

The Person of Peter



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *Luke 5:1–11; Matt. 16:13–17; Matt. 14:22–33; Luke 22:31–34, 54–62; Gal. 2:9, 11–14.*

Memory Text: “But when he saw that the wind was boisterous, he was afraid; and beginning to sink he cried out, saying, ‘Lord, save me!’ And immediately Jesus stretched out His hand and caught him, and said to him, ‘O you of little faith, why did you doubt?’ ” (*Matthew 14:30, 31, NKJV*).

Peter is the author of the two books (*1 and 2 Peter*) that bear his name. He was one of the early followers of Jesus. He remained with Jesus during the Lord's ministry here, and he was one of the first disciples to see the empty tomb. As a result, Peter had a wealth of experiences from which, inspired by the Holy Spirit, he could draw in order to write these powerful letters. “For we did not follow cleverly devised tales when we made known to you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but we were eyewitnesses of His majesty” (*2 Pet. 1:16, NASB*).

Peter appears often in the Gospels, revealing both his triumphs and failures. He was the usual spokesperson of the disciples in their interactions with Jesus. After the Resurrection and Ascension, Peter became a prominent early church leader. The book of Acts talks about him, as does the book of Galatians.

Most important, Peter knew what it was to make mistakes, to be forgiven, and to move forward in faith and humility. Having experienced for himself the grace of God, he remains a powerful voice for all of us who need to experience that same grace, as well.

* Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, April 1.

Depart From Me!

When we first meet Peter, he is a fisherman on the Sea of Galilee (*Matt. 4:18, Mark 1:16, and Luke 5:1–11*). He had been working all night without catching a fish. But then he and his companions obeyed Jesus' command to return to the lake and to try again. How astonished Peter and the others must have been when they caught so many fish that their boats were sinking. What must have been going through their minds after this miracle?

Read Luke 5:1–9. What do Peter's words to Jesus in Luke 5:8 tell us about Peter? That is, what insights do they give us about where he was spiritually?

Peter must have been impressed by what he knew of Jesus. Even before this miracle, when Jesus told the group to put down the nets, Peter—though incredulous because they had caught nothing—nevertheless said: “at Your word I will let down the net” (*NKJV*). It seems that Peter must have known something about Jesus already, and this knowledge impelled him to obey. Indeed, evidence suggests that Peter already had been with Jesus for a while before this event.

Perhaps one key is in Luke 5:3, which talks about what happened before the miracle of the fish. “Then He [Jesus] got into one of the boats, which was Simon's, and asked him to put out a little from the land. And He sat down and taught the multitudes from the boat” (*NKJV*). Maybe the word of Jesus here was what had first impressed Peter so deeply.

However, after the miracle, Peter sensed something more in Jesus, something holy in contrast to his own sinfulness. Peter's realization of his sinfulness, and his willingness to admit it publicly, shows just how open he was to the Lord. No wonder he had been called! Whatever his faults, and they were many, Peter was a spiritual man who was ready to follow the Lord, regardless of the cost.

Read Luke 5:11. What's the crucial principle here? What does this text tell us about what kind of commitment Jesus asks for? What should it tell us, too, that these fishermen were willing to abandon everything when their nets were full?

Confessing the Christ

One of the grand moments in the story of Jesus occurred in a dialogue with Peter. Jesus just had been dealing with some of the scribes and Pharisees who had been challenging Him to give them a sign, something to prove who He was (*see Matt. 16:1–4*). Then, later, alone with the disciples, Jesus talked about the two miracles He had performed, in which He twice fed thousands with just a few loaves and fish. He did all this in the context of warning the disciples about the “leaven of the Pharisees and of the Sadducees” (*Matt. 16:11*).

Read Matthew 16:13–17. What is happening here? What is the significance of Peter’s words to Jesus?

Peter here spoke boldly of his faith in Jesus. And it’s clear from Matthew 16:20 that his confession of Christ as the Messiah was shared by the others, as well. This was to be a turning point in the ministry of Jesus, even though the disciples, including Peter, had much more to learn.

“The disciples still expected Christ to reign as a temporal prince. Although He had so long concealed His design, they believed that He would not always remain in poverty and obscurity; the time was near when He would establish His kingdom. That the hatred of the priests and rabbis would never be overcome, that Christ would be rejected by His own nation, condemned as a deceiver, and crucified as a malefactor,—such a thought the disciples had never entertained.”—Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages*, p. 415.

