

A Pillar of Mission: The Apostle Peter



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *Pss. 18:2, 31; 95:1; Matt. 16:18; Acts 5:15; 10:25, 28–43; 11:19–26; Gal. 2:11–14.*

Memory Text: “When they saw the courage of Peter and John and realized that they were unschooled, ordinary men, they were astonished and they took note that these men had been with Jesus” (*Acts 4:13, NIV*).

Key Thought: Peter, the transformed Peter, became one of the greatest missionaries the world has ever seen, even despite some lessons he still needed to learn.

Last week we looked at the amazing transformation of Peter, how he went from instability to a pillar in the church. How easy it would have been, after his disastrous fall, to have written him off from the service of the Lord. As we saw, however, that was not God's intention for this flawed hero.

Indeed, after his restoration, Peter would devote his life to one mission: to share spiritual food with Jesus' flock—both inside and outside the sheepfold.

Last week we also saw what Christ did in Peter's life to make him the great missionary that he became. This week we will look at the results of his mission. We will follow some of Peter's experiences as he played a key role in the work of the early church and in helping spread the gospel to the Gentiles.

There are some powerful lessons for us today from the story of Peter, both his successes and his failures.

**Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, August 30.*

Peter's Commission: A Closer Look

“I say also unto thee, That thou art Peter, and upon this rock I will build my church; and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it” (*Matt. 16:18*).

These are some of the most controversial words in all of the Bible. A lot of Christian history has been based on how people have interpreted the meaning of this text.

For many, it meant that Jesus built His church on Peter, that he was what has been called “the first pope,” and that he, Peter, was the rock that Jesus was talking about.

Others, however, interpret it as Jesus saying, essentially, “You are Peter, but on this Rock, Myself, I will build My church.” The evidence, as we’ll see below, is strongly in favor of the latter.

Look up the following texts. How do they help us understand what the rock is that Jesus is talking about here? *Deut. 32:4; Pss. 18:2, 31; 95:1; 1 Cor. 10:4; Eph. 2:20; 1 Pet. 2:6.*

No matter how privileged Peter was, no matter his gifts, no matter the importance of his role, God’s church has never been built upon a sinful human being. Heaven forbid! Jesus Himself is the Rock, the foundation upon which His church rests. All of us, including Peter, whatever our role and position, are secure as long as we rest on that foundation, that Rock, and we can do that only to the extent that we are surrendered in faith and obedience (*see Matt. 7:24*) to the words and command of our Lord. Sure, the Lord knew the future of Peter and knew what Peter would become, but He certainly was not going to make Peter, a sinful, fallen human being, the foundation rock of His church.

What should Christ’s words tell us about the importance of humility in our lives and especially in our work for the salvation of others? Why, whatever our gifts, are they nothing if not surrendered to the Lord?

The Shadow of Peter

It appears that immediately after Jesus returned to heaven, Peter took the role of leader among the believers, about 120 people. In the book of Acts he is usually named first in lists of the apostles, and he led the believers in choosing an apostle to replace Judas. As we saw last week, however, it is not until after Pentecost, when he stands up and preaches powerfully to the crowd, that we fully see the amazing transformation in Peter's life (*Acts 2:14–41*). As a result of the Holy Spirit's working through his preaching, 3,000 people accept Jesus and are baptized.

The next time we see Peter, he is walking up with his fellow apostle and longtime friend John to the temple to pray. Peter then performs the first healing miracle recorded in Acts, as he heals a man crippled from birth (*Acts 3:6–8*).

Compare Acts 3:6, 12, 13; 4:10. What common theme runs through Peter's words?

Peter had a long and bitter experience of trying to do things in his own strength. He would never forget sinking into the dark waters after he took his eyes off Jesus. He would never forget betraying his Master after His arrest. He would never forget Jesus rebuking him for trying to do things his own way. Peter, apparently having learned his lessons, was leaning on the power of the Lord. He would need to.

Read Acts 5:15, 10:25. What was going on in these two accounts? What kind of incredible pressure was being placed on Peter here? What great danger would he, or anyone, face in that situation?

