



In *The Characters of Easter*, you'll become acquainted with the unlikely collection of ordinary people who witnessed the miracle of Christ's death and resurrection. Enter their stories and ultimately draw closer to Christ Himself as you encounter His Passion through their experiences.

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CHAPTER ONE

The Failure

Peter

After Peter came to recognize his own inadequacy, his utter inability to fulfill his destiny apart from obedience to his only true responsibility, he became a rock-solid leader. As his story unfolds in the book of Acts, we can clearly see that when Peter kept his eyes on Jesus and followed Him, others followed too.

And they followed by the thousands.

Needed today: more Peters.¹

CHARLES R. SWINDOLL

Simon Peter answered, “Lord, to whom will we go? You have the words of eternal life. We have come to believe and know that you are the Holy One of God.”

JOHN 6:68–69

When Jesus met Simon, he wasn't the Peter we know, the saint after whom children and churches and cities are named. He was Simon and he wasn't exactly looking for Jesus. Instead, he was busy plying his trade as a commercial fisherman on the shores of Lake Gennesaret. Simon and his brother Andrew were part of a fishing

collective with another set of brothers, James and John. The Galilee shores were all the brothers knew, having grown up in Bethsaida, on the northwest shore.

By all accounts, Simon was thriving in Capernaum, making a living bringing fish to the market to be sold locally or shipped to Damascus via the Roman highway and exported to ports across the Roman Empire along the Mediterranean. He owned a home and was married (Luke 4:38–39). It doesn't seem like Simon was either rich or poor but managing a decent life. Like most of us: an ordinary person in an ordinary place in what, he assumed, was an ordinary time.

Jesus spent much of His ministry in Galilee. These were His people: blunt, salt-of-the-earth, and hardworking. Galileans didn't much care for the elite sophisticates in Jerusalem, and the elites returned the scorn. A son of Nazareth in the southwest part of the Galilee region, Jesus made Capernaum His base of operation. Just as God chose a humble place—Bethlehem—for the entrance of Jesus into the world, so the Master Craftsman chose to build His new movement from the raw and rugged people of Galilee. This is not where you would typically recruit if you were building a movement that would shake the world, but Christ often draws His disciples from out-of-the-way places.

We don't really know when Jesus arrived in town. Did He ever pass Simon in the marketplace or sit next to him in the synagogue? In everyday interactions, they would not have noticed anything unusual about this carpenter in town. Jesus didn't have a halo above His head and an arrow pointing to His face, letting people know He was God's Son. It seems that Jesus' pursuit of Peter came patiently, in a series of fits and starts, like He seems to come to all of us, a conversation here, a conversation there. But make no mistake that the "Hound of Heaven,"

named by C. S. Lewis and the poet Francis Thompson, persistently pursued this prickly Galilean.

♦ *When Jesus Met Peter* ♦

The first encounter seems to have been brokered by Simon's brother Andrew. He was intrigued with another itinerant teacher, the rogue prophet named John. Some called him "the baptizer" for his controversial practice of calling Jewish people to a new level of repentance and cleansing, beyond the cold rituals. John was unlike the staid rabbis in the synagogue. A wild-eyed nomad who declared the kingdom of heaven had come near, John insisted the people of God must prepare themselves. While many shrugged off John's message, Andrew listened. And the words cut straight to his heart. John didn't speak of himself, but of another whom God was sending, with a winnowing fork, dividing true believers from pretenders. A more radical, powerful baptism was coming, one of spirit and fire. Andrew wasn't sure he knew exactly what John meant, but he had a strange attraction to the message.

How did Simon feel about Andrew's fascination with this new movement? We don't know what those conversations on the water were like, but it does seem that Simon hung back a bit. Did he think Andrew was getting involved in some dangerous new movement? Did he write John the Baptist off as another fad, soon to fade from a first-century scene that featured so many religious imposters and would-be messiahs? Did he roll his eyes at Andrew's new ideas, the way we roll our eyes when a crazy uncle posts a conspiracy theory on the internet?

Galileans were ready for messages about God's coming kingdom, especially at a time when Israel keenly felt the burden of being a subject

people. But hope for a better future was shadowed by a palpable sense of despair, a cynicism hardened by crushing Roman rule and failed revolutions. In their lifetime, Galileans had been massacred in an ugly confrontation with the governor of Judea, Pontius Pilate.