As soon as the disciples recognize Jesus as the Messiah, Jesus begins teaching that He must suffer and die (*see Matt. 16:21–23*), a concept that Peter could not accept. Peter goes as far as to “rebuke” Jesus. Jesus then turns to Peter and says, “ ‘Get behind Me, Satan’ ” (*Matt. 16:23, NKJV*). This is one of the harshest things that He said to anybody during His ministry; yet, He did it for Peter’s own good. Peter’s words reflected his own desires, his own selfish attitude about what he wanted. Jesus had to stop him in his tracks, right then and there (and though Jesus was really speaking to Satan, Peter got the message). Peter needed to learn that serving the Lord would involve suffering. That he learned this lesson is clear in his later writings (*see 1 Pet. 4:12*).

How often do your personal desires clash with what you know God wants you to do? How do you decide what to do in those situations?

Walking on Water

In their time with Jesus, the disciples saw many remarkable things, although few of them can compare with the events described in Matthew 14:13–33, Mark 6:30–52, and John 6:1–21. Jesus used five small loaves of bread and two fish to feed more than 5,000 people. Again, what must have been going on in their minds after seeing something such as this?

Read Matthew 14:22–33. What’s the most crucial message we can take away from this story for ourselves to help us in our own walk with the Lord?

With the feeding of the multitudes, these men had just witnessed the power of Jesus in a remarkable way. He truly had control over the natural world. That must have been what helped Peter make his rather bold, or even presumptuous, request: “ ‘Lord, if it is You, command me to come to You on the water’ ” (*Matt. 14:28, NKJV*).

What an expression of faith!

Jesus, then, acknowledged this faith and told Peter to come, which he did, another expression of Peter’s faith. It would have been one thing to walk on water when it was calm, but Peter did so in the midst of a storm.

The usual lesson of the story is about taking our eyes off Jesus. But there’s more. Peter surely must have trusted in Jesus, or he never would have made the request and then acted on it. However, once he did act, he started to get scared, and in that fear he began to sink.

Why? Could not Jesus have kept Peter afloat regardless of Peter’s fear? Jesus, however, allowed Peter to reach the point where he could do nothing but cry out in his helplessness, “ ‘Lord, save me!’ ” (*Matt. 14:30, NKJV*). Jesus then stretched out His hand and did just what Peter had asked. The fact that “Jesus stretched out His hand and caught him” (*Matt. 14:31, NKJV*), when Jesus could simply have kept him afloat without the physical contact, surely helped Peter realize just how much he had to learn to depend upon Jesus.

We can start out in great faith, trusting in the power of our Lord, but when the situation gets frightful, we need to remember Jesus’ words to Peter: “ ‘O you of little faith, why did you doubt?’ ” (*Matt. 14:31, NKJV*).

Denying His Lord

Read Luke 22:31–34, 54–62. What lessons can we learn from Peter’s failures?

Peter’s intentions were good. And, in fact, he showed more courage than did the other disciples. He actually followed Jesus in order to discover what would happen to Him. But in doing so, he decided to hide his true identity. This compromise, this deviation from the path of what is good and right, led him to deny his Lord three times, exactly as Jesus had warned him.

The story of Peter here is in a sad way very instructive on how devastating the result of compromise can be.

As we know, Christian history is soiled with the terrible results that happen when Christians compromise crucial truths. Though life itself often involves compromise, and we must at times be willing to give and take, in crucial truths we must stand firm. As a people, we must learn what are the things that we must never compromise, under any circumstances (*see, for instance, Rev. 14:12*).

According to Ellen G. White, Peter’s compromise and failure began in Gethsemane when, instead of praying, he slept, and thus wasn’t spiritually ready for what was coming. Had he been faithful in prayer, she wrote, “he would not have denied his Lord.”—*The Desire of Ages*, p. 714.

Yes, Peter failed terribly. But as great as his failure, God’s grace was even greater. “But where sin abounded, grace abounded much more” (*Rom. 5:20, NKJV*). It was Jesus’ forgiveness that made Peter one of the prime leaders of the early Christian church. What a powerful lesson for us all about the reality of God’s grace. What a lesson to us all that, despite our failures, we should press on ahead in faith!

Yes, Peter knew what it meant to be forgiven. He knew firsthand just what the gospel was all about because he had experienced not just the reality of his human sinfulness but the greatness and depth of God’s love and grace toward sinners.

