

Utterly Transformed

The Improbable Life of Peter

George G Watts

DEDICATION & THANKS

Dedicated to all those who have taught me Biblical truth over the course of my life. From my mother singing to me before I can remember, to pastors, Sunday school teachers, family, friends, speakers, authors, colleagues, and others too many to mention.

To Susan who has been a living, breathing example of following Jesus every day of the past 27 years.

To our four fantastic kids who bring joy, animals, laughs, friends, and so much more into our home every day.

Special thanks to Heidi Edwards and Greg Sund for their invaluable editing.

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Chapter One

NOT WHO YOU THINK HE IS

My wife's paternal grandfather was a chain-smoking alcoholic who towered above others despite being hunched over due to years of hard living. He enjoyed yelling at people and grunting off-color remarks just to make others uncomfortable. His arms were covered with tattoos from the genre best known as 'drunken sailor on shore leave,' which was also his preferred style of swearing.

He fought in World War II, but only because he lied about his age. While overseas, he broke his back in an altercation that no one in the family ever seemed to have the full story. He fathered a child with an English woman before returning to Canada to start a family. He spent his life in manual labor jobs and had a well-earned reputation as a gruff, hard, ornery man. He was suspicious of others, flagrantly racist, and in his shirt pocket, next to his black comb, he kept a small book to track every single dollar anyone ever owed him.

All of those descriptions (and so, so, many more) are entirely true. But so is this: he would sit in front of the TV for hours on end, smoking, drinking, yelling, and knitting. Yes, knitting. He would make little booties and outfits for babies and give them to the local hospital so newborns would have a cute homemade outfit to wear home. While in a body cast in a military hospital in England, someone taught him how to knit in order to keep him busy, and he never stopped. He knit sweaters with bowling pins on the back, and cardigans with deer on the front, but

the baby items really seemed out of character. He used soft yellow and pink yarn, spinning together creations with the attention of a master artisan. An artisan who created things of beauty that brought joy to people he would never meet. He never used a pattern, but spun together creations as a master of his craft.

We can know people well, or at least know a lot about them, and still have a very skewed idea of who they are. We can hear a lot about characteristics, experiences, and vocation, yet miss key parts of who a person is. If we ignore any aspects of someone's life, their personality, their actions, their words, we get an inaccurate idea of who they are as a whole.

We do this with many of the people we read about in the Bible. Some, like Jonah or Thomas, get reduced to one action. We have information, stories, and the words of others, yet we still reduce them to a caricature. Moses is forever parting the Red Sea, Noah is always on his boat, and David is eternally battling Goliath. We make them flat, one-dimensional figures who seem synthetic and unrealistic. No one has been more misjudged than Peter.

The Apostle Peter, Son of Jonah.

AKA: Simon Peter

Originally: Πέτρος (PETROS) in Greek meaning: "stone, rock"

One of the main characters in the writings we have about Jesus, who also played a major role in the formation of what we now call Christianity. Peter is unmissable in the New Testament, in church history, and in the Christian tradition as a whole.

For those of us who grew up hearing the stories of the Bible, Peter was (like all the other characters in New Testament now that I think about it) a serious, wise, stern, level-headed, dedicated follower of Jesus. In my minds-eye, he was a bearded older gentleman (strangely quite Western European looking), who wore a bathrobe-toga and always had a very pensive expression on his face. In fact, for much of my life, what came to mind when picturing Peter (and the rest) were the photos of my mother's father. All images of my grandfather show a kind but serious white-bearded, ancient, pietistic Norwegian man in black and white photos, yellowed with age. However, as I grew older and started to re-read the

accounts of Peter's actions, his words, and the situations he got himself into, an entirely different character emerged. Once I attempted to read these stories with fresh eyes, a very different person revealed himself.

Passionate.

Aggressive.

Fast to act.

Overly confident.

Many times he is too quick to speak, too fast to respond, and too eager to make his voice heard and his ideas put forward.

In his masterpiece, *The Last Supper*, Leonardo da Vinci presents Jesus with his 12 disciples just after he announces, "One of you here at the table will betray me." Leonardo, a master of using still images to convey both movement and emotion, paints each of the disciples in poses that reveal their reaction to Jesus' words and give insight into their emotional state. We see Judas clutching his bag of silver coins, seated, and turning away from Jesus. Andrew is throwing up his hands as if to say "Stop." Then there is Peter, who already has a knife in his hand, a foreshadowing of the physical attack he would later that night carry out.¹ Some disciples have not understood what Jesus said, some are in shock, yet there is Peter, with a weapon drawn.²

This is not atypical of who Peter was. Often he is the first to react to a situation, the quickest to speak, the first in line to give his opinion. He is the first to volunteer, the fastest to respond, and the most eager to go along with whatever. In Luke 8, Jesus and his disciples are in a crowd listening to a man named Jairus begging Jesus to help his only child who is dying. While they are talking, a woman came up behind Jesus and merely touched his robe. She was desperate for physical healing from a hemorrhaging condition that had plagued her for a dozen years. Jesus felt her touch and asked who touched him, not because he didn't know the answer, but perhaps because he wanted to see how the woman would react. This woman had to push her way through a crowd to get there. Luke, a physician who wrote one of the accounts of Jesus, noted "the crowds almost crushed them." So when Jesus asks, "Who touched me?" perhaps the others were wondering if this

was some sort of parable or a clever way of saying something else. If Jesus could miraculously heal her physically (which he did) then it's likely he could figure out who she was. Peter chimes in and helps the Son of God understand the physical realities of standing in a mob. "Master, the people are crowding and pressing against you." Interesting that Peter feels he needs to point out to God-on-Earth: when you stand in the middle of a crowd, some of them will touch you.

