

Crises in the Life of Peter

“Peter answered him, Lord, to whom shall we go? thou hast the words of eternal life. And we believe and are sure that thou art that Christ, the Son of the living God.”
—John 6:68,69

THE APOSTLE PETER IS one of the most colorful and engaging characters in the New Testament. He was among the earliest to become one of the Lord's disciples. It was Andrew, the brother of Peter, who first introduced him to Jesus. This was shortly following Jesus' return from his forty days of meditation in the wilderness, during which he also had been tempted by the devil.—John 1:35-42; Matt. 4:1-11

To consider all of the experiences of Peter in his association with Jesus during the following three and one-half years would be to trace most of the recorded history of our Lord during that period. Peter was not only one of the first called, but he also became one of the three special associates of Jesus, sharing that honor and privilege with James and John, who were brothers in the flesh as well as in the spirit.

These three, together with Peter's brother Andrew, were fishermen and engaged in business at the Sea of Galilee, also known as the Sea of Tiberias. (John 6:1) It is supposed that these four continued in their fishing business for some period after they became Jesus' disciples. They likely also spent a considerable portion of this time with Jesus, becoming more closely associated with his ministry.

END OF THE FISHING BUSINESS

It was in connection with Peter and the other three disciples' fishing that the first experience we will consider occurred. The account is given in Luke 5:1-11 and Matthew 4:18-22. It is the story of Jesus' preaching to the multitude on the shore of the sea. Desiring a suitable place from which to give his message, he entered the ship of Simon Peter, which he asked to have moved out a little distance from the shore. There he "taught the people out of the ship."—Luke 5:3

When he had finished his sermon to the multitude, Jesus turned to his disciples to give them some special and deeper instruction. He suggested to Peter that he move out into deep water and let down his net. Peter replied that they had toiled all night and taken nothing, but nevertheless at Jesus' word he agreed to let down the net once again. The result was astonishing. They now caught so great a multitude of fish that their net broke, and they sought the assistance of their partners, James and John. Both ships were filled so full that they began to sink.—vss. 4-7

This miraculous demonstration of Jesus' power, coupled with the glorious message of the kingdom to which they had just listened, was too much for

Peter. The account tells us that he cast himself down before Jesus, and made a most surprising request, saying, "Depart from me; for I am a sinful man, O Lord."—Luke 5:8

Here was one very conscious of his own imperfections and deeply impressed with the perfections of the Master. Peter was so doubtful of his own ability to measure up to the standards of a disciple of Jesus that he felt unworthy to be associated with him. However, this was just the attitude of honesty and humility that was necessary for Peter, as well as for all who would be disciples of Jesus, to attain before the Lord could safely and effectively use them in his work. Seeing this, Jesus reassured Peter and his associates saying, "Fear not; from henceforth thou shalt catch men."—vs. 10

How sweet those words must have sounded to impetuous Peter! How greatly did they affect this disciple who had asked the Lord to depart. In his heart, Peter no doubt felt a deeper devotion to the Master than ever before, and a more earnest longing to be associated with him. Most assuredly, Peter would call this important experience to mind on many subsequent occasions.

That seems to have been the end of the fishing business for those four disciples, until a time several years afterward which we will consider later in our study of the experiences of Peter. For now, however, we are told that "when they had brought their ships to land, they forsook all, and followed him." (vs. 11) Hereafter it would be no longer part-time association with the Master and his work, but such complete devotion that Peter could later say, "We have forsaken all, and followed thee."—Matt. 19:27

LESSONS FROM THESE EARLY EXPERIENCES

We find lessons for ourselves in this incident in the lives of those early disciples. Like them, there may have been a period in our lives, when, after becoming the Lord's disciples, we were still divided in our attention to this new vocation. Perhaps we were not fully setting our minds on things above, but still pursuing to some extent selfish and spiritually profitless worldly aims and ambitions.—Matt. 6:19,20; Col. 3:1,2

We might wonder how, after his initial introduction to Jesus and acceptance as a follower, it was possible for Peter to continue his fishing business. Why had he not, before this miraculous demonstration, felt the Master's presence and his service to be so marvelous a privilege as to have "forsaken all" and followed him at the very first?