And yet Andrew was still listening that one day, during a trip to Jerusalem with John, when the prophet pointed at a fellow Galilean, the son of Joseph, and declared of Jesus, “Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!” Andrew went to the place where Jesus was staying and was captivated by this rabbi’s teaching. So he returned to Capernaum and ran toward his brother Simon and urged him to check out this Jesus.

You can almost picture the scene in your mind, can’t you? “We have found the Messiah,” John 1:41 records Andrew saying, but I see him shouting, breathless and grabbing Simon by his fishing vest. *This is the one! I know it sounds crazy. But trust me, you’ve got to come hear Him and see Him. I’ve never seen anything like this.*

Messiah, *anointed one*, meant a lot of things; and while the two brothers were catechized in the Torah, they were not scholars who pored over texts. And yet, unlike those who did, they knew enough to follow. They didn’t and wouldn’t understand then that the Christ would not just swoop in and conquer Israel’s enemies. They couldn’t see an unjust trial, a bloody cross, and the sending of the Spirit. But they knew just enough to follow.

◆ Found! ◆

I think a lot about those simple words Andrew said that day. *We have found Him.* Are these not the words that beckon us every year to

Easter? Are these not the words that one friend says to another, upending future generations? I think of my own father, who heard these words from my aunt who watched when an evangelist named Billy Graham spoke them to her on TV. My father walked that aisle in 1971 in Chicago and changed the trajectory of his troubled family. I'm here today, writing books for Easter, because my father heard those words and said them to a young Jewish girl who would become his wife, a mother who would tell her son one day: *We have found Him*.

Of course when Andrew and Simon found Jesus, they didn't know all that this would mean. And neither do we when we with knocking knees walk the aisle, or with trembling lips bow our heads, or feel, like John Wesley, strangely warmed. Some find Jesus on the side of the road, some after a drunken haze in a dorm room, some after late-night conversations with friends. Some find Jesus in rehab, others in church, and still others, like renowned scientist Francis Collins, find Jesus at the end of a test tube.

But the important thing is: you found Him. And yet as much as it seems we found Jesus, it was really Jesus who was doing the looking.

John preached. Andrew listened. John pointed to Jesus. Andrew *found*. This is how the gospel reaches you and it reaches me. God sends someone to us: a voice on the radio, a discarded tract, a persistent friend. It seems so random, and yet when we look back we see how Providence unfolds mysteriously and makes its way to us.

Simon didn't know it, but his life story was being written before he was born. It began miles away in tiny Bethlehem thirty years earlier, when an impoverished carpenter and his wife pounded on the doors of an inn, begging for a place to give birth to their baby. Simon's story began when an aging priest named Zechariah and his wife, Elizabeth,

miraculously conceived and bore a child born to be a prophet. Jesus, John the Baptist, and Simon would converge, not by accident or fate, but by the silent fingers of God. The fullness of time was coming to bear down on an unsuspecting young fisherman.

And it was on the day Simon reluctantly followed that the entrepreneur fisherman became, in Jesus' words, Peter—meaning “rock” (Matt. 16:18). Yes, the one who had to be dragged to Jesus would become a pillar of God's new creation movement in the world, would be written into salvation history as one of the twelve Apostles, and would write two letters that would become Holy Writ. Jesus' closest companions, tasked with the founding of the church, would not be drafted from the finest rabbinical schools or from among the educated scribes or the bluebloods in Herod's court, but would be plucked, like so many of Israel's leaders, from the ranks of the common. The kingdom of God seems to travel away from the places of power and toward the unheralded, the unseen, the unqualified. The carpenter King, born in poverty on the backside of nobility, seeks His followers among those whom the world does not see.

♦ Pursuing Peter ♦

That dramatic first encounter with Andrew in Jerusalem was only the first of many appeals by Jesus to Peter. One day Jesus appeared on the shores of Galilee while the two brothers worked the deep waters for another day's catch (Matt. 4; Mark 1). “Follow me,” the Master called, “and I'll make you fishers of men” (Matt. 4:19 ESV). What did “follow me” mean? He didn't know, but Peter followed anyway as Jesus taught and healed and preached in Peter's own synagogue in Capernaum (Luke 4:31).

Jesus became more familiar with Peter, staying in his home (Luke 4:38) and healing his mother-in-law of a fever, no small malady in a time before pain relievers, antibiotics, and vaccines. Peter's home became a gathering place of sorts as word spread throughout Capernaum, and others made their way to his home, the desperate seeking healing and hope from this new rabbi.

