

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 Lesson in Brief

► **Key Text:** *Acts 4:13*

► **The Student Will:**

Know: The history and reasons for the development of Peter as a major leader in the early church.

Feel: An attachment to Peter as a worthy example of the kind of people Jesus calls to mission.

Do: Motivate your class to grasp the meaning and be involved in the “wider mission” of the church.

► **Learning Outline:**

I. Peter the Leader (*Matt. 16:18*)

A Review the Roman Catholic and Protestant ideas about the meaning of this text. *It is very important that your class understand the meaning of this text.* Who is “Peter,” who is the “builder,” what’s the “rock,” what’s the “church,” and what are the “gates of hell”?

B What is “Peter’s shadow” talked about in Monday’s lesson, and how would you characterize a “Peter’s shadow” in our church?

II. Peter the Jewish Nationalist (*Gal. 2:11–14*)

Case Study: Your class is the church board in Antioch. Peter and Paul are hard at it. How will you resolve the problem?

III. Peter: A Wider Vision (*Acts 1:8*)

A What is Wednesday’s lesson talking about when it says that Peter got a “wider vision”?

B Have the class write out a statement of how they are/could be involved in the “wider mission” of the church.

► **Summary:** Peter became a major church leader. He allowed Jesus to redirect his personality toward the mission of the church, even though he had a difficult time dissociating himself from some long-held opinions.

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?

Learning Cycle

► **STEP 1—Motivate**

Can the Lord use only “perfect” people—or is there room for folk like you and me?

This part of Peter’s story builds on his humanness to show us that God can use just about anyone. Peter swore, denied Christ, even resorted to violence, and yet, he went forth with “the keys to the kingdom” and became a mighty witness for God’s truth and God’s Son, Jesus the Messiah, or Christ.

Peter was a fisherman, unschooled in the higher realms of Scripture, certainly not one who sat at the foot of the rabbis of old. Yet, despite his “rough” background and sometimes “raw” behavior, God’s grace transformed him into an evangelist par excellence.

Ask your class members to think of people whom they’ve known over the years whose worldly experience ill-fitted them for spiritual achievement, and yet these people were used to reach others with the gospel and the three angels’ messages.

► **STEP 2—Explore**

Bible Commentary

I. I Will Build My Church (*Review Matt. 16:18 and related verses from the lesson with your class.*)

Our lesson accurately points out the controversy surrounding the simple words from Matthew. Jesus couldn’t be referring to a single, sinful human being as the foundation for the Christian church. If so, why would we have needed a perfect Savior? Instead, Jesus is trying to encourage us, through the example of Peter, that God can take imperfect people and use them, when surrendered, for great things.

Consider This: What are the needs in your church, your community, your nation that can only be filled, or, perhaps, best be filled, by consecrated people of faith? How can each of us, as fallen people in a fallen world, use the gifts that God has given us to build God’s church?

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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?

Learning Cycle CONTINUED**II. Simon, Son of Jonah**

Consider This: Peter wasn't always called Peter. He was Simon, the son of Jonah, a rough-hewn fisherman. Jesus upgraded his name, calling him a "rock," symbolizing solidity and determination.

Even with a new name—on earth, no less, not just "written down in glory," as the old hymn goes—Peter didn't always live up to the title given him. He feared drowning, he feared the hostile leaders, he feared the crowd, and he feared the Romans—the latter three with good reason.

Yet, Jesus saw something beyond the present reality to make Peter's future a divine forecast. After the Resurrection, after Jesus appeared to him and both forgave and commissioned Peter, he became a mighty, indefatigable warrior for the faith, this time with only the Word of God as his sword!

What can we discern in those around us, in the family of God, that would make them candidates to help spread the gospel? How can we encourage and help these people develop into what they could be for the Lord?

III. Against the Gates of Hell *"And the gates of hell shall not prevail against it"* (Matt. 16:18).

So much has come against the church over the years—persecution, heresies, divisions, false teachings, repressions, forced conversions to other faiths, atheism, and communism, to name a few. Yet, as Lonnie Melashenko remarked in his December 17, 2006, *Exploring the Word* broadcast, "God has always had a remnant, even in the darkest hours."

Many have tried to crush Christianity, but the church comes back stronger and more vital. Peter succeeded after some of his darkest moments—shouldn't that inspire us to be dedicated soldiers of the cross?

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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, 17*). 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?

Learning Cycle CONTINUED► **STEP 3—Practice****Thought Questions:**

1 What did Peter learn from his attempts to do things in his own strength, such as taking his eyes off Jesus when called to walk on the water? What lesson did he learn about relying on God’s power?

2 When new congregations were formed in near and distant places—Samaria or even Antioch—what was the reaction in Jerusalem? They sent more experienced people to help the congregations grow. Today, such calls are made, and answered, on a more local level, but why is this still a good idea?

Application Questions:

1 As Peter progresses in his work, some people begin to look to Peter, and not Jesus, as their source (*Acts 5:15*); Cornelius even wanted to worship Peter (*Acts 10:25*). How would you react to those who want to credit you, and not God, for the good things they see in your ministry?

2 In Acts 10:28–41, Peter learns the importance of treating people whom he might have considered “unclean” as being as much children of God as his Jewish brethren. How can we apply this idea of tolerance, acceptance, and understanding in the church? In our daily lives?

Witnessing

There’s a lot more to sharing the gospel with others than can be done merely by the printed word, a shortwave broadcast, or even satellite television. All of these are important, even vital in some areas of the world where Christians can’t easily travel or work. But in those places where people can share the good news, how can we help those who hear but don’t

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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?

Learning Cycle CONTINUED

fully understand, as the Ethiopian eunuch confessed, to grasp the wonder and hope of grace?

► **STEP 4—Apply**

On a clear spring afternoon on the sidewalks of New York some twenty-five years ago, a band of Christians witnessed in the “open air,” singing songs, reading Bible verses, and offering prayer to those who needed or wanted it.

“I didn’t have a prayer left in the world,” Tom Lucas later said in a conversation with this author in 1982, so he raised his right hand and asked for help. That marked the start of Tom’s change from a drunkard, a drug addict, and a toothless street denizen into a Christian witness. Tom cleaned up his act and spent his remaining career helping others out of the pit of loneliness and despair that had consumed much of his lifetime.

Consider This: Are there people around us who exhibit some spiritual potential, but somehow fail to reach it? Can we help these people see that God’s plan doesn’t end with their salvation but only begins there?

If we believe that the church has a specific role to play in spreading the gospel before Jesus returns, who will do that? An evangelist? Your pastor? The local conference administration?

The Great Commission of Matthew 28 isn’t addressed to church administrators—it’s addressed to you and to me. We each, we all, have to move forward in faith to share the good news with others; and we can each encourage those believers around us to “go, and do likewise.”

But what if we’re the only Christian in our home, our community, even our nation? What can we do then, especially if it is difficult or dangerous to engage in public evangelism?

We can pray: We can pray for those at work in the harvest fields, and we can pray for those who have yet to believe. We can do good to our neighbors and, carefully perhaps, answer as to why we’re doing something for others when most people are too wrapped up in themselves. Peter healed those in need; we can offer spiritual help and healing to all.

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:

- ① 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?
- ② 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?
- ③ 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.