We may turn this question upon ourselves, and recall if a period of time went by after we had made a full consecration to God before we truly began to understand and put into practice a life of full devotion that such an agreement requires. Going still further in our introspection, we may ask whether we have even now mastered the lesson that Peter and his companions learned that day in the boat with Jesus, and whether, in our hearts and as fully as possible in our lives, we are really "All for Jesus! all for Jesus! All my days and all my hours."—*Hymns of Dawn*, #8

Another suggestion which comes through consideration of this introduction to a "full-time" ministry is that Peter had to become fully "caught" himself before he could be a successful fisher of men. The sharp points of (Continued on page 36)

(Continued from page 31) truth must first reach his heart, revealing his helplessness and unworthiness. He must become truly “poor in spirit” before he could safely be used. He must “mourn” before he could be “comforted,” and, as one of the Lord’s special representatives, share in the work of comforting others.—Matt. 5:3,4

It is no less true today. The one who would be used of the Lord must first have opened his own heart and mind fully to the Master’s instruction. Paul indicated this in his letter to Timothy, saying that one who labors in a vineyard “must be first partaker of the fruits.” (II Tim. 2:6) To those who have responded as did Peter, our gracious Lord offers the same comforting reassurance that he gave to Peter, and the promise that we may share in his ministry both now and in the future.

“THOU ART THE CHRIST”

The next event under consideration which was of major importance in the life of Peter is recorded in Matthew 16:13-23. This account records a conversation between Jesus and his disciples when, in their journeying, they were in the northern part of Palestine, at “Caesarea Philippi.” Jesus’ ministry had now been in progress for more than two years, and he asked his disciples concerning what the results had been: “Whom do men say that I the Son of man am?”

Their reply was not encouraging: “Some say thou art John the Baptist: some, Elias; and others, Jeremias, or one of the prophets.” (vs. 14) How remarkable that the disciples could not recall anyone among the multitudes to whom Jesus had

preached who discerned the fact that he was far greater than any of these noted servants of God.

To instill a new idea in the mind of fallen, imperfect man has always been a difficult task. It is well for us to recall the meager results evidenced in the disciples' statement. Thus we will not be discouraged when our glorious message of the nearness of God's kingdom seems to fall on heedless ears, or excite but a temporary response tempered with incredulity. Rather, let us be encouraged, for we are still in the age when we must "walk by faith, not by sight," and at the present time "all men have not faith." (II Cor. 5:7; II Thess. 3:2) We are in the company of the Master and his disciples. As such, we are to emulate their zeal, obedience, and faithfulness by proclaiming the Gospel in the end of the age as they did in its beginning.

In our narrative Jesus then made his inquiry more personal, asking the disciples whom they recognized him to be. This was the occasion for the great confession of Peter, "Thou art the Christ [Hebrew: *Messiah*], the Son of the living God." The commendation Peter received from Jesus in response to his declaration is familiar to all Bible students: "Flesh and blood hath not revealed it unto thee, but my Father which is in heaven." Jesus was not merely a perfect man, but was the long-promised Messiah, the Son of God. The disciples were now convinced of his true origin and office. They were prepared to witness to these tremendously important facts.—Matt. 16:15-17

MUST FIRST SUFFER AND DIE

This insight into the true character of their Master was only part of the instructions he had yet

to give in the short time that remained for him to be with his disciples in the flesh. Thus we read that “from that time forth began Jesus to shew unto his disciples, how that he must go unto Jerusalem, and suffer many things of the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and be raised again the third day.”—Matt. 16:21

It is not surprising that Jesus’ statement did not coincide with the idea that Peter had as to the destiny marked out in the Scriptures for Christ, the Messiah. Never hesitant to express himself, we read that Peter immediately confronted Jesus, and “began to rebuke him, saying, Be it far from thee, Lord: this shall not be unto thee.”—vs. 22

This was a well-intentioned effort of the devoted Peter to dissuade Jesus from the course he knew had been foretold by the Old Testament prophets, and which was of vital importance in the accomplishment of the plan of God. Jesus’ reaction was instantaneous and emphatic. “He turned, and said unto Peter, Get thee behind me, Satan: thou art an offence [Greek: trap or snare] unto me: for thou savourest not the things that be of God, but those that be of men.”—vs. 23

What a trial those severe words of reproof must have been to Peter, testing greatly his humility as a disciple—now merely a student of the Master. Only a short time earlier he received one of the highest commendations of the New Testament in the assurance that God had revealed the identity of Jesus to him. Now, however, he was personified as Satan, the enemy of God.

We may wonder why Jesus gave such a stern reproof. As we ponder the circumstances and the

conversation, we see that Peter's well-meant remark was in effect the same as Satan's effort in the wilderness. Namely, it was an effort to dissuade Jesus from his course of loyalty to God's plans, which involved his surrender of human life as a voluntary sacrifice.

No progress could be made in Peter's understanding as long as he believed Jesus was the Christ, the Son of God, and at the same time supposed that he should avoid persecution, suffering, and death. This fundamental error, that to be the Christ, or a true follower of Christ, was possible without sacrifice unto death, had to be refuted by the Master in the most positive terms. This was not only for Peter's benefit, but for the protection and guidance of the Lord's followers ever since.