Imagine what this must have been like for Peter to experience. What questions rattled around his head? For us, reading the text today, two thousand years removed, these biblical scenes of healing don't pack the wallop they must have for those who witnessed such events. But for Peter, this was completely new. In Peter's time the blind never saw. The lame never walked. The demons never left.

While Jesus is teaching and healing, He's also pursuing Peter. One day, after Peter returns from an unsuccessful overnight fishing trip, Jesus appears again on the beach and crowds began to form, eager to listen to His teaching. So Jesus asked the brothers to lend their boat to use as a place to sit and teach the gathering crowds. The brothers' grimy and smelly boat—now a stage for the Son of God. And when the crowd dispersed, Jesus urged the men to give the nets another chance.

The Scripture suggests this tip rankled Peter, and we know why. When an amateur weighs in on our area of expertise, it raises our hackles. These guys knew the lake better than almost anyone. They were good at fishing, having spent their whole lives mastering the currents, discerning where schools of fish gathered and when exactly to cast their nets and when to draw them in. This was their business, their livelihood, their way of life. Jesus—He's good for miracles and messages, but why was He messing with their business? Imagine

LeBron James being told how to make a game-winning shot or Tiger Woods how to sink an eighteen-foot putt at the Masters or Dr. Fauci being told by one of your crazy uncles on Facebook how to diagnose infectious diseases. Peter didn't say it, but you know the internal dialogue went something like this: *Jesus, You know nothing about this business. I've been doing this my whole life. It's just not a good day out here. We'll come back and get it tomorrow.*

And yet Peter would learn, as do all who follow Jesus, that the Master is not just interested in our Sunday morning piety, but He demands lordship over all of our lives, even and maybe especially those areas we have mastered. He's a Monday-through-Friday kind of Lord.

This is what Jesus was doing with Peter that day. And to Peter's credit, he acquiesced, "If you say so," the CSB translation renders Luke's Greek. You can feel the sigh here, a grudging, shoulders-slumped kind of obedience. But he grabbed those nets, those nets he had already cleaned and stowed away, and slung them over the side of the boat.

What followed was, well, a miracle. You can quibble about the shape of the miracle: Was this the Lord of Creation, fashioning hundreds of prize tilapia, carp, and sardines in an instant? Or the Lord of Creation directing hundreds of prize tilapia, carp, and sardines to obey the voice of their Creator and swim toward nets?

What we do know is that in this seemingly ordinary moment, on a bad day at the office, Jesus opens up the heavens, just a crack, to show a group of shaken fishermen a glimpse of His divine power. As we've seen, Peter had witnessed miracles from Jesus before. But this was different. Here was Jesus in Peter's boat, in the one arena where Peter was master, in the area of his life that Peter had tucked away as his own. This was not someone else's miracle he was witnessing.

This was *Peter's* miracle. An empty net and an empty lake suddenly, inexplicably full of fish. Peter knew the sea, but Jesus *made* the sea.

There was a message in the miracle. Jesus is reassuring Peter that he could leave behind his profitable business and follow. That boatful of fish was a check in the mail at just the right time, a yield that would perhaps give him enough money to care for his family while he was on the road with Jesus. He had heard Jesus say to seek first the kingdom of God and all these things—important things like money and family and future—would be taken care of (Matt. 6:33). Peter could afford to deny himself, to leave father and mother, to abandon investments where moth and rust corrupt and where thieves break through and steal. A disciple of Christ can entrust those things that keep us up at night to the God who never sleeps. Not a promise of prosperity, of course, but a promise of provision.

But Jesus was delivering an even clearer message. This was a vision of Peter's future life. He was the empty net God would one day fill with spiritual power to preach to thousands of people at Pentecost, lead the early church, and write two books of inspired biblical canon.

Peter's response in this moment is really the only appropriate response when confronted with Jesus: he bowed and worshiped Jesus. "Go away from me, because I'm a sinful man, Lord!" (Luke 5:8). You'll notice that nobody in Scripture is ever casual after an encounter with the living God: Moses glowed, Isaiah was "undone," Ezekiel face-planted in fear, John fainted. Peter was overwhelmed—but he left his nets and followed.

