

# TRIAL IN THE LIFE OF PETER

article 1

introduction

Peter.

He is arguably the easiest person to identify within the Bible. No one in all of Scripture is as volatile and impulsive as Peter (cf. Matt. 14:28; Mark 14:29; Luke 5:8; John 21:7). On his worst days, he bossed Jesus around and denied even knowing him. On his best days, he wrote two books of the Bible and, according to church history, he was martyred by crucifixion. Peter asked his killers to turn his cross upside down because he did not believe he was worthy of dying as Jesus did.

Peter's life was filled with trials. After failing miserably—he is a coward in the gospels and Galatians reveals his racism—by God's grace he began to grow and change, showing that by God's grace anyone can become a world-changing servant of Jesus. In Peter, we see a normal disciple. Someone who really loves Jesus. Someone who really sins. Someone with whom God is patient as he grows and matures through his sin to love Jesus more and sin less. Perhaps this is why Jesus appointed him as the leader of the disciples as an example for all Christians. His imperfections are endearing and his progress is encouraging.

Peter's shadow looms over much of the New Testament. In the four lists of the twelve apostles (Matt. 10:2–4; Mark 3:16–19; Luke 6:13–16; Acts 1:13), Peter is always mentioned first because he is their recognized leader after Jesus. As their leader, Peter also acts as spokesman for the Twelve (Matt. 15:15; 18:21; Mark 1:36–37; 8:29; 9:5; 10:28; 11:21; 14:29ff.; Luke 5:5; 12:41).

His father's name was Jonah (Matt. 16:17), he himself was married (Mark 1:30), and in his missionary days of evangelism and church planting his wife accompanied him (1 Cor. 9:5). The fourth Gospel gives Bethsaida, a largely Greek city, as his place of birth (John 1:44), but he also had a home in Capernaum in Galilee (Mark 1:21ff.). Both places were lakeside, where he worked as a fisherman, and in both there would be frequent contact with Gentiles. He spoke Aramaic with a strong accent (Mark 14:70), and knew Greek as his second language, as was common in that day. It is also likely that Peter was influenced by John the Baptist's ministry (cf. Acts 1:22), since his brother Andrew was a disciple of John (John 1:39ff.).

## *Peter and Jesus*

Peter was first introduced to Jesus by his brother Andrew (John 1:41). Peter was later called to be a follower of Jesus (Mark 1:16), and was eventually called to be among Jesus' twelve disciples (Mark 3:16ff.). Peter was also one of the three,

along with James and John, who formed an inner circle around Jesus (Mark 5:37; 9:2; 14:33; cf. 13:3). This privileged access allowed Peter to be present with Jesus as much as anyone during his earthly ministry, including being an eyewitness to milestone events in world history. One such example is the day that Peter saw the transfiguration of Jesus (Mark 9:2–13). His experience in the inner circle was so significant in the life of Peter that he refers back to it as proof of the validity of his teaching about Jesus (1 Pet. 5:1; 2 Pet. 1:16).

It was as Jesus' disciple that Simon received his new title, the Aramaic "Kepha" ("Cephas"), which means "rock" or "stone" (1 Cor. 1:12; 15:5; Gal. 2:9), usually appearing in the New Testament in the Greek form "Petros." According to John 1:42, Jesus conferred this title (not known as a personal name previously) at their first meeting. John's usual designation is "Simon Peter." Mark's gospel calls him "Simon" until 3:16, and "Peter" almost invariably thereafter.

Warren Wiersbe says, "Peter was a man with three names. Nearly fifty times in the New Testament, he is called 'Simon'; and often he is called 'Simon Peter.' Perhaps the two names suggest a Christian's two natures: an old nature (Simon) that is prone to fail, and a new nature (Peter) that can give victory. As Simon, he was only another human piece of clay; but Jesus Christ made a rock out of him!"<sup>1</sup>

### *Jesus' Commission of Peter*

Matthew 16:16–19 records Jesus' commission of Peter:

Simon Peter replied [to Jesus], "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God." And Jesus answered him, "Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father who is in heaven. And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it. I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven."

