

Who was Peter in the Bible?

Simon Peter, also known as Cephas (John 1:42), was one of the first followers of Jesus Christ. He was an outspoken and ardent disciple, one of Jesus' closest friends, an apostle, and a "pillar" of the church (Galatians 2:9). Peter was enthusiastic, strong-willed, impulsive, and, at times, brash. But for all his strengths, Peter had several failings in his life. Still, the Lord who chose him continued to mold him into exactly who He intended Peter to be.

Simon was originally from Bethsaida (John 1:44) and lived in Capernaum (Mark 1:29), both cities on the coast of the Sea of Galilee. He was married (1 Corinthians 9:5), and he and James and John were partners in a profitable fishing business (Luke 5:10). Simon met Jesus through his brother Andrew, who had followed Jesus after hearing John the Baptist proclaim that Jesus was the Lamb of God (John 1:35-36). Andrew immediately went to find his brother to bring him to Jesus. Upon meeting Simon, Jesus gave him a new name: Cephas (Aramaic) or Peter (Greek), which means "rock" (John 1:40-42). Later, Jesus officially called Peter to follow Him, producing a miraculous catch of fish (Luke 5:1-7). Immediately, Peter left everything behind to follow the Lord (verse 11).

For the next three years, Peter lived as a disciple of the Lord Jesus. Being a natural-born leader, Peter became the de facto spokesman for the Twelve (Matthew 15:15, 18:21, 19:27; Mark 11:21; Luke 8:45, 12:41; John 6:68, 13:6-9, 36). More significantly, it was Peter who first confessed Jesus as "the Christ, the Son of the living God," a truth which Jesus said was divinely revealed to Peter (Matthew 16:16-17).

Peter was part of the inner circle of Jesus' disciples, along with James and John. Only those three were present when Jesus raised the daughter of Jairus (Mark 5:37) and when

Jesus was transfigured on the mountain (Matthew 17:1). Peter and John were given the special task of preparing the final Passover meal (Luke 22:8).

In several instances, Peter showed himself to be impetuous to the point of rashness. For example, it was Peter who left the boat to walk on the water to Jesus (Matthew 14:28-29)—and promptly took his eyes off Jesus and began to sink (verse 30). It was Peter who took Jesus aside to rebuke Him for speaking of His death (Matthew 16:22)—and was swiftly corrected by the Lord (verse 23). It was Peter who suggested erecting three tabernacles to honor Moses, Elijah, and Jesus (Matthew 17:4)—and fell to the ground in fearful silence at God's glory (verses 5-6). It was Peter who drew his sword and attacked the servant of the high priest (John 18:10)—and was immediately told to sheath his weapon (verse 11). It was Peter who boasted that he would never forsake the Lord, even if everyone else did (Matthew 26:33)—and later denied three times that he even knew the Lord (verses 70-74).

Through all of Peter's ups and downs, the Lord Jesus remained his loving Lord and faithful Guide. Jesus reaffirmed Simon as Peter, the "Rock," in Matthew 16:18-19, promising that he would be instrumental in establishing Jesus' Church. After His resurrection, Jesus specifically named Peter as one who needed to hear the good news (Mark 16:7). And, repeating the miracle of the large catch of fish, Jesus made a special point of forgiving and restoring Peter and re-commissioning him as an apostle (John 21:6, 15-17).

On the day of Pentecost, Peter was the main speaker to the crowd in Jerusalem (Acts 2:14ff), and the Church began with an influx of about 3,000 new believers (verse 41). Later, Peter healed a lame beggar (Acts 3) and preached boldly before the Sanhedrin

(Acts 4). Even arrest, beatings, and threats could not dampen Peter's resolve to preach the risen Christ (Acts 5).

Jesus' promise that Peter would be foundational in building the Church was fulfilled in three stages: Peter preached on the day of Pentecost (Acts 2). Then, he was present when the Samaritans received the Holy Spirit (Acts 8). Finally, he was summoned to the home of the Roman centurion Cornelius, who also believed and received the Holy Spirit (Acts 10). In this way, Peter "unlocked" three different worlds and opened the door of the Church to Jews, Samaritans, and Gentiles.

Even as an apostle, Peter experienced some growing pains. At first, he had resisted taking the gospel to Cornelius, a Gentile. However, when he saw the Romans receive the Holy Spirit in the same manner he had, Peter concluded that "God does not show favoritism" (Acts 10:34). After that, Peter strongly defended the Gentiles' position as believers and was adamant that they did not need to conform to Jewish law (Acts 15:7-11).

Another episode of growth in Peter's life concerns his visit to Antioch, where he enjoyed the fellowship of Gentile believers. However, when some legalistic Jews arrived in Antioch, Peter, to appease them, withdrew from the Gentile Christians. The Apostle Paul saw this as hypocrisy and called it such to Peter's face (Galatians 2:11-14).

Later in life, Peter spent time with John Mark (1 Peter 5:13), who wrote the gospel of Mark based on Peter's remembrances of his time with Jesus. Peter wrote two inspired epistles, 1 and 2 Peter, between A.D. 60 and 68. Jesus said that Peter would die a martyr's death (John 21:18-19)—a prophecy fulfilled, presumably, during Nero's reign.

Tradition has it that Peter was crucified upside down in Rome, and, although such the story may be true, there is no scriptural or historical witness to the particulars of Peter's death.

What can we learn from Peter's life? Here are a few lessons:

Jesus overcomes fear. Whether stepping out of a boat onto a tossing sea or stepping across the threshold of a Gentile home for the first time, Peter found courage in following Christ. "There is no fear in love. But perfect love drives out fear" (1 John 4:18).

Jesus forgives unfaithfulness. After he had boasted of his fidelity, Peter fervently denied the Lord three times. It seemed that Peter had burned his bridges, but Jesus lovingly rebuilt them and restored Peter to service. Peter was a former failure, but, with Jesus, failure is not the end. "If we are faithless, he will remain faithful, for he cannot disown himself" (2 Timothy 2:13).

Jesus patiently teaches. Over and over, Peter needed correction, and the Lord gave it with patience, firmness, and love. The Master Teacher looks for students willing to learn. "I will instruct you and teach you in the way you should go" (Psalm 32:8).

Jesus sees us as He intends us to be. The very first time they met, Jesus called Simon "Peter." The rough and reckless fisherman was, in Jesus' eyes, a firm and faithful rock. "He who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion" (Philippians 1:6).

Jesus uses unlikely heroes. Peter was a fisherman from Galilee, but Jesus called him to

be a fisher of men (Luke 5:10). Because Peter was willing to leave all he had to follow Jesus, God used him in great ways. As Peter preached, people were amazed at his boldness because he was “unschooled” and “ordinary.” But then they took note that Peter “had been with Jesus” (Acts 4:13). Being with Jesus makes all the difference.