

From Folly to Faith: The Apostle Peter



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *Acts 2:14–40, Acts 3, 5:1–11, 1 Peter, 2 Peter.*

Memory Text: “Simon Peter answered him, ‘Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life’” (*John 6:68, NIV*).

Key Thought: The apostle Peter was one of the central pillars of the early church. Jesus changed Peter from an unreliable but passionate disciple into a rocklike tower of strength in sharing the gospel.

Peter's impulsive, emotional character has made him an interesting study. He was a disciple whose heart was in the right place but who made many mistakes.

Peter's story especially helps us understand the role of emotions in the Christian life. When you are lost in a forest, your senses can take you only so far. You can see, hear, and smell—and still be lost. You need a compass and a map, something more than what you have naturally.

So it is in our spiritual lives. What we feel is not the final test of what is truth. We need something more—something outside of us. We need a spiritual compass and map. Emotions are a vital part of the Christian life but not the most important part. Without appropriate care, they even can be dangerous. Peter was someone whose emotions got him into trouble more often than not. However, once placed under submission to Jesus, his emotions and zeal became powerful tools for the Lord's work.

**Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, August 23.*

The Fisherman

Peter came from Bethsaida, a fishing village on the northeastern coast of the Sea of Galilee. Bethsaida, which means House of Fishing, was where Jesus later performed many miracles. For nearly two thousand years, Bethsaida was lost to history. Not until 1987 was the archaeological site of this village discovered.

Although Peter was married (*Matt. 8:14*), we know nothing about his wife or any children he might have had. We do know he was living with his wife and mother-in-law in Capernaum when Jesus called him to be His disciple.

Read Matthew 4:18–20. How did Peter respond to Jesus’ call? What significance is found in the fact that they “left their nets” (*vs. 20*)?

The simplicity of this description leaves us to guess what went through Peter’s mind. Obviously, something about Jesus was so compelling that Peter was prepared to leave his home and livelihood to follow this itinerant Teacher. The point should be obvious to all of us. We need to be ready to do the same thing; that is, to follow Jesus no matter the personal cost (*see Luke 14:26, 27*).

Peter came from a humble working-class background. Contrast that to Paul’s background. *Acts 22:3, Rom. 11:1, Phil. 3:5; see also Acts 5:34*. What point can we take away from this contrast?

Either way, for both Peter and Paul, regardless of their different backgrounds, the call of Jesus required total commitment on their part. Upper class, working class, it does not matter.

Recount your own experience when being called by Jesus. What did it cost you? What did you have to give up? If someone asked you, Was it worth it? how would you respond, and why?

The Lesson in Brief

► **Key Text:** *John 6:68*

► **The Student Will:**

Know: Peter as an activist leader who got things done, but with tendencies to react more emotionally than rationally.

Feel: What it must have taken to mold Peter’s character into what Jesus wanted.

Do: Develop with the class a game plan for character development.

► **Learning Outline:**

I. Peter: A Not-Too-Solid Rock (*Luke 22:32*)

A What is an “activist” leader? Is that good or bad?

B Make a list of some of Peter’s “not-too-solid” experiences.

C What’s the difference between Peter and John (review last week’s lesson)?

D This week’s lesson talks about Peter in the Gospels, Acts, and the Epistles. Have the class discuss these three “Peters.”

II. Church Leadership: Who Should Be There? (*John 21:15–18*)

A Ask your class if they would elect Peter as head elder of your church. Why, or why not?

B Which disciple would they elect?

C Have the class make a list of characteristics they expect to see in church leaders at any level.

III. Game Plan

Taking John (last week’s lesson) and Peter as examples, have the class come up with some specific things that need to be done for characters to be molded according to Jesus’ expectations.

► **Summary:** Jesus harnessed Peter’s activism and good intentions and strengthened him in the faith to be a major pillar of the early Christian church.

Peter's Folly

Like the other disciples, Peter had a unique opportunity to learn from Jesus. He walked many miles with Him, ate with Him, worked with Him. He listened to Jesus speak, watched the way He dealt with people, saw Him heal the sick. He witnessed dramatic spectacles—the Mount of Transfiguration, where Jesus talked with Moses and Elijah; Jesus raising the dead; Jesus arrested; Jesus risen from the grave.