This section is one of the most debated passages of the entire New Testament and in some regards a dividing line between Protestant and Catholic opinions of the papacy. From early times two main interpretations have been held, with many variations.

The first opinion is that the rock is Peter's confession that Jesus is the Christ. This would mean that either Peter's faith or the confession of Peter's faith that Jesus is the Christ is in fact the "rock." This is a very early Christian interpretation. For example, the early church father Origen says, "Rock means every disciple of Christ." Therefore, in this view the function of the apostles (including Peter, who is nicknamed "the rock" by Jesus to emphasize this fact) is to have faith in Jesus as the Christ and declare that fact openly as the rock on which Christianity is founded. Echoing this interpretation is Ephesians 2:20, which says that the church is

“built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone.”

The second opinion is that the rock is Peter himself. This is found almost as early as the other view, as it is spoken of by the church father Tertullian. Its strength lies in the fact that Matthew 16:19 is in the singular, and must be addressed directly to Peter, even if, like Origen, we go on to say that to have Peter’s faith and virtues is to have Peter’s “keys.”

The words to Peter about the “keys of the kingdom” should be contrasted with Matthew 23:13. There, Jesus said that the Pharisees had shut the door to the kingdom for people. Conversely, it would therefore make sense that Peter, in recognizing Jesus as the Son who is over the house and who holds the keys (cf. Rev. 1:18; 3:7; 21:25), finds them delivered to him (cf. Isa. 22:22) to open the kingdom. The “binding and loosing” here is addressed to Peter (Matt. 16:19), but elsewhere is assigned to all the apostles, showing that the authority Peter enjoyed was not his alone (cf. Matt. 18:18).

A final point worth mentioning is that even if this latter view of Jesus’ commission of Peter is believed, the view does not endorse or even infer the subsequent teaching of the Roman Catholic Church. Building upon this interpretation, the Catholic Church teaches that the Roman bishops are the successors of Peter and that in every generation the Catholic Church and pope essentially hold the keys to the kingdom.

### *Peter in the Apostolic Church*

The Bible records that following his resurrection from death, Jesus personally appeared to Peter (Luke 24:34; 1 Cor. 15:5). Also, the closing chapter of John’s gospel reveals that in a painfully earnest moment following Peter’s denial of Jesus and Jesus’ resurrection from death, Jesus re-commissions Peter to pastoral ministry and the responsibility to “feed my sheep.”

The book of Acts, which records the work of the Holy Spirit in the early church, shows that Peter is the leader of the early church prior to Pentecost (Acts 1:15ff.). Afterwards, he is the principal preacher (2:14ff.; 3:12ff.), the spokesman before the Jewish authorities (4:8ff.), and the president in the administration of discipline (5:3ff.). Though the church as a whole made a deep impression on the community, it was to Peter in particular that supernatural powers were attributed (5:15). In Samaria, the church’s first mission field, the same leadership is exercised (8:14ff.).

Significantly, he is the first apostle to be associated with the Gentile mission, and is such by unmistakably providential means, as God commands Peter to extend gospel grace to non-Jews (10:1ff.; cf. 15:7ff.). This immediately brings criticism upon Peter (11:2ff.), and not for the last time. Galatians 2:11 gives us a glimpse of Peter at Antioch, the first church with a significant ex-pagan element, sharing table-fellowship with the Gentile converts, and then meeting a barrage of Jewish-

Christian opposition, in the face of which he withdraws. In short, Peter acted like a hypocrite by preaching about the grace of God and then refusing to share it with non-Jewish Christians. As was his tendency, Peter did come to repentance and supported the full inclusion of Gentiles into Christianity without being burdened by Jewish custom and culture.