People wanting only to have “the shadow of Peter” touch them? In many ways now, Peter, filled with power from on high, would face his greatest spiritual challenges.

What would it do to you if people responded to you the way they did to Peter? What is the only way you could keep yourself from spiritual pride of the most damaging kind?

Organizing the Early Church

In the early stages of the Christian church, the new believers shared their possessions and goods, met together daily for worship, and enjoyed fellowship together. They were “praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people” (*Acts 2:47, NIV*). Things were going well under the leadership of the apostles.

But, as the church grew, problems arose. It became clear that the church needed an organizational structure. Peter and the other apostles realized there had to be a proper balance between maintenance work and their main mission. They decided: “It would not be right for us to neglect the ministry of the word of God in order to wait on tables” (*Acts 6:2, NIV*).

As new congregations were formed in new areas, proper church organization became even more critical. It was vital to ensure that the believers were properly established and nurtured in their new faith.

The Jerusalem church began sending missionaries in groups of two (following the example of Jesus when He sent out the apostles and the disciples two by two).

What did the leaders in Jerusalem do when they heard about the new group of believers in Samaria that Philip had established? *Acts 8:14*. Or when a new church was founded in Antioch? *Acts 11:19–26*. What is the significance of these actions?

Throughout the book of Acts, we see Peter and the other church leaders in Jerusalem keeping a close administrative and spiritual eye on the rapid growth of the church, particularly among the Gentiles. They realized how easy it would be for them to slip back into paganism or to be led astray by false doctrines. Having come to Jesus as babes in the faith, these new believers needed to be weaned from the “milk” of the Word and firmly planted in solid doctrine.

What more could you do to help new members be better grounded in Jesus and our message? Why not take a new member under your wing and help him or her along?

A Wider Vision

After Pentecost, Peter's life was transformed, and he became a mighty pillar of the church. But there still was more for him to learn. Like the other apostles, Peter still saw his mission as exclusively to the Jews.

Read Acts 1:8. What was Jesus saying that should have helped Peter and others understand that things were not going to be quite what they expected, at least in terms of mission?

In Acts 10:1–14, Peter was given a vision in which he was told to eat unclean foods. As a Jew, he was astounded at what was told him. “‘Surely not, Lord!’” Peter replied.

“‘I have never eaten anything impure or unclean’” (*Acts 10:14, NIV*). It would be the same as a Seventh-day Adventist being told in vision to smoke a cigarette and drink from a bottle of alcohol.

Of course, God was not literally telling Peter to eat unclean foods—just as He would not ask us to smoke tobacco or drink alcohol. Peter's vision was a parable. At first he wondered about the meaning (*vs. 17*), but soon it became apparent as he was invited to the house of Cornelius, a Gentile.

Read Acts 10:28–43. What was the real meaning of the vision? What did Peter now understand that he did not before?

For us today, it is obvious that the gospel was a message for the whole world, but it must have been quite a surprise for someone like Peter, coming out of the background that he did. How important that, whatever our position in the church, we not let our cultural prejudices put blinders on us. How important that, as with Peter, we get a wider vision of the mission of our church.

What are some personal or cultural blinders that you have had to deal with? Or, perhaps, that many in your church still do? How can you get a wider vision?

Growing in Grace

Even when church members in Christ are working together for the same mission, misunderstandings and disagreements can arise. The early Christian church was no exception.

Nor was Peter. However singularly blessed of God, however crucial to the work of the church, even Peter, after Pentecost, still had some growing to do. How nice to know that even with his faults, God was still using him.

Read Galatians 2:11–14. What did Peter still not understand?

Paul was upset because he believed that Peter was acting like a hypocrite. After Peter's vision about unclean foods and his encounter with Cornelius, he had begun associating with Gentiles. For this he was criticized by the Jewish Christians in Jerusalem (*Acts 11:2*). Peter defended his actions, and as a result, his critics changed their minds. "They had no further objections and praised God, saying, 'So then, God has granted even the Gentiles repentance unto life' " (*vs. 18, NIV*).

