A Man Called Peter

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

By Escape the Mustard Tree

Introduction

Before we open the letters themselves, we need to know the man who wrote them. Simon Peter's life reads almost like two different stories stitched together: bold confession beside stunning failure, a sword swung in Gethsemane beside a denial before a servant girl, bitter weeping beside a bright restoration on a familiar shoreline. When this same man later writes to Christians scattered under trial, urging them to hold fast their faith to the very end, he writes from inside exactly the kind of failure and recovery he's calling them to come through.

I. The Call of a Fisherman

Peter's brother Andrew was the one who brought him to Jesus. "We have found the Messiah," Andrew told him, and when Jesus looked at Simon, the first thing He gave him was a new name (John 1:41-42): "You are Simon the son of Jonah. You shall be called Cephas" (which is translated, A Stone). It would be a long road before Simon lived up to that name.

His call to leave his nets came attached to a miracle. Peter was a working fisherman on the Sea of Galilee, and after a night of catching nothing, Jesus told him to let down his nets one more time. 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). "Follow Me," Jesus said, "and I will make you fishers of men" (Matt. 4:19), and "they forsook all and followed Him" (Luke 5:11).

Notice Peter's first instinct in the presence of real power: an acute awareness of his own unworthiness. That instinct, humility surfacing right alongside real faith, will show up again and again across his story.

II. Bold Faith, and Sudden Stumbles

The pattern shows up first on the water. When the disciples saw Jesus walking toward their boat in a storm, Peter was the only one who asked to join Him: "Lord, if it is You, command me to come to You on the water." Jesus said, "Come," and Peter walked on the water. "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" (Matt. 14:28-31). Nobody else got out of the boat. Nobody else sank, either.

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" (Matt. 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" (Matt. 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 of Christ's coming glory. Jesus announced it beforehand: "there are some standing here who shall not taste death till they see the Son of Man coming in His kingdom" (Matt. 16:28). Then He took Peter, John, and James up on the mountain to pray, and "as He prayed, the appearance of His face was altered, and His robe became white and glistening." Moses and Elijah stood with Him, "who appeared in glory and spoke of His decease which He was about to accomplish at Jerusalem." And "Peter and those with him were heavy with sleep; and when they were fully awake, they saw His glory" (Luke 9:29, 31-32). Then the voice out of the cloud: "This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased. Hear Him!" (Matt. 17:5).

Decades later, writing to Christians who hadn't been on that mountain with him, Peter reached back to this exact memory as evidence for what he wanted them to believe about Christ's return: "For 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. For He received from God the Father honor and glory when such a voice came to Him from the Excellent Glory: 'This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased.' And we heard this voice which came from heaven when we were with Him on the holy mountain" (2 Pet. 1:16-18). Notice that Peter quotes the voice in the same words Matthew wrote down, "in whom I am well pleased," and that what he says he received on that mountain was "honor and glory."

Peter knew what he was writing about. On the mountain, while Moses and Elijah spoke with Jesus about "His decease which He was about to accomplish at Jerusalem," Peter's answer was to build: "let us make three tabernacles," and Luke adds, "not knowing what he said" (Luke 9:31, 33). It was the same instinct that had told Jesus, "Far be it from You, Lord" (Matt. 16:22): stay in the glory, skip the death. Now, just before he tells the story, he writes of his body as a tent he must soon put off and of his own death as his "decease" (2 Pet. 1:14-15), the same word Luke used on the mountain. The man who once wanted to keep Jesus from dying writes calmly about his own.

And with that decease in view, what he's careful to leave them is this memory: "Moreover I will be careful to ensure that you always have a reminder of these things after my decease" (2 Pet. 1:15).

He sets his eyewitness account against "cunningly devised fables" (2 Pet. 1:16) because he knew what would come after him: "there will be false teachers among you" (2 Pet. 2:1). Until the glory he saw is revealed, they have "the prophetic word confirmed, which you do well to heed as a light that shines in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts" (2 Pet. 1:19). The man who once wanted the glory without the decease had learned the order by the time he wrote: "the sufferings of Christ and the glories that would follow" (1 Pet. 1:11).

IV. Misplaced Confidence

On the night He was betrayed, Jesus told His disciples 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' answer was just as direct: "Assuredly, I say to you that this night, before the rooster crows, you will deny Me three times" (Matt. 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: "Simon, are you sleeping? Could you not watch one hour?" (Mark 14:37). He drew a sword when he should have submitted (John 18:10-11). He "followed at a distance" when he should have stood near (Luke 22:54). And when he was pressed three times about knowing Jesus, he denied it three times, the last time with cursing: "Then he began to curse and swear, saying, 'I do not know the Man!'" (Matt. 26:74). "Immediately, while he was still speaking, the rooster crowed. And the Lord turned and looked at Peter. Then 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, not a tribunal of any kind. Household staff and bystanders around a fire.

