD OF PETER'S LIFE

Acts 1—12

Chart A

1	3	8:1b	9:32	12
Church Is Born	Church Grows Through Testing	Church Is Scattered	Church Embraces Gentiles	
Jerusalem		Judea and Samaria		
Peter		Philip—Barnabas—Peter—Paul		

The following passages of Acts reveal the place of leadership and responsibility that Peter filled in the small group of twelve chosen apostles and in the larger group of the local congregation of believers in Jerusalem.³

1. *Leader of the twelve apostles* (1:15-26).
 2. *Powerful preacher* (2:14-40; 5:42; 8:25; 10:34-43).
 3. *Miracle-worker* (3:1–4:22; 5:12-16; 9:32-43).
 4. *Other experiences* (identify them).
- 5:1-11

5:17-41

8:14-24

12:1-19 (Except for the reappearance of Peter in chapter 15 in connection with the Jerusalem Council, we might say that Peter fades

2. For a survey chart of the rulers (emperors, procurators, and high priests) during the years of the Acts, see Irving L. Jensen, *Acts: An Inductive Study* (Chicago: Moody, 1968), p. 247.

3. The original group of twelve was reduced to eleven with the alienation and death of Judas (Acts 1:16-20) but was restored to twelve when Matthias was selected to replace Judas (Acts 1:23-26).

out of the action of Acts at 12:17: "And he [Peter] departed and went to another place.")

5. *Apostle to the Gentiles* (10:1–11:18).

6. *Speaker at the Jerusalem Council* (15:6-11; cf. vv. 12-29). This is the last reference to Peter in Acts. What he was doing while Paul was engaged in missionary journeys and other experiences of Acts 13-28 is the subject of the next era of his life, which we shall call the Later-Life Period.

D. Later-Life Period

From a few New Testament references to Peter after the Jerusalem Council, the following reconstruction of his latter life may be made:

1. *Evangelistic ministry to Jews* (Gal. 2:7-9).

2. *A visit to the church at Antioch (in Syria)*. Here Paul rebuked Peter for his inconsistency in the manner of fellowshiping with Gentiles and with Jews.⁴ Read Galatians 2:11-21. What harm was Peter doing?

3. *Evangelistic tour of northern Asia Minor*. There is a strong possibility that the northern provinces of Asia Minor not evangelized by Paul were the areas where Peter ministered the gospel as an itinerant evangelist after the Jerusalem Council. This would partly explain Peter's references to believers living in Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia in 1 Pet. 1:1.⁵ Peter probably ministered to both Jews and Gentiles at this time.

4. *Arrival at Rome*. It is generally believed that Peter came to Rome shortly after Paul's release from his first imprisonment.

5. *Writing of the epistles*. The two epistles of Peter were written at this time, with perhaps only a short interval between them. At the time of his second letter, Peter knew his death was imminent (2 Pet. 1:14).

4. Peter's behavior on this occasion has been identified in various versions as "insincerity" (*Revised Standard*), "deception" (Phillips), and "playing false" (*New English Bible*).

5. Of Peter's relationship to the churches in these areas, Tenney writes, "While there is no statement on record that Peter founded or even visited these churches, there is nothing to preclude his doing so" (Merrill C. Tenney, *New Testament Survey*, rev. ed. [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1961], p. 345).

IV. DEATH

According to tradition, Peter was martyred by Nero in A.D. 67, about the same time his “beloved brother Paul” (2 Pet. 3:15) also was martyred. Origen says that Peter’s death was by crucifixion and that the apostle requested that he be crucified head downward, because he felt unworthy to die as Christ had died.

V. THE CHARACTER AND PERSONALITY OF PETER

The character and personality of Peter have been scrutinized perhaps more than those of any other man or woman of the Bible. It is a happy circumstance that the New Testament reveals so much about this interesting man.

A man’s character may change radically in his lifetime, such as happens in the conversion of his soul. His basic temperament, however, is part of his permanent image.⁶ For example, Peter was always an aggressive man, full of energy. In his early days as a disciple of Jesus, this brought on unfortunate consequences, such as Peter’s rash act of cutting off the ear of the high priest’s servant Malchus (John 18:10-11). After Pentecost, Peter was still the man of action, but that basic temperament had undergone some radical experiences, including the Holy Spirit’s baptism (Acts 2). This gave birth to a new passion and a mature vision, so that now the aggressive Peter was the powerful preacher and courageous leader of the earliest New Testament church community. Peter in Acts is a different *character* from the Peter found in the gospels, but his basic temperament is essentially the same.

Four passages of Scripture should be studied in connection with Peter’s character-biography. These are shown on Chart B. Read them carefully, and try to reconstruct the things that were probably going through Peter’s mind at these times.

With the above exercise as a background, study the following list of various traits that have been attributed to Peter at some time in his life. Identify each one as either pre-Pentecost, post-Pentecost, or both, from what you know of Peter.

unstable _____	hasty _____
daring _____	strong in faith _____
weak _____	stable _____
humble _____	impulsive _____

6. For an interesting and practical discussion of varieties of temperament, see O. Hallesby, *Temperament and the Christian Faith* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, n.d.).

PETER IN THE ACTS AND GOSPELS

Chart B

PETER in the GOSPELS	Calling of the Twelve	John 1:41-42 (cf. Matt. 16:13-20)	PROGNOSTICATION	“Thou shalt be called Cephas”
	Calvary	Matthew 6:69-75	DEFECTION	“But he denied”
	Resurrection	John 21:15-19	RESTORATION	“Feed my sheep”
PETER in ACTS	Ascension and Pentecost	Acts 2:1-41 (cf. 1:6-8)	DEMONSTRATION	“Filled with the Holy Ghost”

energetic _____ strong in leadership (Gal. 2:9) _____
courageous _____ self-confident _____
devoted as a servant _____

The question may be asked, What kind of a man was Peter in the last decade or so of his life, after he moved out of the story of Acts in chapter 15? The gospels and Acts, of course, supply no information on this. Our sole source is the inspired writing of Peter himself during these years—the two epistles that bear his name (1 and 2 Peter). As we analyze the various chapters of these epistles (beginning in Lesson 2), we will get to know Peter more intimately, and then it is that we will have at least a partial answer to the question raised above.

* * *

SOME REVIEW QUESTIONS

1. What is significant about Peter’s name?
- _____
- _____
- _____

2. What were the four periods of Peter's life? Recall some of the highlights of each period.

3. What were Peter's three calls by Jesus? What was the significance of each call?

4. What role does Peter play in the book of Acts?

5. Reconstruct a probable biography of Peter after the Jerusalem Council of Acts 15.

6. What experiences of Peter are suggested by the words *prognostication*, *defection*, *restoration*, and *demonstration*?

7. Describe in your words the character of Peter as of the time of the writing of his epistles.
