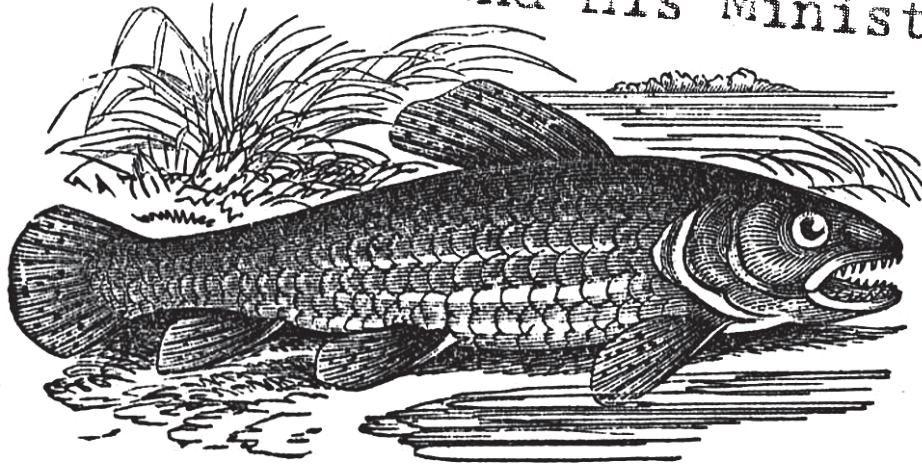


By Bobby Kelly

# Simon Peter

The Man and His Ministry



*The prescript of 1 Peter begins,  
“Peter, apostle of Jesus Christ.”<sup>1</sup>*

Similarly, the prescript of 2 Peter has, “Simon Peter, servant and apostle of Jesus Christ.” What would bring the author to begin an address to Christians of Asia Minor in this way? What would authorize Peter to speak in such an authoritative manner? The answer lies in the New Testament teachings and the earliest traditions of the church about a certain Simon from Galilee, one of the first and closest followers of Jesus, who paid the ultimate price for his faith.

## Simon Peter in the Gospels

The story of Simon, son of an otherwise unknown Jonah (Aramaic) or John (the Greek equivalent), begins in Galilee where he lived in the village of Capernaum with his wife (Mark 1:21,29-30). A Galilean in speech, Peter spoke Aramaic with a characteristic Galilean “twang” (14:70). Like so many other Jews living around the Sea of Galilee, Peter and his brother Andrew were uneducated fishermen (Mark 1:16; Matt. 4:18; Luke 5:2-3; John 21:3).

## LESSON REFERENCE

ETB: 1 and 2 Peter





**Left: Fishermen on the beach preparing their nets for work.**

**Right: House ruins at Bethsaida with Hellenistic villas in the background. Bethsaida was the home of Peter, Andrew, and Philip, three of Jesus' disciples.**

**Below: Model of the first-century fishing boat found in January 1986 off the coast of Nof Ginnosar, a small village on the western shore of the Sea of Galilee.**

The movement out of Galilean obscurity began when Simon's brother Andrew, a disciple of John the Baptist, acknowledged Jesus as the Messiah. Andrew immediately brought Simon to Jesus (John 1:35-42). To indicate not only Simon's faith but also the prominent role Simon would play among the Twelve, Jesus gave him the Aramaic surname Cephas, meaning "Rock." From the Greek translation of this surname comes the name *Petros*, or "Peter" (Mark 3:16; Luke 6:14; John 1:42). The name drips with irony since Peter's temperament reveals he was anything but a rock, particularly early in his life as a disciple. A subsequent encounter occurred while Peter and Andrew were fishing and Jesus was walking along the shore of the Sea of Galilee. Jesus issued a more specific call to "follow me and I will make you become fishers of men" (Mark 1:16-17). The brothers immediately left behind their nets and everything else to follow Jesus.

Peter emerged quickly as the most prominent of the Twelve. Without exception he served as the spokesperson for the group (Matt. 14:28; 15:15; 18:21; 26:35,40; Mark 8:29; 9:5; 10:28; John 6:68). Furthermore, Peter, along with James and John, constituted Jesus' inner circle (see for example the transfiguration, Mark 9:2; and Gethsemane, Mark 14:33). Finally, Peter's name appears first in every list of the Twelve (Matt. 10:2-4; Mark 3:16-19; Luke 6:13-16). Peter's position as spokesman, representative, and leader of the Twelve is secure. In this sense, Peter lived up to the designation "Rock." Unfortunately, Peter's immaturity and inconsistency continued to surface.<sup>2</sup>

The exchange between Jesus and Peter at Caesarea Philippi reveals in one scene the volatile nature of Peter's faith and temperament. Jesus attempted to draw His true identity from the disciples by inquiring, "Who do you say that I am?" Peter responded with a moment of extraordinary insight, "You are the Christ" (Mark 8:29). Matthew alone added Jesus' statement about Peter's role in the establishment and growth of the church: "You are



Peter (Greek, *Petros*), and on this rock (Greek, *petra*) I will build my church" (Matt. 16:18). *Petros* refers to a specific stone or rock whereas *petra* refers to bedrock. Jesus thus indicated that Peter would be pivotal in the development of the church, but Christ Himself would be the cornerstone.<sup>3</sup> In the following scene Jesus announced His impending death. Peter responded by rebuking Jesus, revealing his severe misunderstanding of the nature of Jesus' messiahship. Jesus retorted, "Get behind me Satan, for you are not thinking the things of God but the things of men" (Mark 8:31-33). The event at Caesarea Philippi serves as a microcosm of Peter's life. In the twinkle of an eye Peter could swing between faith and insight on the one hand and unbelief and blindness on the other.