♦ Where Else Would We Go? ♦

Following Jesus took Peter across Galilee and Judea and to places he could have never imagined. Lepers healed. Lame walking. The blind receiving sight. He saw Jesus raise a servant girl from the dead. Peter was there, twice, when the Lord of Creation scooped up a little boy's lunch and stretched it to feed thousands of hungry, desperate people, with food left over. And there was the time Jesus, awoke from a nap and saved the disciples from shipwreck by speaking, yes speaking, to the water and turning a choppy sea smooth as glass in an instant.

It seemed the more Peter messed up, the more Jesus drew him into the inner circle.

There were also many moments that Peter just didn't understand, such as Jesus' insistence on going through Samaria, where no Galilean ever set foot. And not only did He pass through Samaria, He initiated a conversation with a sketchy woman who astonishingly became an evangelist. He heard Jesus describe the faith of a Roman centurion, the very symbol of oppression and power, as the greatest faith in all of Israel. And there was the time Jesus insisted on dining with the traitorous tax collectors.

And it seemed the more Peter messed up, the more he opened his mouth before his brain engaged, the more Jesus drew him into the inner circle. Peter was the only one who, when he saw Jesus walking on the water toward them, didn't stay in the boat to gaze on the miracle but impulsively leapt into the sea and began walking on the water himself (Matt. 14:29). Peter was the one who, when Jesus took him and James and John to the top of a mountain and revealed to them a glimpse of His divine glory, suggested they domesticate the

Transfiguration with a series of memorials, and was rebuked by the Father (Matt. 17:1–4; Mark 9:2–5; Luke 9:32–33).

Perhaps nothing encapsulates what this three-year journey was like for this fisherman-turned-follower than the words he spoke in response to a haunting question. After thousands of fair-weather followers peeled away from their movement in response to some hard teaching, Jesus offered a most human question: “You don’t want to go away too, do you?” (John 6:67). Jesus, Son of God, knew His mission and journeyed toward the cross, but Jesus, Man of Sorrows, was hurt as people rejected Him. In this moment, Peter spoke up:

Simon Peter answered, “Lord, to whom will we go? You have the words of eternal life. We have come to believe and know that you are the Holy One of God.” (John 6:68–69)

To whom will we go? This is why we pause every spring and gaze at a bloody cross and an empty tomb; why we drag ourselves out of bed on cold Sunday mornings, week after week; why, weary and sorrowful and not sure about anything, we come to Jesus in jumbled prayer. We have nowhere else to go, no one else to turn to. Jesus has the words of eternal life.

What Peter had was a tiny seed of faith, implanted in him by the Spirit of God. We know this because we read his bold words of affirmation of Jesus as the Christ, the anointed one spoken of by the Old Testament prophets. Jesus, standing at Caesarea Philippi, on the ruins of ancient temples where sacrifices to the pagan gods had been offered, had pressed into His disciples and had asked them, “Who do you say I am?” (Matt. 16:15–16; Mark 8:29; Luke 9:20). Peter answered the question that, sooner or later, every human soul must

answer. “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God” (ESV).

He didn’t understand everything. Peter couldn’t imagine the Messiah King as a crucified, arrested Lord. He didn’t like Jesus’ prediction of death and resurrection for Himself, hardly the career trajectory of a triumphant conqueror. In fact, not long after his declaration of faith, Peter was rebuked by Jesus for opposing the journey to the cross. Peter’s vision of God’s kingdom involved blood, yes, but surely it would be Roman blood spilled underfoot as the righteous King put down the Roman overlords. He could not see ahead the blood of the One he loved splattered across an ugly instrument of torture and death. But make no mistake: Peter’s open declaration of Jesus as God’s Son was not the safe choice. It defied the religious leaders. Soon the crowds would be howling for Jesus’ death. And one day this simple declaration would make Peter an enemy of Rome.

With twenty-first-century hindsight, expressed in air-conditioned auditoriums and comfortable seating, we don’t fully grasp what it would mean for a respectable Jewish businessman to sacrifice his reputation and openly declare that this teacher from Nazareth was God Himself, in the flesh. We can’t feel the sting of social isolation Peter and others would endure in the years ahead, alienation from their own family and tribe and eventual martyrdom.

Jesus’ response was that upon this rock—yes, Peter the impulsive, impatient, imperfect disciple—Christ would build His church. Peter and the other disciples would become Apostles, ushering in a new age of salvation history.