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

Three days later, at the empty tomb, an angel gave the women a message with a detail that's 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.

The Lord didn't make him wait for Galilee to see Him. That same day, when two disciples hurried back from Emmaus, the others met them with the news: "The Lord is risen indeed, and has appeared to Simon!" (Luke 24:34). Paul lists it too: "He was seen by Cephas, then by the twelve" (1

Cor. 15:5). Whatever passed between them in that first meeting, Scripture keeps it private. What John records later, by the Sea of Galilee, is the restoration that happened in front of the others.

Peter's eagerness to be near Jesus shows up vividly at that shoreline. Fishing before dawn, the disciples didn't 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 didn't 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 wasn't enough to keep Peter from getting to Jesus as fast as he possibly could.

Notice where they are. This is the same lake, and the same miracle, that started everything. But there's one difference in the detail. The first time, "their net was breaking" (Luke 5:6). This time, with even more fish, "although there were so many, the net was not broken" (John 21:11). Something is being repeated on purpose, and repeated better.

And look who brings it in. All seven of them together "were not able to draw it in because of the multitude of fish" (John 21:6), but when they reach the shore, "Simon Peter went up and dragged the net to land" (v. 11). The man who had come apart in the courtyard is the one who hauls in the net that holds.

Three Denials at a Fire of Coals

To feel what happens next, you have to put the two fires side by side.

On the night of the arrest, Peter followed Jesus into the high priest's courtyard, "but Peter followed at a distance" (Luke 22:54). John records what he found there: "Now the servants and officers who had made a fire of coals stood there, for it was cold, and they warmed themselves. And Peter stood with them and warmed himself" (John 18:18). Three times, standing at that fire, he was asked, and three times he answered:

- A servant girl at the door: "You are not also one of this Man's disciples, are you?" He said, "I am not" (John 18:17).
- Those warming themselves beside him: "You are not also one of His disciples, are you?" He denied it and said, "I am not!" (John 18:25).
- A relative of the man whose ear he had cut off: "Did I not see you in the garden with Him?" "Peter then denied again; and immediately a rooster crowed" (John 18:26-27).

Now read John 21:9: "Then, as soon as they had come to land, they saw a fire of coals there, and fish laid on it, and bread."

A fire of coals. The Greek word John uses there is a specific and uncommon one, and it appears in only two places in the entire New Testament: the courtyard where Peter denied Him, and the beach where Jesus fed him breakfast. The repetition is never explained. It doesn't need to be.

Jesus did not restore Peter at a distance from the memory. He built a fire of coals, and with Peter standing beside one again, He asked His questions.

Three Questions

Three denials, three questions. The match is deliberate, and it begins with a phrase that reaches back further than the courtyard: "Simon, son of Jonah, do you love Me more than these?" (John 21:15).

More than these. That is not a random comparison. It reaches straight back to Peter's own boast: "Even if all are made to stumble because of You, I will never be made to stumble" (Matt. 26:33). Peter had measured himself against the other eleven and come out ahead. Jesus' first question hands that measurement back to him, in front of the very men he had measured himself against.

The original language carries more tension in the exchange than the English alone shows. The first two times, Jesus asks with *agapao*, the word for a deep, sacrificial, all-in love: "Simon, son of Jonah, do you love [*agapao*] Me?" Both times, Peter can't quite claim it. He answers instead with *phileo*, the word for fondness and affection: "Yes, Lord; You know that I love [*phileo*] You" (John 21:15-16). Notice also what drops out of his answer entirely. Peter never picks up "more than these." When he writes to elders years later, he calls himself "a fellow elder" (1 Pet. 5:1).

On the third question, Jesus Himself shifts His word down to meet Peter where he actually was: "Simon, son of Jonah, do you love [*phileo*] Me?" Now He's asking, in Peter's own word, only whether Peter is fond of Him. "Peter was grieved because He said to him the third time, 'Do you love Me?'" (v. 17), and not merely because he'd been asked a third time. Jesus' own question had just quietly confirmed what Peter already suspected about himself since that courtyard fire: the bold, unconditional love he had once been so sure of was not, in fact, something he could still promise. Peter answers the only way left to him: "Lord, You know all things; You know that I love [*phileo*] 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). Three denials answered by three questions, and three questions answered by three commissions. The man who three times denied even knowing Christ was handed, three times, a fresh assignment, built on the real, humbler love he actually had rather than the confident love he no longer dared to claim.

"Follow Me"

Then Jesus says one more thing, and it's the piece that ties the whole night in the courtyard off for good:

> "Most assuredly, I say to you, when you were younger, you girded yourself and walked where you wished; but when you are old, you will stretch out your hands, and another will gird you and carry you where you do not wish." This He spoke, signifying by what death he would glorify God. And when He had spoken this, He said to him, "Follow Me." (John 21:18-19)

Go back to the upper room, hours before the fire. "Simon Peter said to Him, 'Lord, where are You going?' Jesus answered him, 'Where I am going you cannot follow Me now, but you shall follow Me afterward.' Peter said to Him, 'Lord, why can I not follow You now? I will lay down my life for Your sake.' Jesus answered him, 'Will you lay down your life for My sake? Most assuredly, I say to you, the rooster shall not crow till you have denied Me three times'" (John 13:36-38).