Later, when Jesus again told the disciples of his impending death, they were "amazed" and "exceeding sorrowful." "They understood none of these things," as to the reasons for Jesus' determination to go among his enemies. (Mark 10:32; Matt. 26:22; Luke 18:34) It was from Jesus' explanations during his post-resurrection appearances and by the eventual enlightenment of the Holy Spirit, given on the Day of Pentecost, that the proper understanding of these events was made known to the disciples. (Luke 24:25-27, 44-46; Acts 1:8; 2:1-4) Subsequently, we see abundant evidence in Peter that he had humbly absorbed the sobering lesson given by his Master months earlier at Caesarea Philippi.

GARDEN OF GETHSEMANE TEST

We find Peter, only hours before Jesus' betrayal, objecting to the Lord's saying that they would all "be offended" that night because of him. Boastfully,

Peter assured Jesus, "Though I should die with thee, yet will I not deny thee. Likewise also said all the disciples." (Matt. 26:31-35) These dear followers of Christ were learning a great lesson, even though not yet able to put it into practice until "endued with power from on high" through the begetting of the Holy Spirit. (Luke 24:49) Nevertheless, they had determined to profess loyalty to their Master, even unto death.

Another event on that fateful night, which was among the important experiences of Peter, took place in the Garden of Gethsemane. In Luke 22:35-38, we are told of Jesus' instructions to the disciples as they left the upper room. Among other things they were to provide themselves with swords. He said, "This that is written must yet be accomplished in me, And he was reckoned among the transgressors: for the things concerning me have an end." The disciples replied that there were two swords among the company, "And he said unto them, It is enough."

We pause to consider the remarkable statement of the Lord that he had now reached the climax of his earthly experience, and that the prophecy would soon be fulfilled which stated that he was to be counted among the transgressors. (Isa. 53:12) What a glorious testimony of a life of perfect devotion and of faithfulness to every detail of the divine will for him as he had discerned it in the Scriptures. It was for grace and strength to meet this final test that the Master agonized in prayer that night in Gethsemane.—Luke 22:41-44

After being strengthened by the ministry of an angelic messenger, the Jewish multitude, led by Judas, approached to apprehend Jesus. Peter no

doubt had in mind the Lord's instructions regarding the swords. He asked, "Lord, shall we smite with the sword?" Not waiting for a reply, the impetuous disciple "smote the servant of the high priest, and cut off his right ear."—vss. 49,50

Now Peter and his companions were to be given another important lesson of far-reaching significance to them, to all the Lord's disciples down through the age, and to us in the end of the age. They might have the means to avoid suffering, to resist injustice and persecution, but they were not to use them. It was God's will that they suffer. It was the Father who poured the cup for Jesus that night and gave it to him to drink. Accordingly, we read in John's account, "Then said Jesus unto Peter, Put up thy sword into the sheath: the cup which my Father hath given me, shall I not drink it?" (John 18:11) Jesus then healed the wound made by Peter's sword, with the observation, "All they that take the sword shall perish with the sword."—Matt. 26:52

We have no record of Peter's response to the Lord's reproof, but we have the evidence of his later hearty acceptance of this new idea. After Pentecost, when Peter and the other apostles were arrested, imprisoned, and beaten by order of the Sanhedrin, they "departed from the presence of the council, rejoicing that they were counted worthy to suffer shame" for the name of Christ. (Acts 5:29,40,41) Later, we read Peter's clear statement to follow the non-resisting Master and to heed the instructions which he gave and exemplified that night in the Garden. Peter's exhortation to the brethren is to "arm yourselves," not with swords, but "with the same mind" found in Jesus.—I Pet. 2:19-24; 4:1

PETER'S MOST HEART-SEARCHING TEST

We now come to what are perhaps the most sorrowful hours in the history of the human race. The Son of God, the one fully controlled by, and perfectly manifesting the spirit of humility, simplicity, grace and love, is on trial before members of the human family whom he helped create. There, the representatives of our race, motivated by pride, jealousy and hatred, brought false witness against him and condemned him to death. Furthermore, those who were guilty of that unmatched wrong were not the ignorant and godless elements of society, but the most enlightened group among the chosen nation of Israel—their religious leaders.