♦ I've Got This, Lord ♦

Which bring us, ultimately, to the life-defining moment of Peter's story. It's a story included in all four gospels so we know it was important to the gospel writers who wrote their eyewitness accounts under inspiration of the Holy Spirit following decades of oral tradition in the early church. You can't tell the Easter story without talking about Peter's stunning denial.

How could a devoted disciple suddenly turn on Jesus? To understand, I think we have to step into his sandals on that tragic early morning. The scenes of denial come toward the end of a long and emotionally draining week that began with great joy and promise.

Jesus and the disciples had arrived the Friday before in Bethany, a small community within walking distance of Jerusalem. The week ahead would feel more like a year. It would begin with an emotional high, with Jesus triumphantly entering the city on a donkey and being hailed by crowds of palm-branch-waving supporters as the King of the Jews. Jesus was fulfilling Zechariah's prophecy of an unorthodox future king who would ride into Jerusalem, not in a chariot, but on a humble beast of burden.

Then there was a joyous meal at Simon the leper's house where Mary opened an expensive bottle of perfume and washed Jesus' feet in a display of extravagance that Peter couldn't understand and enraged Judas. But Jesus embraced Mary's gesture as a sign that she understood, unlike the others, what was to unfold in the coming days.

How could a devoted disciple suddenly turn on Jesus?

As the days wore on, there was a growing sense of danger. Whispers of plots by religious leaders, secret schemes to capture Jesus and the

disciples. Word came of a conspiracy to capture and kill Lazarus, whom Jesus had raised from the dead. It must have frustrated Peter and the other disciples that Jesus seemed to do nothing to tamp down danger or to fight back. At times, Jesus seemed to exacerbate the division, chasing out the merchants and the grifters from the temple and predicting that Herod's magnificent edifice, Israel's source of national pride, would be unceremoniously destroyed in the not-so-distant future.

One night, Jesus gathered them at the Mount of Olives and communicated His vision for the future of Israel, of the disciples' movement into the world. If Peter was looking for immediate revolution against their enemies, he surely came away disappointed. But Jesus talked of both His impending death and of a second coming, this time in judgment. If, all these centuries later, Christians still seem perplexed by the future, imagine how the disciples felt on that chilly night.

It all climaxed, however, when Jesus and the disciples enjoyed a Passover in a room that Peter and John had secured. This had all of the elements of a typical Passover meal, except Jesus continued to talk of His own coming arrest and death at the hands of His enemies. How could a king rule, Peter must have wondered, when He seemed so resigned to the fate of capture? But Jesus continued and mentioned His leaving them and the sending of the Spirit of God, a prospect that made them sad and a little angry.

Peter had left everything and had staked it all on the idea that Jesus was the promised Messiah. But how could the Messiah allow Himself to be captured and killed? Internally, Peter must have reassured himself that he wouldn't let this happen. He'd fight and give his life in order to protect his Master. But Jesus didn't seem to entertain Peter's delusions. He somberly predicted that all the disciples would desert Him, and

one would even betray Him. It was like He could see into Peter's soul in a way Peter couldn't see himself:

“Simon, Simon, behold, Satan demanded to have you, that he might sift you like wheat, but I have prayed for you that your faith may not fail. And when you have turned again, strengthen your brothers.” Peter said to him, “Lord, I am ready to go with you both to prison and to death.” Jesus said, “I tell you, Peter, the rooster will not crow this day, until you deny three times that you know me.”
(Luke 22:31–34 ESV)

After the Passover meal, Jesus asked Peter and James and John to join Him in the Garden of Gethsemane where Jesus went to pray. He asked them to wait for Him, to pray, at this late hour. They were weary. It was very late. Imagine how the roller-coaster of the last several days must have caught up with Peter. He was probably still trying to process the stunning exchange with Judas. The friend he had trusted, who had been side-by-side with them for three years, who had given up everything, would now sell Jesus out. He didn't want to believe it. So Peter drifted off to sleep, only to be awakened by the sight of an ashen, weary Jesus, tears and blood rolling down His face. His words pierced Peter's soul, *Could you not have prayed and watched?*

And then it happened so suddenly. Soldiers marching into the dark garden. Torches and swords. And . . . Judas, their friend, embracing Jesus in a final, sick display. The kiss of betrayal. Peter was so enraged, adrenaline flowing. His world spinning. His life coming unglued. This was so unfair. So unjust. So wrong. So he clumsily stole a sword and struck the high priest's servant. Jesus didn't accept Peter's defense of Him but instead healed the ear of His enemy.