That was the boast. Not merely that he would stand firm, but that he would die for Christ. It was the one promise Peter most wanted to keep, and it collapsed inside a few hours.

Now, on the beach, Jesus gives it back to him, not as something Peter pledges, but as something Jesus states will happen. Peter *will* lay down his life for His sake, and John tells us exactly what Jesus meant by it: "signifying by what death he would glorify God." The difference between the promise and the fulfillment is who's doing the guaranteeing. And He says it in terms Peter couldn't miss: "when you were younger, you girded yourself and walked where you wished," which is precisely what Peter had just done a few verses earlier, throwing on his outer garment and going into the water on his own initiative (v. 7), "but... another will gird you and carry you where you do not wish." The old Peter moved himself. The finished Peter would be carried, and would still glorify God in it.

And then two words: *Follow Me.*

They aren't new words. They're the words of his first call, beside this same lake, at this same trade: "Follow Me, and I will make you fishers of men" (Matt. 4:19). They also keep the promise Jesus made in the upper room: "you shall follow Me afterward" (John 13:36). Between that call and this one lies a courtyard where Peter "followed at a distance" (Luke 22:54) and then stopped following altogether. Jesus does not give him a lesser assignment because of it. He gives him the original one, again, in the original words.

That is what restoration looks like here. It doesn't mean Peter got back to where he had been before he fell; that man, the one who could promise anything, is gone and does not return. It means Peter was sent forward exactly as he now was, with a flock placed in his care and a death already spoken over him, following the same Person who had called him the first time.

Both of Peter's letters carry the fingerprints of that morning. When he writes to elders, he tells them to "shepherd the flock of God which is among you" and points them to the day "when the Chief Shepherd appears" (1 Pet. 5:2, 4): the man given three charges to feed sheep, spending his old age handing that charge on. And when he tells his readers his time is nearly up, he doesn't cite a premonition or a prison sentence. He cites this conversation: "knowing that shortly I must put off my tent, just as our Lord Jesus Christ showed me" (2 Pet. 1:14). Decades later, Peter was still living inside what Jesus told him at that fire.

VI. Filled with the Spirit and with Power

For forty days after His resurrection, Jesus was "seen by them during forty days and speaking of the things pertaining to the kingdom of God" (Acts 1:3). That was the message Peter would carry. When the promised Holy Spirit came at Pentecost, the change in him was unmistakable. The man who had crumbled before a servant girl's question now stood before a vast crowd of Jews gathered from across the known world and preached until "they were cut to the heart" (Acts 2:37), and "that day about three thousand souls were added to them" (Acts 2:41).

It didn't stop there. Not long afterward, the man who'd once warmed himself at the high priest's fire was beaten on the council's orders and walked out with the other apostles, "rejoicing that they

were counted worthy to suffer shame for His name" (Acts 5:41). That's the man who would one day write a letter about suffering.

Years later, Peter addressed his first letter "To the pilgrims of the Dispersion in Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia" (1 Pet. 1:1). Three of those five, Cappadocia, Pontus, and Asia, had been named in the Pentecost crowd (Acts 2:9). The man who preached the message at its beginning was, decades later, still writing to shepherd people in some of the same places that first heard it.

Applying "A Man Called Peter"

Nowhere in this story is Peter's standing before God in question. His failure that night didn't undo it, and Jesus had already prayed for the outcome before it happened (Luke 22:32). What was at stake was something else: whether Peter would go on to strengthen his brethren, feed the flock, and finish what he'd been called to, or whether that bitter night would be the last word on his usefulness. It wasn't the last word, because Jesus intervened personally to make sure of it.

That's the same thing these two letters press on their first readers, and on us. Their standing before God isn't what Peter puts in question. What he sets before them is "the end of your faith—the salvation of your souls" (1 Pet. 1:9), and whether their faith, "though it is tested by fire, may be found to praise, honor, and glory at the revelation of Jesus Christ" (1 Pet. 1:7), or wither under pressure the way Peter's courage once did in a courtyard.

Peter knew what it was to have the Lord turn and look at him (Luke 22:61). Every Christian will stand under that look one day: "For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, that each one may receive the things done in the body, according to what he has done, whether good or bad" (2 Cor. 5:10). The man who wrote these letters knew, better than almost anyone, how badly a Christian can stumble, and how completely Jesus is able to restore him and use him again.

Looking Ahead

Next, before we open the first letter, we'll look at who received these two letters and what they had already been taught: the five regions Peter names, and the years Paul spent among them.

Scripture quotations are from the New King James Version.