But now, to Paul's disgust, after having achieved so much on behalf of the Gentiles, Peter was reversing his behavior. He was now bowing to pressure from Jewish Christians and going against his convictions. He was now refusing to eat with Gentiles, because he did not want to offend the Jewish Christians. Paul, though, was offended by Peter's actions, even though in another place he warned about a stronger brother being an offense to a weaker one (*1 Cor. 8:9–14*).

Obviously, though, in this case, that of associating with Gentiles, Paul, the apostle to the Gentiles, thought that the sense of mission to others, the sense of all being one in Christ, was the overriding and most important principle.

Read 1 Corinthians 8:9–14. What is Paul talking about there? How could you take what he is saying and apply it to yourself and your church? What things might you be doing that are offending weaker members?

Further Study: “The Saviour’s manner of dealing with Peter had a lesson for him and his brethren. Although Peter had denied his Lord, the love which Jesus bore him had never faltered. And as the apostle should take up the work of ministering the word to others, he was to meet the transgressor with patience, sympathy, and forgiving love. Remembering his own weakness and failure, he was to deal with the sheep and lambs committed to his care as tenderly as Christ had dealt with him.”—Ellen G. White, *The Acts of the Apostles*, p. 516.

“After all the failures of Peter, after his fall and restoration, his long course of service, his intimate acquaintance with Christ, his knowledge of Christ’s pure, straightforward practice of principle; after all the instruction he had received, all the gifts and knowledge and great influence in preaching and teaching the Word, is it not strange that he should dissemble and evade the principles of the gospel, for fear of man, or in order to gain his esteem? Is it not strange that he should waver, and be two-sided in his position? May God give every man a sense of his own personal helplessness to steer his own vessel straight and safely into the harbor. The grace of Christ is essential every day. His matchless grace alone can save our feet from falling (MS 122, 1897).”—Ellen G. White Comments, *The SDA Bible Commentary*, vol. 6, pp. 1108, 1109.

Discussion Questions:

- ❶ As a class, discuss the issue of dealing with weaker folk in the church who might be offended by certain practices. How far do we go in accommodating them? What principles should we follow so that we do not, as did Peter, sacrifice a higher purpose in our well-meaning attempts not to offend?
- ❷ Spiritual pride is always a danger for anyone. How can we protect ourselves from this, especially if we are having great success in soul winning, in ministering, or in any area of church life? How does the Lord help keep His servants humble?
- ❸ Is your church organized more as a club than a mission organization? If so, what can you do to help restructure the church for its central mission?

Summary: The apostle Peter went through a dark night of the soul before, during, and after Jesus’ death. When Jesus was resurrected, he was given another chance to be faithful to his Lord. Peter dedicated his life to that task and led the church from strength to strength in challenging times.

God Healed Me

by MARINA

I live in Ulaanbaatar, Mongolia. For years I suffered from a serious heart-related illness that filled my body with fluid. Whenever I tried to move, I would lose my breath. I spent two years in a wheelchair and thought I would die. The treatments the doctors offered promised little help, and I feared the consequences of them.

One day a friend visited me. She brought a young man who asked to pray for me. I agreed, thinking, What other hope do I have? I just want to get better. After that my friend and other Christians came often to pray for me.

Little by little I felt better and could breathe more easily. In one month I could leave my wheelchair and walk. Every day I felt stronger. My new friends urged me to exercise to regain strength. Their encouragement and their prayers saved my life. Soon I could walk to the little church to worship.

Then tragedy struck. One of my sons was killed and then a daughter died. I grieved and wondered how God could heal me but allow my children to die. Eventually I realized that I must be grateful for the healing I have experienced and not allow anger to destroy my faith.

My children are amazed at how healthy I am, and I tell them that God healed me. My doctors were amazed at my strength, and I told them what God has done for me. I tell everyone who asks that God healed me, and I invite them to church. I know now that in life we have shadows and sunlight. In both places God is with us. He was with me when I was sick, and He was with me when my children died.

My grandsons who live with me attend church, and I pray that my other children will accept God as their God, even as I have.



Pray for the people of Mongolia. The church here is young and growing. And remember, your mission offerings support lay evangelists such as the one who prayed for me and touched me with God's love.

MARINA (left) shares her faith in Ulaanbaatar, Mongolia.