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Peter's actions during Passion Week provide further insight into his unrocklike character. All four Gospels bear witness to Peter's denial during the Jewish portion of Jesus' trial. In the context of the Passover meal, Jesus predicted Peter's denial. Peter boasted that he would never deny Jesus, even if it meant giving his life (Mark 14:18-21, 29-31). Hours later, Peter vehemently denied any connection to Jesus (vv. 66-72). Hearing the rooster crow twice, Peter remembered Jesus' words, and "breaking down he wept" (v. 72). Mark strongly implied Peter's forgiveness when the young man at the tomb instructed the women to "Go, tell the disciples *and Peter* that he goes on ahead of you into Galilee" (16:7). Once more, Jesus singled out Peter, this time for the announcement of resurrection and the assurance of forgiveness and restoration. A post-resurrection fireside chat with Jesus resulted in Peter's restoration to shepherd Jesus' followers (John 21:15-19).

### Simon Peter in Acts

Peter was anything but consistent during Jesus' Galilean ministry, but he began to live up to his moniker in the days after the resurrection. In Acts, Peter showed leadership from the beginning as he guided the process of choosing Judas's replacement (1:15-26). He was the preacher *par excellence* at both the Jewish Pentecost when the Spirit fell and three thousand Jews repented and believed (2:14-41) as well as later in the home of Cornelius when the Spirit fell on the family of Gentiles (10:34-44). At the Jerusalem Council, a climactic moment in the development of the

early church, Peter provided the decisive testimony that led to James's decree that Gentiles were free to follow Jesus without circumcision (15:6-21). Peter also performed signs and wonders that closely paralleled Jesus' miracles (chap. 3). God, working through Simon Peter, healed a paralyzed man named Aeneas who was lying on his mat (9:32-35; compare Luke 5:17-26), as well as raised Tabitha from the dead (Acts 9:36-42, compare Luke 7:11-17). The same power that was at work in Jesus' ministry was also at work in Peter. The inconsistency that marked Peter's earlier life as a disciple had begun to fade.

### Simon Peter in Paul's Letters

Paul provided limited information about Peter, mentioning him in 1 Corinthians and Galatians only. In Galatians, Paul affirmed Peter's role as apostle to the Jews (2:7-8) and as a pillar of the Jerusalem church. Conversely, Paul reported a public confrontation he had with Peter at Antioch. Apparently, Peter wavered in his full acceptance of Gentile believers, choosing not to share table fellowship with them because of his fear of certain men from the Jerusalem church who had not fully embraced the Gentile mission (vv. 11-15). Paul publicly rebuked Peter for his hypocrisy.

In 1 Corinthians Paul referenced Peter on four occasions. In 1 Corinthians 1:12 and 3:22, Paul indicated that a "Cephas" party existed, just as there was a Paul, Apollos, and Christ party. Paul attributed the division to a fundamental misunderstanding of the role of leadership in the church, with no hint that Cephas encouraged the party spirit.



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In 1 Corinthians 9:5, Paul employed Cephas as an example of an apostle who exercised his right to have a wife, even while Paul chose not to exercise the same right. Finally, Paul indicated that the resurrected Jesus appeared first to Cephas and then to the others (15:3-5). Each of Paul's references highlights the significant role Peter played in the early church.

## 1 and 2 Peter

Peter was responsible for two books in the New Testament and probably contributed significantly to a third.<sup>4</sup> In 1 Peter he addressed believers facing persecution for their faith. Confronted as his readers were with physical persecution and social alienation, Peter encouraged them to be strong in their faith, both for the sake of their Christian witness and because of their future hope (1 Pet. 1:1-12). Those who suffered for righteousness would be vindicated, Christ being the ultimate example (3:18). In these words one detects the maturity and strength of a man who understood his role as "shepherd" and "elder" to the younger leaders of the expanding Christian movement in Asia Minor (5:1-4). The reference to "she who is in Babylon [code for Rome], likewise elect, sends you greetings, as does Mark my son" (v. 13) indicates Peter was writing from Rome, probably in A.D. 64 during Nero's persecution of Christians. The reference to Mark provides evidence for the early tradition that Mark's Gospel depends heavily on Peter's recounting of Jesus' life and ministry, thus

making Peter partially responsible for a third New Testament document.<sup>5</sup>

Second Peter reads like a final testament, calling the readers to remember his words and oppose false teachers. The letter presents Peter as an eyewitness of Jesus' ministry, specifically the transfiguration, and as a defender of the apostles' teachings in the face of heresy (1:16-21; 2:15-19). Second Peter embodies the wisdom of a mature apostle calling others to stand for the truth even if it meant giving one's life. Peter would soon model his instruction.