Peter also had many opportunities for practical learning. Often Peter found himself in the middle of experiences that provided life-changing object lessons. All these lessons were preparing him for his role as one of the great missionaries of the early church.

In the course of his experiences with Jesus, Peter made many mistakes. Read the mistakes depicted below. What were they, and what lessons should Peter have learned from them?

Matt. 14:22–32

Matt. 26:36–46

Mark 14:29–31, 66–72

John 18:10, 11

Brash, presumptuous, prone to violence, collapsing under pressure, sleeping on the job, Peter on one level appeared to be everything that a humble, meek, faithful Christian should not be. And yet, before it was all over, Peter became one of the key leaders in the early Christian church, a powerful evangelist and missionary for Jesus. What a testimony to what God can do in a life surrendered to Him.

What lessons can you learn, from this account, about not judging others? Or even judging yourself?

Learning Cycle

► **STEP 1—Motivate**

Very few New Testament characters rival Simon Peter in terms of bold actions and outrageous statements. He invited himself to walk with Jesus on the water, he cut off a man's ear, and he initially refused to let Jesus wash his feet just before the Last Supper. Often, when Jesus asked His disciples a question, it was Peter who spoke up. With James and John, Peter accompanied Jesus on some of His most outstanding miracles.

Yet often in the sermons that mention Peter, he's treated as kind of a lovable buffoon; someone who speaks and acts before he thinks through the results of his words or actions. The implied message of these sermons is, "Don't be like Peter. Keep your mouth shut and your hands to yourself. It's better to be safe than sorry."

That attitude misses the entire point of his story: Peter's influence in the early church was huge because he was willing to take risks for Christ. When Peter was converted and transformed, the Holy Spirit used Peter's bold proclamations and brave actions to build up Christ's kingdom.

► **STEP 2—Explore**


Bible Commentary

I. Peter's Call (*Review Matt. 4:18–22, Mark 1:16–20, Luke 5:1–11 with your class.*)

A casual reading of these verses gives the impression that Jesus showed up out of the blue and invited Peter, James, and John to follow Him, and almost on a whim they accepted His invitation.

But even fishermen are more sophisticated than that. We know that Peter was married; what kind of thoughts must have gone through his mind as he considered leaving everything to follow Jesus?

Consider This: Peter and his fellow fishermen had no doubt heard about Jesus before He showed up and sat in his boat. What effect did the miraculous catch of fish have on those who saw it? What was behind Peter's exclamation: " 'Go away from me, Lord; I am a sinful man!' "

C O N T I N U E D 

Learning From Jesus

Read Matthew 16:13–26. What was the nature of the exchange? Why did Peter respond as he did? What basic lesson was Jesus seeking to teach the disciples?

Though Peter had declared that Jesus was the Messiah, the Christ, he had a false understanding of what that meant. The view Peter and the other disciples had of the Messiah reflected the common understanding of the day. The Messiah would come from the line of David and would overthrow the Romans and bring justice and peace.

Yet, Jesus clearly taught the disciples and the crowds that the kingdom of God was a spiritual kingdom. They would not establish it by power, swords, and daggers but by love, forgiveness, and righteousness.

At a pivotal stage of His ministry, Jesus decided to tell the disciples about His death—that He would go to Jerusalem, be killed, and rise again after three days. Peter was offended by the idea that Jesus was going to die—even though this death was to be the central pillar of the plan of salvation.

Within Peter’s worldview, there was no room for this. Peter had left his home village and his fishing business to follow Jesus. He had given his life to supporting Him and His ministry. The death of his Master, therefore, had no place in the scenario Peter had painted in his mind. Jesus would set up His kingdom on earth, and Peter would play a key role in that kingdom of justice and peace. How could such a wonderful movement of righteousness and healing end in the death of its Leader? It is almost as if Peter either did not hear or did not understand Jesus’ promise to rise on the third day.

Notice the degree of selfishness seen in Peter here. That explains, it seems, Christ’s words in Matthew 16:23–26. Read those verses again. In what areas of your own life might you apply those words?

Learning Cycle CONTINUED

(*Luke 5:8, NIV*)? What does that tell us about Peter and about His openness to the prompting of God? Imagine if Peter had thought himself so holy and religious that he didn't need Jesus.

