

A Man Called Peter

The Gospels and Acts — Understanding I and II Peter Series, Part 1

By Escape the Mustard Tree

Introduction

Before opening the letters themselves, it's worth knowing the man who wrote them. Simon Peter's life reads almost like two different stories stitched together — bold confession beside stunning failure, a Gethsemane sword-swing beside a wilting denial before a servant girl, a bitter weeping beside a bright restoration on a familiar shoreline. When this same man later writes to believers scattered under trial, urging them to hold fast their faith to the very end, he is not offering theory. He is writing from the inside of exactly the kind of failure and recovery he is calling others to survive.

I. The Call of a Fisherman

Peter first met Jesus as a working fisherman on the Sea of Galilee, and his call came attached to a miracle. After a night of catching nothing, Jesus told him to let down his nets one more time, and the catch was so great the nets began to break. "When Simon Peter saw it, he fell down at Jesus' knees, saying, 'Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord!'... And Jesus said to Simon, 'Do not be afraid. From now on you will catch men'" (Luke 5:8, 10). Notice what Peter's first instinct was in the presence of real power: not pride, but an acute awareness of his own unworthiness. That instinct — humility surfacing right alongside genuine faith — will show up again and again across his story.

II. A Bold Confession, and an Immediate Stumble

At Caesarea Philippi, Peter gave the clearest answer any of the disciples ever gave to the question of who Jesus was: "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God." Jesus responded, "Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jonah, for flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but My Father who is in heaven" (Matthew 16:16-17). That confession came by direct revelation from the Father Himself.

And yet only a few verses later, when Jesus began explaining that He must suffer and die in Jerusalem, Peter took Him aside and rebuked Him: "Far be it from You, Lord; this shall not happen to You!" Jesus' response was as sharp as His blessing had been warm: "Get behind Me, Satan! You are an offense to Me, for you are not mindful of the things of God, but the things of men" (Matthew 16:22-23). The same mouth that had just spoken words given by the Father spoke, moments later, words opposing God's actual plan. Spiritual insight and human presumption sat side by side in this man, often within the same conversation.

III. Eyewitness of the Glory

Peter was given a privilege few others received: a preview, in advance, of Christ's coming glory. "About eight days after these sayings... He took Peter, John, and James and went up on the mountain to pray. As He prayed, the appearance of His face was altered, and His robe became white and glistening... Peter and those with him were heavy with sleep; and when they were fully awake, they saw His glory... And a voice came out of the cloud, saying, 'This is My beloved Son. Hear Him!'" (Luke 9:28-29, 32, 35).

That moment was not simply a private encouragement for Peter. Decades later, writing to believers who would never have the chance to see what he saw, Peter reached back to this exact memory as evidence undergirding everything he wanted them to believe about Christ's return: "We did not follow cunningly devised fables when we made known to you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but were eyewitnesses of His majesty... And we heard this voice which came from heaven when we were with Him on the holy mountain" (2 Peter 1:16, 18). What Peter witnessed on that mountain became, years later, an anchor he offered to others who could only take his word for it.

IV. Misplaced Confidence

On the night He was betrayed, Jesus told His disciples plainly that they would all fall away. Peter's response was immediate and absolute: "Even if all are made to stumble because of You, I will never be made to stumble." Jesus answered him just as plainly: "Assuredly, I say to you that this night, before the rooster crows, you will deny Me three times" (Matthew 26:33-34). Luke's account adds something remarkable — Jesus had already been praying specifically for this moment: "Simon, Simon! Indeed, Satan has asked for you, that he may sift you as wheat. But I have prayed for you, that your faith should not fail; and when you have returned to Me, strengthen your brethren" (Luke 22:31-32). Notice what Jesus did not pray. He did not pray that Peter would avoid the test. He prayed that Peter's faith would survive it, and that Peter, once restored, would go on to strengthen others.

Everything Jesus predicted came to pass with painful precision. Peter slept when he should have prayed in Gethsemane. He drew a sword when he should have submitted. He followed at a distance when he should have stood near. And when a servant girl by a fire pressed him three times about his connection to Jesus, he denied it three times, the last time with cursing. "Immediately, while he was still speaking, the rooster crowed. And the Lord turned and looked at Peter. And Peter remembered the word of the Lord, how He had said to him, 'Before the rooster crows, you will deny Me three times.' So Peter went out and wept bitterly" (Luke 22:60-62). The boldest promise in the room collapsed under the mildest possible pressure — not a soldier, not a court, just a servant girl's passing remark.