How can we learn to forgive those who have greatly disappointed us, as Peter disappointed Jesus here?

Peter as Church Leader

During the ministry of Jesus, Peter often acted in the role of leader of the 12 disciples. He was their usual spokesman. When Matthew lists the disciples, he says “first, . . . Peter” (*Matt. 10:2*). Peter also took a prominent role in the early church. It was Peter who took the initiative to appoint a disciple to replace Judas Iscariot, who betrayed Jesus (*Acts 1:15–25*). On the day of Pentecost, it was Peter who explained to the multitudes that they were seeing the promised gift of the Spirit, poured out by God upon His people (*Acts 2:14–36*). It was Peter who, when arrested for speaking about the resurrection of the dead, spoke to the high priest and the assembled Jewish leaders (*Acts 4:1–12*). It was Peter who was led to Cornelius, the first Gentile to be accepted as a follower of Jesus (*Acts 10:1–48*). It was Peter whom Paul visited for 15 days when Paul first came to Jerusalem after his conversion (*Gal. 1:18*). Indeed, describing the circle of Jesus’ followers in Jerusalem at that time, Paul identifies three “pillars” of the church: Peter, James the brother of Jesus, and John the beloved disciple (*Gal. 2:9*).

Read Galatians 1:18, 19; 2:9, 11–14. What do these texts tell us about Peter, even while he functioned so prominently in the early church?

Even as a church leader, even as someone clearly called of the Lord (Jesus told Peter, “ ‘Feed my sheep’ ” [*John 21:17*]), even as the one who received the vision about not calling “any man common or unclean” (*Acts 10:28*), Peter still had some important growing to do.

In the early days of the church, almost all the Christians were Jews, many of whom were “zealous for the law” (*Acts 21:20, NKJV*). In their interpretation of the law, eating with Gentiles was problematic because the Gentiles were considered unclean. When some Jewish Christians came from James at Jerusalem, Peter stopped eating with the Gentiles in Antioch.

For Paul, such behavior was an attack on the gospel itself. He saw Peter’s actions as frank hypocrisy, and he wasn’t afraid to challenge him on it. In fact, Paul used the opportunity to express the key teaching of the Christian faith: justification by faith alone (*see Gal. 2:14–16*).

Though called of God, Peter had some blind spots that needed correcting. How do we respond when others seek to point out our own “blind spots”?

Further Thought: Read Ellen G. White, “The Call by the Sea,” pp. 244–251; “A Night on the Lake,” pp. 377–382, in *The Desire of Ages*.

From the fisherman’s early admission of his own sinfulness to his bold declaration of Jesus that “ ‘You are the Christ, the Son of the living God’ ” (*Matt. 16:16, NKJV*) to his terrible denial of his Lord and even to his triumphs and mistakes as a leader in the church, Peter certainly had been a key player. Thus, under the flawless inspiration of the Holy Spirit, he could write what he did, not only from theoretical knowledge but from experience itself. He knew not only the saving grace of Christ but His transforming grace, as well: “Before his [Peter’s] great fall he was always forward and dictatorial, 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 Peter was converted, and the converted Peter was very different from the rash, impetuous Peter. While he retained his former fervor, the grace of Christ regulated his zeal. Instead of being impetuous, self-confident, and self-exalted, he was calm, self-possessed, and teachable. He could then feed the lambs as well as the sheep of Christ’s flock.” —Ellen G. White, *Testimonies for the Church*, vol. 5, pp. 334, 335.

Who among us can’t relate in some degree to Peter? Who hasn’t, at times, stood boldly for their faith? And who hasn’t, at times, failed miserably?

Discussion Questions:

- ① What does it tell us about the grace of God that even after such a shameful denial of Jesus, Peter would still come to play such a prominent and important role in not just the early church but in the Christian faith itself? (After all, he wrote part of the New Testament.) What lessons can we take from his restoration about how to deal with those who, in their own way, have failed the Lord?
- ② In class, talk more about the dangers of compromise for the church. How can we know on what things we need to give and take, and on what things under no circumstances we can compromise? What are examples that we can find in church history of compromise that led to disaster? What lessons can we learn from these events?
- ③ Peter learned some lessons the hard way. From seeing his mistakes, how can we learn the lessons we need to learn but in an easier way than Peter did?