The disciples, we are told in Matthew 25 and Mark 14, scattered. But Peter and John lingered, using John's connections to get into the courtyard where the secret and illegal trial of Jesus took place in Ananias's house. Should Peter have gone? What else could he do? He had to find a way to be near Jesus, to protect Him, to fight for Him, to demonstrate his loyalty.

The same impulsive faith that led him to leap out of the boat and walk on water, to blurt out an affirmation of Jesus' deity, was the same faith that kept Peter close when others fled. So Peter stands by a fire in the courtyard, probably a bit nervous. It's dark, so maybe they don't see him. Maybe he's trying to be inconspicuous, but it's impossible. A servant girl comes over and asks him, "You're one of those with Jesus of Nazareth, right?"

It could be that he's trying to shush her so others don't hear and his cover won't be blown, so he can stick around. But he's a fisherman, not a spy. He's Peter, the Galilean with the thick accent. So Peter dashes out of there and sort of lingers by the entrance.

Mark's gospel says that the first rooster crowed in this moment. A warning shot. But I'm not sure Peter even heard it. I think Peter waits out here a bit, watching to see if the coast is clear, then goes back to that fire. Remember it's cold out, probably forty degrees. And he wants to hear news. So he sneaks back into the courtyard again, trying not to be seen.

But he's no Navy SEAL or trained Roman operative. "This guy is with Jesus!" someone shouts. And again, he denies it. At this point, I still don't think Peter is trying to sell out Christ. I think he's still trying to stay close, so he can see what is happening. But this plan, this trust in his own instincts and bravery, is failing fast. To quote that twenty-first-century theologian, country singer Jason Isbell, Peter was

telling himself, “[I] thought I was strong until I finally had to fight.”²

One of the relatives of the servant whose ear was cut off by Peter says, “Didn’t I see you with him in the garden?” At this point, Peter’s cover is totally blown. He’s exposed before his accusers and he panics. I mean, if your uncle’s ear gets cut off, you recognize the guy who raised that sword so awkwardly against him, right? So Peter resorts to the language of the sea, spitting out curses, his old life tumbling back into the foreground. And it’s in this moment of truth that the words Jesus spoke to him the night before echo back and pierce his soul. Another rooster crow.

The gospels all record their versions of this story, but Luke, the meticulous journalist, records a particularly haunting detail: somehow Peter was within eyeshot of Jesus. “Then the Lord turned and looked at Peter” (Luke 22:61). You can just read the hurt and ache in those words. The eye contact, the look of anguish on Jesus’ face, the despair roiling now through Peter’s heart. This once-proud, self-assured young man was fully and unreservedly broken. Luke later records that he “went out and wept bitterly” (Luke 22:62).

Have you ever had a moment when you wept bitterly? I have. A genuine confrontation with the cross of Christ will do this, exposing our pride and self-sufficiency, the sin that blackens our souls. Whether you approach Jesus with a record of accomplishment and a life of charity or you shuffle forward with halting steps and a life of shame, Calvary will break you, and yet it will lift you up.

And so we shouldn’t see this as Peter’s end, but the beginning of his life’s work. Peter’s failure here was not one of cowardice, but of pride. He had loyally stayed by Jesus’ side far longer while others fled. Peter’s failure was his inability to fully see himself. When Peter looked in the mirror every morning, he saw a strong, successful, brave

warrior, but Jesus' piercing look that dark night revealed the real man: a weak and frail disciple.

The world would one day see a courageous Peter, resisting the government and boldly preaching the gospel to thousands. But it would be a different kind of courage, one that he would later define as truth wrapped in gentleness and kindness and buoyed not by own self-assurance, but the "living hope" of the resurrection of

**Like God's
best servants,
Peter would
walk with
a limp.**

Jesus Christ (1 Peter 1:3). Peter would live the rest of his life with humility. That rooster crow he heard on the night of his denial? That was a common sound in the cacophony of daily life in Israel. So imagine every sunrise after that fateful day, he'd be reminded of his failure.

Like God's best servants, Peter would walk with a limp; he'd bear the scars of past failure. This is the same journey toward leadership we see throughout the Scriptures: Abraham had Ishmael, Jacob had a hollowed-out thigh bone, Moses a stutter, Paul a mysterious thorn in the flesh. We have to come to understand that our scars are not marks to be ashamed of, but gifts from God that remind us, daily, of our weaknesses.