## Martyrdom of Simon Peter

While the New Testament does not narrate Peter's death, two passages in John's Gospel imply Peter's martyrdom. In John 13:36-38, as Jesus prepared His disciples for His imminent death, Peter inquired, "Lord, where are you going?" Jesus responded, "Where I am going you are not able now to follow me, *but you will follow me later.*" Likewise John 21:18-19a offers a prediction of Peter's martyrdom and adds a hint about the manner of his death, "truly, truly I say to you, when you were young, you girded yourself and walked wherever you desired; but when you are old, *you will stretch out your hands*, and another will gird you and take you where you do not desire to go. Now he said this in order to indicate by what kind of death he would glorify God." Presumably, this was a reference to crucifixion. Peter likely had these exchanges in mind when he stated,

**Left: At Syrian Antioch this church was built into the side of a cliff by late 1st-century Christians and named after Peter from its beginning. Inside is 1st century. Present facade added by 11th-century Christians. Tradition holds that Simon Peter was active in the church at Antioch until he left for Rome about A.D. 55.**



ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO/ BOB SCHATZ (10/17/16)

**Upper right: An octagonal church built in the 5th century A.D. over the 1st-century ruins of St. Peter's house at Capernaum.**



ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO/ DAVID ROGERS (4/21/19)

**Below right: A Christian chapel on the slopes of Mount Hermon, at Caesarea-Philippi, site of Peter's confession that Jesus was the promised Messiah (Matt. 16:13-19).**

"I know that I must soon lay aside this body, just as our Lord Jesus Christ has informed me" (2 Pet. 1:14).

The apocryphal Acts of Peter, written in the second or third century, report that during Nero's persecution of Christians in the mid-60s A.D., Peter fled from Rome. During his flight he saw a vision of Jesus and inquired, "Lord, whither (goest thou) here?" reminiscent of the question Peter asked Jesus in John 13:36. Jesus responded, "I am coming to Rome to be crucified [again]." Peter interpreted the appearance to mean that he should return to Rome and be crucified with joy, upside down.<sup>6</sup> While certainty regarding the manner of Peter's death eludes us, the tradition that Peter died in Rome during Nero's persecution is widespread and coheres with the tone of 2 Peter as a last will and testament. While numerous traditions offer possible explanations about what happened to Peter's body, the truth is that only God knows.

Peter could be a rock, a foundational stone for the building of the church in the days after Jesus' ascension. He could also be a stone of stumbling, showing severe misunderstanding of Jesus' true messiahship (Matt. 16:23). He could be called a rock of the church at Jerusalem (Gal. 2:9), yet crumble before the Judaizers at Antioch (vv. 11-15). Perhaps his ample display of humanity even as he strived to live out God's call makes him someone with whom we easily identify. Peter's life reminds us that discipleship is a journey marked by growth, although painfully slow at times. Peter's journey from the shores of the Sea of Galilee

(Mark 1:16-20), to denial of Jesus in Jerusalem (14:66-72), to leadership of the Jerusalem Church (Acts 1-5), to his work as Scripture writer and shepherd of churches throughout Asia Minor, to martyrdom in Rome in A.D. 67 stands as a model of what it means for a believer to grow in the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ. **B**

1. Scripture quotations in this article are the writer's own translation unless indicated otherwise; emphases added by writer.

2. M. J. Wilkins, "Disciples" in *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels*, Joel B. Green, Scot McKnight, I. Howard Marshall, eds. (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1992), 179.

3. Jesus' words came to pass in the early chapters of Acts. Paul pointed to the same reality in Ephesians 2:20 where he asserted that the church is "built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone."

4. Some scholars argue that 1 Peter is pseudonymous, that is, written by someone after Peter's death but attaching Peter's name either to conceal the author's true identity or to invoke Peter's authority and memory. Ultimately, the arguments against Peter's authorship of both letters bearing his name prove unconvincing. For more see Thomas R. Schreiner, *1, 2 Peter, Jude* in *The New American Commentary* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2003), 21-36.

5. The earliest and most important tradition comes from Papias, a first-century bishop in Asia Minor, as recorded in Eusebius: "Mark became Peter's interpreter and wrote down accurately, but not in order, all that he remembered of the things said and done by the Lord. For he [Mark] had not heard the Lord or been one of his followers, but later, as I said, a follower of Peter. Peter used to teach as the occasion demanded, . . . so that Mark did not err in writing down some things just as he [Peter] recalled them. For he had one overriding purpose: to leave out nothing [to] omit nothing that he had heard and to make no false statements in his account." Eusebius, *The Church History A New Translation with Commentary*, Paul L. Maier, trans. (Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 1999), 3.39 (pp. 129-130).

6. *Acts of Peter* in *The New Testament Apocrypha*, Wilhelm Schneemelcher, ed., vol. 2 (Louisville: The Westminster Press, 1964), 35-40 (pp. 317-321). For complete translation and commentary, see pages 259-322.

Bobby Kelly is the Rowena Strickland associate professor of religion, Oklahoma Baptist University, Shawnee, Oklahoma.