V. "Go, Tell His Disciples — and Peter"

Three days later, at the empty tomb, an angel gave the women a message with a detail easy to miss: "Do not be alarmed. You seek Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He is risen! He is not here. See the place where they laid Him. But go, tell His disciples — and Peter — that He is going before you into Galilee; there you will see Him, as He said to you" (Mark 16:6-7). Peter is named separately from the rest, singled out by name, as though the risen Christ wanted him to know specifically that he was still included, still wanted, still expected at the meeting place.

That same eagerness to be near Christ again shows up vividly at the shoreline itself, some time later. Fishing before dawn on the Sea of Galilee, the disciples did not immediately recognize the stranger on the beach directing their catch — until John did: "Therefore that disciple whom Jesus loved said to Peter, 'It is the Lord!'" The moment Peter heard it, he did not wait for the boat: "Now when Simon Peter heard that it was the Lord, he put on his outer garment (for he had removed it), and plunged into the sea" (John 21:7). The other disciples stayed with the boat and rowed the short distance to shore, dragging in the net full of fish (v. 8). Peter alone swam. Whatever shame or hesitation might have held a lesser man back, it was not enough to keep Peter from getting to Jesus as fast as he possibly could.

The fuller restoration came after breakfast, over a charcoal fire. Three times Jesus asked Peter essentially the same question, matching the three denials with three opportunities to answer differently — though the original language carries more tension than the English alone shows. The first two times, Jesus asks using *agapao*, the word for a deep, sacrificial, all-in love: "Simon, son of Jonah, do you *agapao* Me?" Both times, Peter cannot quite claim it. He answers instead with *phileo* — fondness, affection: "Yes, Lord; You know that I am fond of You" (John 21:15-16). The man who once swore he would never stumble no matter what could no longer bring himself to promise the deeper love Jesus was asking about.

On the third question, Jesus Himself shifts His word down to meet Peter where he actually was: "Simon, son of Jonah, do you love Me?" — now asking, in Peter's own word, only whether he is fond of Him. That is why Peter was grieved (v. 17). Not because he was asked a third time, but because Jesus' own question had just quietly confirmed what Peter already suspected about himself since that courtyard fire: the bold, unconditional love he'd once been so sure of was not, in fact, something he could still promise. Peter answers the only way he honestly can: "Lord, You know all things; You know that I love You." And each time — regardless of which love Peter could actually offer — Jesus responded with a charge: "Feed My lambs... Tend My sheep... Feed My sheep" (John 21:15-17). The man who three times denied even knowing Christ was given, three times, both forgiveness and a fresh commission, built not on the confident love he no longer dared to claim but on the real, humbler love he actually had. Restoration, here, did not mean returning to where Peter had been before he fell — it meant being sent forward, exactly as he now was, with a flock now placed in his care.

VI. Filled with the Spirit and with Power

When the promised Holy Spirit came at Pentecost, the transformation in Peter was unmistakable. The man who had crumbled before a servant girl's question now stood before a vast, mixed crowd of Jews gathered from countries scattered across the known world, and preached with a boldness that cut listeners to the heart, resulting in thousands turning to Christ that day (Acts 2:14-41). It is worth noticing, years later, when Peter sat down to write his first letter, whom he addressed it to: "Peter, an apostle of Jesus Christ, to the pilgrims of the Dispersion in Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia" (1 Peter 1:1) — regions overlapping the very nations represented in that Pentecost crowd. The same man once entrusted with proclaiming the message at its beginning was, decades later, still writing to shepherd the flock scattered across that same wide territory.

Applying "A Man Called Peter"

Nowhere in this story is Peter's standing before God ever in question. His failure that night did not undo his salvation, and his restoration was never in doubt — Christ had already prayed for exactly this outcome before it happened. What was genuinely at stake was something else: whether Peter would go on to strengthen his brothers, feed the flock, and finish the race set before him, or whether that bitter night would be the last word on his usefulness. It was not the last word, because Christ intervened personally to make sure of it.

That is precisely the tension these two letters were written to address in their first readers — and in us. Salvation, once given, is not the question these letters raise. What is at stake is whether faith, tested by real fire, will be found "to result in praise and glory and honor" when Christ is revealed (1 Peter 1:7), or whether it will wither under pressure the way Peter's courage once did in a courtyard. The man who wrote these words knew, better than almost anyone, both how badly a believer can stumble and how completely Christ is able to restore and use him again.

Looking Ahead

Next, we open the letter itself, beginning with the opening greeting Peter wrote to those same scattered believers, and the living hope he sets before them from the very first verse.