This is hard for us to comprehend in a culture that continually tells us we are strong. We are catechized by inspirational mumbo-jumbo: *you are strong, you are brave, you've got this*. But real strength is found not in summoning some illusion of inner machismo. Instead, we, like Peter, need to be broken in order to be brave.

Peter's dramatic fall was the beginning of his rise. And we only know about the denial and the rooster crowing because Peter himself shared it. Nobody else from the inner circle was with him in the

courtyard, by the fire, and outside the high priest's house. We can only read about it in the gospels because Peter must have shared it, over and over again, with audiences large and small until it became such a part of the eyewitness narratives that later became the gospels and inspired canon of Scripture. What's more, if Mark was the first gospel written, as many scholars believe, then this means Peter *intended* for God's people to see him at his worst moment.

We can only wonder how many thousands, perhaps millions, have converted to Christianity because this Apostle cut open his heart and shared his most vulnerable moment. Only heaven knows. So maybe it's time we stop looking at Peter as a foolish coward and instead see in this man an example of Christ's transformative gospel work. Peter's response to his sin, in contrast to that of the sad tale of Judas, is a study in true repentance. Like David's transparent confession in Psalm 51, we find no justifications, obfuscations, or anger. We just see a once-proud, self-confident man reduced to a mess of tears. This is why Jesus would name him "the rock," not because he was bursting with brava-do, but because of a tender, contrite heart.

Most importantly, Peter's denial shows us something about the Savior. Jesus, at a moment of extreme agony and personal shame, turned and looked with compassion at His friend who was at that moment sinning against Him. "While we were still sinners, Christ died for us" (Rom. 5:8). He didn't go to the cross for perfect, whole people. He died for the sick and the broken. He died for you and me.

Jesus, while predicting Peter's demise, also quietly said the words, "When you have turned back, strengthen your brothers." *When you have turned back*. Jesus saw through Peter's failures and toward his future as an Apostle. This is a word for Christians: The way to personal

peace is through repentance and the way to restoration is to look at your Savior who has not turned away from you but has fresh reservoirs of grace.

And so it is, in this generation, God is calling flawed, broken, repentant people for His mission in the world.

♦ And . . . Peter ♦

We don't know where Peter went after his denial. He isn't present, like John and Jesus' mother Mary, at the foot of the cross while Jesus died. But we know he likely didn't go back home. Capernaum is about eighty miles from Jerusalem, a two-hour journey by car today and a four-day walk back then. Did he stay with friends Mary and Martha and Lazarus in Bethany?

What we do know is that the next couple of days must have been Peter's most difficult. Broken by his behavior the night of Jesus' arrest and unsure of what the future looks like, Peter was staring into an abyss of uncertainty. All that Jesus had promised during their last meal together, the passages we read in John 14–16, didn't make sense yet. The King he assumed would set up the kingdom of God and overthrow the Romans was decomposing in a borrowed tomb.

Unless, of course, He wasn't.

Peter's Sunday-morning misery was punctuated by a sudden visit from a breathless group of women led by Mary Magdalene and Mary, Jesus' mother. They could barely get the words out. What they said seemed crazy. No, actually it was crazy. The body of Jesus, gone? This was impossible. The tomb was guarded with tight Roman security. A heavy stone sealed the entrance. Oh, and there is this little detail that dead bodies don't just rise again. But the women were serious.

And they carried a word especially for Peter. Mark records a scene at the tomb where a man dressed in a white robe urges Mary, “Tell the disciples and Peter” (Mark 16:7).

And Peter. These two words had Peter rubbing the sleep out of his eyes and sprinting toward the cave where Joseph of Arimathea, a wealthy benefactor, paid to bury Jesus. When Peter arrived, he saw what the women had just seen: an empty hole, a rolled-away stone, and, most telling, Jesus’ folded grave clothes.

Peter was probably never so happy to see a pile of used clothes. The neat folds, placed with intentionality, were clear evidence that Jesus had indeed slipped the bonds of death and was raised by the Father to life. This was a physical testimony to a physical resurrection.