As evidence of his repentance, Peter readily recognized his mission to Jews and Paul's to Gentiles as part of the same ministry (Gal. 2:7ff.). Also, at the Jerusalem Council, Peter is recorded as the first to urge the full acceptance of the Gentiles on faith alone without additional Jewish customs such as circumcision (Acts 15:7ff.).

Peter's career after the death of Stephen in Acts 7 is hard to trace. The references to him in Joppa, Caesarea, and elsewhere suggest that he undertook missionary work in Palestine (with Jesus' brother James no doubt now assuming leadership in Jerusalem). He was imprisoned in Jerusalem, and upon his miraculous escape he left for "another place" (Acts 12:17). Attempts to identify this place are hopeless. We know that he went to Antioch (Gal. 2:11ff.); he may have gone to Corinth, though probably not for long (1 Cor. 1:12). He is closely associated with Christians in Northern Asia Minor (1 Pet. 1:1), and possibly the prohibition on Paul's entry into Bithynia (Acts 16:7) was due to the fact that Peter was at work there. Peter's residence in Rome has been disputed, but on insufficient grounds. First Peter was almost certainly written from there because he calls it "Babylon" (1 Pet. 5:13). First Peter shows signs of being written just before the Neronian persecution, and 1 Clement 5 implies that, like Paul, he died in this outburst.<sup>2</sup> Concerning the death of Peter, Bible commentator Karen Jobes writes: "There is virtual unanimity that the apostle Peter died in Rome in the mid-60s during the reign of Emperor Nero."<sup>3</sup>

### *Peter the Author*

While some critics argue that Peter is not the author of the letters bearing his name, the evidence against such critics is more than sufficient. They are prone to argue that he could not have written the letter based on Acts 4:13, which says that Peter was not formally educated. However, this charge is not credible for five reasons.

First, Peter is described in Acts 4:13 as "uneducated," and the style of Greek in which the letter is written is said to be too good for a Galilean fisherman to have used. Also, quotations in 1 and 2 Peter are taken from the Septuagint, the Greek version of the Old Testament, rather than the Hebrew version. The style is, however, not so "educated" as some would like to make out and in places it is much more the language of ordinary people. There is evidence that in Peter's time, Greek, as well as Aramaic, was spoken in Galilee, and as a fisherman living in Capernaum on one of the great trade routes, he would have had to speak Greek regularly. The fact that his own brother's name, Andrew, is a Greek one suggests that from boyhood Peter grew up with this language. Some thirty years' work of evangelism and teaching in a church that contained an increasing proportion of Gentiles would have made him more fluent in Greek and prepared to quote the Septuagint. Furthermore, the

charge in Acts 4:13 comes from Peter's critics and may not in fact be true; opponents are prone to lie, as exemplified by the advertising that accompanies every modern-day election.

Furthermore, even if Peter was not formally educated, it does not logically follow that he lacked the intelligence to pen the letters. As an example, Bill Gates was not formally educated in college but nonetheless has succeeded because of his intellect. The fact that Peter's first language was likely Aramaic, and Greek (in which the letters were originally written) was probably his second language is in itself indicative that he was intelligent.

Second, 1 Peter 5:12 says, "By Silvanus, a faithful brother as I regard him, I have written briefly to you, exhorting and declaring that this is the true grace of God. Stand firm in it." While there is a question as to whether or not Silvanus was the courier or co-author of the letter, it is certainly possible that Peter had writing and editing assistance. In addition, Silvanus was seemingly a very capable man as he is noted as a senior leader in the early church (Acts 15:22) and a prophet of God (Acts 15:32).