II. Peter's Conversion (*Review Matt. 16:13–23, 26:69–75, John 13:39 with your class.*)

These passages describe situations in which both Peter's character strengths and flaws are revealed. But to maintain, as some do, that Peter was not truly converted indicates how many of us misunderstand conversion.

Being converted doesn't mean that we'll never again experience failure, any more than being married means you'll never fight with your spouse. Conversion simply means that we're on the Christian pathway. If we fall, as Peter sometimes did, we get back up and get back on the path.

Consider This: What comfort comes from knowing that Jesus can transform us as He transformed Peter? What does Peter's transformation tell us about conversion? Is it an event or a process?

III. Peter's Ministry (*Review Acts 2:1–14, 3:1–12, and 10:1–22 with your class.*)

Being a Christian is a learning experience. Peter's experiences with Jesus provided the platform on which he built his ministry to both Jews and Gentiles.

Consider This: For each of the three incidents recorded in the Scriptures above, what was the primary lesson Peter had to learn? Ask your class: How might the Holy Spirit be leading us to be more daring for God?

The Peter of Acts

No doubt, much of the Gospels do not paint Peter in a particularly great light. He is shown, time and again, floundering, falling, making great mistakes. Yet, the Gospels end with a clear indication of the bumbling disciple's future.

Read John 21:14–19. What is Jesus saying to Peter here? Why is that so astonishing, considering Peter's past?

“Feed my sheep”? That is exactly what Peter eventually comes to do. Again, what a powerful testimony to what God can do in the life of someone dedicated to Him. The fiery, impetuous Peter now takes a key role in the formation of the early church.

Browse through the following texts. What do they tell us about the role and work of Peter?

Acts 2:14–40

Acts 3

Act 5:1–11

The transformation was astounding, and the lessons for us should be obvious. Through the surrender of himself to Christ, Peter became a powerful witness for the Lord. Despite Peter's numerous mistakes and shortcomings, the Lord was still able to use him as a powerful witness.

How different are you today from when you first started following Jesus? What progress have you seen? What areas need more improvement? Why, no matter how slow the progress seems, should you never give up?

Learning Cycle CONTINUED**IV. Peter's Legacy** (*Have someone from your class read 1 Pet. 3:8, 9; 4:7–11 out loud.*)

According to tradition, Peter died by being crucified upside down. Apparently, at the end of his life of service to Christ he felt unworthy to die in the same way Jesus did.

Consider This: If, after reading the Scriptures in this section, you had to summarize Peter's counsel to the church in one word, what would that word be?

► **STEP 3—Practice****Thought Questions:**

- 1 All we know about most of the characters in the Bible is gleaned from just a few verses. Some of the snapshots we have of Peter aren't all that flattering. What would people know about you based on glimpses of your life, seen here and there?
- 2 Another thing about Bible biographies is that months and years are compressed into a few verses or chapters. How long does it take for a person's character to be revealed? At what stages is it most likely that character can be altered?

Application Questions:

- 1 Jesus' love and patience are highlighted in the stories of Peter's misdeeds and mistakes. In what areas of your life can you see God changing you into someone who more correctly reflects His character? List at least three.
- 2 What, exactly, was Jesus doing for Peter when He told him, "Feed my sheep" (*John 21:17, NIV*)? When has Jesus expressed His confidence in you by giving you a responsibility you weren't sure you were capable of?

Witnessing

- 1 No question: When Jesus first called him, Peter was a little rough

CONTINUED ►

The Peter of the Epistles

When Jesus told Peter, “Feed my sheep,” no doubt the discouraged fisherman had no idea what was coming, or the role he would play in the Lord’s church. Though we have seen, in Acts, Peter fulfilling that command, we can see it also in the fact that this same Peter was also the author of two epistles, his way of “feeding the sheep” not just in his own time but for all church history. In a sense, every time we read one of his letters, we are seeing another fulfillment of Christ’s words to His disciple.

Pick one chapter, any chapter, from either of the epistles of Peter. Read it over, pray over it, and try to imagine the character of the person writing it. What can you learn about the new Peter from what you have read in that chapter?

In some ways it is hard to imagine these deep, eloquent words coming from the same man seen in the Gospels, the harsh, brash fisherman whose mouth ran faster than his mind or his faith. Yet, this is the Peter transformed by God’s grace into what Paul called “a new creature” (2 Cor: 5:17).