Peter was there in the high priest's palace that night. His love for his Master gave him the courage to follow him into the presence of his enemies. He was pointed out as a member of Jesus' company. Then, in the very presence of the Master he loved, Peter denied that he even knew him. How astonishing a combination of qualities we find in Peter. Here love and courage had brought him into danger. Yet, whatever the reason, he denied with an oath the one whom but a few hours before he had assured that "though all men shall be offended because of thee, yet will I never be offended ... Though I should die with thee, yet will I not deny thee."—Matt. 26:33-35

Jesus came into view, under guard of soldiers, and he looked at Peter. (Luke 22:61) How that look must have cut him to the heart. It doubtless was the most critical moment in all of his experiences with the Master thus far. Would he repent, or would he, like Judas, make repudiation of his Master final? If we

were there, how breathlessly we would have waited to see the reaction of Peter. Jesus' look was no doubt full of yearning for his sorely pressed disciple, who was in danger of being sifted "as wheat," as Jesus had forewarned the previous evening in the upper room.—vs. 31

As the cock crowed, Peter remembered that Jesus had warned him that "before the cock crow, thou shalt deny me thrice." Peter went out of the palace. Thankfully, he did not go out as Judas did, to hang himself. He also did not go out to console himself with the thought that he had been under great strain, and thus make excuses for his denial of the Master. Rather, Peter "went out, and wept bitterly." (Matt. 26:75) Peter had passed this great climactic test successfully! The humbling process had truly begun, a vital step in preparation for the great apostolic work that was soon to begin when the disciples would be endued with God's Holy Spirit.

LOVEST THOU ME?

This humbling process was continued a short time later, following Jesus' resurrection from the dead. Not yet fully aware of the course they should pursue, Peter and others of the disciples again engaged in the fishing business. As had happened three years before, they toiled all night and caught nothing. Then the stranger on the shore advised them to cast their net on the right side, assuring them that they would find fish there. Again a miraculous abundance of fish was taken. Convinced that it was the Lord on the shore, Peter could not wait but cast himself into the sea to swim to him.—John 21:1-7

Later, after the meal at which the risen Lord was the host, he had an intimate conversation with Peter. "Lovest thou me?" Jesus asked Peter three times. "Thou knowest all things; thou knowest that I love thee," Peter replied, to which Jesus instructed him, "Feed my lambs. ... Feed my sheep." The risen Lord then reminded Peter that though he was used to taking care of himself and going where he wanted to go, the time would come when "another shall gird thee, and carry thee whither thou wouldest not." The record further states that Jesus indicated to Peter the manner of his death—by crucifixion, it is supposed—by which "he should glorify God." Peter's devotion was in no wise daunted now. God could begin to honor and use him as an apostle, since the humbling had been accomplished.—vss. 15-19

FULLY PREPARED

Years afterward Peter alludes to this conversation at the seaside. He says the time is near when "I must put off this my tabernacle, even as our Lord Jesus Christ hath shewed me." He was now fully prepared for that final test. In fact, the account seems to indicate that it weighed little upon him, and his greater concern was to faithfully complete his ministry among the Lord's followers to whom he wrote. He would "not be negligent," but keep them reminded of the Gospel and the course which would insure that they make their "calling and election sure," though they knew the things of which he wrote and were "established in the present truth."—II Pet. 1:10-14

Indeed, Peter felt it necessary to continue to stir up the brethren by reminding them of these things,

“as long as I am in this tabernacle.” Looking even beyond his ministry in the flesh, he writes, “Moreover I will endeavour that ye may be able after my decease to have these things always in remembrance.”
—vs. 15

AN INSPIRATION TO US

Cephas, or Peter—meaning a rock—was the name Jesus gave Simon when he was first brought to him. (John 1:42) How little he seemed to deserve that name in some of the tests the Lord applied. However, Jesus saw in him the animating principle of reverence for God. He loved Peter, and Peter loved his Master. Jesus could wait for Peter’s development with patience, hope and helpfulness. He views and treats us likewise, and he gives us opportunities to similarly discern the gold in the character of our brethren. He desires that we share in their encouragement as he brings them through life’s critical experiences until their characters are fully developed.

At the beginning, Peter’s character was one made up of complex and sometimes contradictory human impulses and dispositions. However, the Lord led him in such a way, overruling his experiences, and instructing him through his Word and his providences, that he fully overcame those conflicting dispositions as far as his heart was concerned. The new impulses and Godlike qualities were gradually crystallized into a rock-like, immovable and unchangeable character, prepared as a “living stone” for the temple of God.—I Pet. 2:4,5, *Rotherham Emphasized Bible*

How glorious to consider Peter’s growth in grace and his final success! We rejoice also, to think of the saints down through the age—only a “little

flock”—who have likewise, through the infinite love and grace of God, “bought” of him the divine character, “gold tried in the fire.” (Luke 12:32; Rev. 3:18) As Jesus clearly indicated, the cost of such character is sacrifice, tribulation, death to the flesh and to its desires and ambitions. Yet, the most splendid thought is that it is still possible for us to “purchase” this gold of such immeasurably high value. May our consideration of these incidents in the life of Peter inspire and encourage us to press on in the same way until we too have made our “calling and election sure.” ■