Third, the internal evidence of both 1 and 2 Peter emphatically states that Peter is the author of both letters. First Peter 1:1 begins by saying, "Peter, an apostle of Jesus Christ." In 1 Peter 5:1 the author claims to be "a fellow elder and a witness of the sufferings of Christ." Second Peter 1:1 opens by saying, "Simeon Peter, a servant and apostle of Jesus Christ." Second Peter 1:16-18 says of the author's presence at the earthly ministry of Jesus Christ,

For we did not follow cleverly devised myths when we made known to you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but we were eyewitnesses of his majesty. For when he received honor and glory from God the Father, and the voice was borne to him by the Majestic Glory, "This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased," we ourselves heard this very voice borne from heaven, for we were with him on the holy mountain.

As well as this direct evidence that Peter the apostle was the author, the letter frequently alludes to the life and teaching of Jesus, which Peter was present to witness. Subsequently, the verdict of F. H. Chase is that "no Epistle has caught so much of the spirit of Jesus."<sup>4</sup>

Fourth, from the language of 1 Peter 4:14-16, some have built a case to suggest that the letter was written at a time when the very fact of being a Christian was a crime, and this is known not to have been the case until long after Peter's death. Peter's argument in 1 Peter 2-4, however, is that Christians must take care to live an innocent life so that if they are falsely accused, such slander will be without foundation. The book of Acts reveals that from the earliest days, misunderstanding, personal prejudices, and rejection of the gospel could lead to persecution because of the name of Christ (e.g., 13:50; 14:5, 19; 16:19-24; 17:5, 13; 18:12-13; 19:23-29). In fact, Peter's own words suggest that he was speaking only about individual and not state-sponsored persecution of Christians (1 Pet. 2:13-14). The relationship between the church and the authorities indicated in the letter is basically the same as in Acts,

which also precedes the horrendous and murderous persecution that was inflicted upon Christians in the time of Nero some years later.

Fifth, 2 Peter 3:1 reveals that the author of 2 Peter is in fact the same person who wrote 1 Peter: “This is now the second letter that I am writing to you, beloved.” Despite some scholarly doubt concerning the authorship of 2 Peter, David H. Wheaton writes:

The writer leaves us in no doubt on the matter. He says he is “Simon Peter, a servant and apostle of Jesus Christ” (1:1). He was on the mount of Transfiguration with Jesus (1:16–18) where only Peter, James and John were with him (Mk. 9:2–12). He had written on a previous occasion to the recipients of this letter (3:1) and is on familiar terms with them (3:1, 8, 14, 17). Furthermore, he calls Paul “our dear brother” (3:15), and at the time of writing he was expecting to die quite soon (1:14).<sup>5</sup>

Furthermore, the early church consistently recognized Peter as the author of the two letters bearing his name. This includes Polycarp, Irenaeus, Tertullian, and Clement of Alexandria, among others. Simply, 1 and 2 Peter were penned by Peter. D. A. Carson calls Paul Achtemeier’s commentary on 1 Peter “the fullest commentary in English at the exegetical level” and “a masterpiece of careful scholarship.”<sup>6</sup> Thus, the greatest technical commentator on 1 and 2 Peter concludes, “The majority of the evidence, both external and internal, would appear to support the traditional view that Peter the apostle wrote this letter.”<sup>7</sup>

## NOTES

1. Wiersbe, W. W., *The Bible Exposition Commentary (1 Pe 1:1)* (Wheaton, Ill.: Victor Books, 1996, c1989).
2. D. R. W. Wood, “Peter” in *New Bible Dictionary*, ed. I. Howard Marshall et al., 3rd ed. (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1996), 905.
3. Karen H. Jobes, *1 Peter* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2005), 8.
4. Quoted in David H. Wheaton, “1 Peter” in *New Bible Commentary: 21st Century Edition*, ed. D. A. Carson, electronic version, (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1994).
5. David H. Wheaton, “2 Peter” in *New Bible Commentary: 21st Century Edition*, ed. D. A. Carson, electronic version, (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1994).
6. D. A. Carson, *New Testament Commentary Survey* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1986/2007), 136.
7. Peter Achtemeier, *1 Peter* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1996), 35–36.