Particularly powerful are Peter’s words in 1 Peter 1:18–21 and in 1 Peter 2:24, in which Peter puts emphasis on the death of Jesus for the redemption of our souls. The Peter who once was determined that Jesus should never go to the Cross is now the Peter who is proclaiming the Cross as the means of redemption, as the place where Jesus, our Substitute, bore our sins. Notice, too, the wording of 1 Peter 2:18–23 in which Peter is advocating a kind of pacifism, a turning of the cheek that one would not have found in the Peter of the Gospels. Truly, the change was remarkable. It should give us all hope, regardless of where we are in our own personal character development.

Go back over the chapter you picked from one of Peter’s epistles. What was the main point? How can you take what this shepherd is feeding you and make it your own?

Learning Cycle CONTINUED

around the edges. Who, in your circle of friends or fellow church members, needs some help polishing out the rough places? What specific activities are you prepared to engage in to see that it happens?

2 It has been said, “Truth is not so much taught as caught.” Peter was a man of action because Jesus was a man of action; Peter just reflected what he saw in Jesus. What activities or events could you plan, as a group or as individuals, to model Christian virtues for those who are still developing as Christians?

► **STEP 4—Apply**

Ellen G. White wrote, “Sanctification is the work of a lifetime. As our opportunities multiply, our experience will enlarge, and our knowledge increase. We shall become strong to bear responsibility, and our maturity will be in proportion to our privileges.”—*Christ’s Object Lessons*, pp. 65, 66. The truth of this statement is surely borne out in the story of Peter.

Consider This: There are two ways to look at Peter’s story: one, from Peter’s perspective, and the other, from Jesus’ perspective. Ask your class to respond to these three questions:

- What is it about Jesus that makes you want to dedicate your life to Him and His kingdom, as did Peter? What talents do you bring to this relationship? Why is it important to recognize that no matter what your gifts are, they all come from the Lord?
- As you see yourself from Christ’s perspective, what areas of your life need to be transformed? Are you a more faithful follower of Christ today than you were a year ago? Two years ago? Ten years ago? How can you know one way or another?
- What responsibilities are you now carrying that you never imagined would be yours? What larger responsibilities might God have in store for you?

As you close the class with prayer, allow a few moments of silence for God to impress your class members of avenues they might pursue to be of greater service to Christ and His kingdom.

Further Study: Read Ellen G. White, “A Night on the Lake,” pp. 377–382, in *The Desire of Ages*.

“In his early discipleship Peter thought himself strong. Like the Pharisee, in his own estimation he was ‘not as other men are.’ When Christ on the eve of His betrayal forewarned His disciples, ‘All ye shall be offended because of Me this night,’ Peter confidently declared, ‘Although all shall be offended, yet will not I.’ Mark 14:27, 29. Peter did not know his own danger. Self-confidence misled him. He thought himself able to withstand temptation; but in a few short hours the test came, and with cursing and swearing he denied his Lord.

“When the crowing of the cock reminded him of the words of Christ, surprised and shocked at what he had just done he turned and looked at his Master. At that moment Christ looked at Peter, and beneath that grieved look, in which compassion and love for him were blended, Peter understood himself. He went out and wept bitterly. That look of Christ’s broke his heart. Peter had come to the turning point, and bitterly did he repent his sin. He was like the publican in his contrition and repentance, and like the publican he found mercy. The look of Christ assured him of pardon.”—Ellen G. White, *Christ’s Object Lessons*, pp. 152–154.

Discussion Questions:

- ① Go through Peter’s epistles and look for things that specifically show how different a person he was from the Peter of the Gospels. What encouragement can you draw from what you find?
- ② It is easy to criticize Peter’s lack of faith as he sank into the water. But Peter was the only disciple who had the courage to get out of the boat. What are some of the ways you need to “get out of the boat” in your Christian life? What about your own church? Does it need to do the same?
- ③ Ellen G. White writes, “Every true disciple is born into the kingdom of God as a missionary.”—*The Desire of Ages*, p. 195. Many followers of Christ lose their early enthusiasm to share what they have learned with others. How can church members recapture that passion for sharing the good news? How can you help each other regain this desire for witnessing?

Summary: The story of Peter is a tribute to what God can do through even the weakest disciple. Jesus harnessed Peter’s passion and good intentions and strengthened him in the faith to be a mighty pillar of the early Christian church.