We don’t know where and when Jesus met up with Peter for the first time after the resurrection, but we can imagine the scene. Scripture records several other meetings with Jesus where Peter was likely present, twice in the Upper Room, another in Galilee as Jesus delivered the Great Commission mandate. Paul records later in 1 Corinthians 15:7 that Jesus made a personal appearance to Peter after the resurrection. Jesus, just as persistent in Peter’s restoration as He was in his initial calling.

Peter’s story climaxes in a scene John paints: an event on the beach that matches, almost perfectly, the description Luke gives us at the beginning of Peter’s journey with Jesus. It’s no mistake, no coincidence that the Master bookends His three years with Peter with the same miracle: a fruitless day of fishing, a reluctant toss of the nets to humor Jesus, and a boatload of fish.

John writes this scene with great detail. Here is Jesus physically feeding His disciples, a testament to a real resurrection of His body. Jesus is not a mystical disembodied angel, but a resurrected human.

There's fish to eat: humans eat, angels don't. This matters to us because it means if Jesus rose again, those who are in Him will also rise again, bodily.

And let's think about what memory a charcoal fire, the same kind of fire that was burning in that cold courtyard, would spark in Peter? The last time he warmed his hands, his heart turned cold toward Jesus. And yet this image is undoubtedly an image of hope. Peter may have abandoned Jesus in Jesus' hour of need, but Jesus would not abandon

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Peter in his hour of need. This is why Jesus asking Peter three times about the depth of his love is not a test of faithfulness as some imagine it, but God's way of calling this future Apostle to a life of service. The new way of leadership in the kingdom of God is not about position or title, but about humbly serving—feeding—the people of God. To love God is to love those God loves, and to declare what Peter knew: Christ defeated sin, death and the grave, and is saving sinners.

Christ is still seeking out fishers of men, the kind of leaders who walk with a limp. Here we see God's unmatched, one-way love. We fail Him, but He doesn't fail us. We forget Him, but He doesn't forget us. We pursue other loves, but He is faithful.

♦ An Empty Soul Is Filled ♦

Peter's life is one, really, of emptiness and filling: empty nets, empty self, empty tomb. An empty net is a sign of professional failure and for a successful Galilean merchant, there was no greater sign of loss than an empty net. An empty net meant nothing to sell and trade. It meant an empty wallet, empty stomachs, and an empty house. Jesus entered

Peter's life, at the very beginning of this call to ministry and at the very end, filling Peter's empty nets.

But this was only the smallest way Christ would fill the empty places in Peter's life. Peter's soul, that day on the beach, was also bereft. He had failed Jesus in the worst possible way in the worst moments. The news of the resurrection was both bitter and sweet. Sweet in that the one he loved was not held down by Roman nails and the devil's schemes. Bitter in that Peter would have to face the friend he betrayed. Yet it was another empty place—a borrowed tomb outside the city walls—that healed the shame in this disciple's soul. For Jesus, in walking out of that grave, walked into victory over sin, the sin that corrupts hearts and makes proud men cowards. Stripped of his self-assurance, bereft of confidence, shorn of pride, Peter could now be filled with a different kind of power, the one that saw him stand up to religious bullies, preach the gospel to thousands, and one day hang upside down for the same Lord he had earlier betrayed.

What gave Peter this courage? That look from Jesus in Jesus' moment of agony. The same kind of salvation that gives us courage. Years later, as an aging Apostle, he'd write: "He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree; so that, having died to sins, we might live for righteousness. By his wounds you have been healed" (1 Peter 2:24).

Peter could live for righteousness and we can live for righteousness, not because we summon up our own goodness or bravery, but because there was One who bore our own sins in His body on the tree. It is not until our nets our empty, until all of the self-saving, self-justifying, self-satisfying religion is gone and we are absolutely as low as we can go, that Jesus arrives and fills us with supernatural grace to let His life be lived through us.



STUDY QUESTIONS:

- ◆ Reread the narrative of Peter's first call and second call in Luke 5 and John 21. What does Jesus' pursuit of Peter tell us about the way God calls disciples?
- ◆ Think through the denial of Peter. Why do you suppose Peter insisted that he, unlike the other disciples, would be loyal and brave when Jesus needed him? What does that tell us about our own tendency to think we are stronger than we really are?
- ◆ In John 6:68, Peter says that he would follow Jesus because he had nowhere else to go. What does this tell us about the nature of faith?

SUGGESTED HYMNS AND SONGS:

And Can It Be That I Should Gain—Charles Wesley

How Can It Be—Lauren Daigle

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