I wonder what some of the other disciples were thinking. "Wow - thanks for pointing that out, Pete! What would we do without you?"

Not only is he often the first to give his opinion on a matter, but he is also very often the first to take action. Many times, he is the only one. When Jesus walks on the water to the disciples, out of all of them, Peter is the one who yells at Jesus and questions him. Then he is the only one to jump out and try walking on the water toward Jesus. In one of the last scenes we see them together, Peter is with Jesus in the garden of Gethsemane as Judas comes with the religious leaders and soldiers to arrest Jesus. Peter is the one who seems to say "It's ON!" and pulls out his weapon to draw first blood in the Messiah-King-led battle to overthrow the Roman oppressors.

In Matthew 15, Peter's request that Jesus explain his parable triggers Jesus' words, "Are you still so dull?" The Parable of The Unmerciful Servant seems to be given in direct response to Peter coming to Jesus all proud about having "forgiven someone SEVEN times!" Enthusiastic zeal is a key characteristic of the life of Peter. Sometimes it appears to come out as love, sometimes rage, sometimes a lack of foresight, and sometimes nothing more than ignorance. However, there is no doubt he is a man of passion. When he makes mistakes, he makes them boldly. He speaks grand promises, harsh condemnations, and incredibly impassioned pleas. He obviously is living the words of his high school coach who told him to "always give 110%!"

It is exactly this fervor that gets him into trouble, into situations, into learning, and into fascinating relationships. Having someone often on the verge of frenzy traveling around with Jesus, gives us a truly unique point of view into the life and teachings of Jesus. Not just what Peter said, but also how he reacted, in the very

presence of Jesus of Nazareth. More insightful than Peter's reactions are the ways Jesus responds when presented with these attitudes, words, and actions of Peter.

The various accounts of Jesus' life, and the letters that are written immediately after it, record a surprising number of things Peter did and said. We have a lot of recorded history of who he was and how he acted in response to Jesus. Even when Peter wasn't the only one doing something, the Gospel writers still single him out. Peter alone is noted as sleeping in the Garden of Gethsemane when the others are sleeping as well. "Go tell the disciples and Peter" is what the angel tells the women at the tomb. Together with James and John, Peter forms the inner circle of disciples, often the only ones privy to certain events. We know so much about this improbable life of a Galilean fisherman, as we see him transformed as he followed Jesus.

Product designers often employ "extreme use cases" to create better objects. To design a better can opener, you watch how elderly people with arthritis use them. If you want to make a better baby carrier, you study people who have never held a child, and also someone with eight children. How extreme examples respond gives insight that is valid for the less-extreme cases, but would not have been obvious if you only look at the average. Most of us are probably 'more average' than Peter. Less impulsive, not as bold, more level-headed. However, by studying his extreme-case reaction to Jesus' message, actions, and love, we can all learn something for ourselves. None of us will ever spend three years here on earth traveling with Jesus in his incarnate form. This is another extreme case of Peter. He often was one of the few people present when Jesus did and said things. His utter transformation from an absolutely common fisherman to a pillar of the Christian Church bears examination.

When someone dies, it's often the person who was closest to them who gives the eulogy. They knew them best, so they can best speak to what their life was like. Consider Peter's words a testimony of who Jesus was, coming from arguably the person who was closer to him than any other human being. I hope that by studying Peter we learn not only about Peter but more deeply about Jesus. That ought to deserve our attention if nothing else does.

Chapter Two

PETER THE FISHERMAN

Before we examine the events in Peter's life, we need to look at one of the fundamental characteristics that formed who he was - his career. Peter, his brother Andrew, and their father were fishermen. Their father Jonah was from Bethsaida, a town whose name means "house of fishing," so it's safe to say fishing was in Peter's blood. However, when I think 'fisherman' the image that comes to mind is not an accurate depiction of John, Andrew, Peter, and their 1st-century colleagues.

I have to push out of my mind the idea of the modern 'recreational fisherman.' That guy who heads out to the lake on a weekend for some restful time away from it all. Armed with kevlar rods, a sonar fish finder, GPS, perhaps a silly hat, some friends, and a case of beer - he is basically there for fun. Often they catch and release - as the actual gathering of the fish is not the goal. They are out on the water for peace, relaxation, and enjoying time with a buddy or two. They stream the weather app on their phone, and if the wind picks up too much or the mosquitoes are biting more than the fish, they head for the cabin and catch a football game on the TV. I'm not judging this. I have friends who fit this description, but it's an inaccurate mental image if we're discussing Peter and his buddies.

They are fishermen who actually fish. They don't throw the fish back because - you know - they catch fish to keep the fish. One of my most vivid memories of

these kinds of fishermen is from a small village on the Atlantic coast of Morocco. The livelihood of most people in Essaouira is tied to how many fish they can bring in from the water. The major catch in that area is sardines, which means you head out at night when they come to the surface to eat. These men don't head back to shore when the clouds make the lake a little dark. They head out into the ocean when it is already dark. Every night.

We walked past the boatyards where men were building new boats that appeared just like all the others out on the water. They all appeared to be the same model they had built for a thousand years. This was 20 years ago, so there was no weather app, no phone reception on the water, and no solar panels or good batteries. They had no communication, nothing to guide them but the coast and the stars, and no help except each other. They went out at night in these small wooden vessels because it was the only way these men could support their families.

Two things stand out in my memory of when they came back to the docks in the morning. There was a lot of noise. There was a lot of smell.

Tired men hauling in massive loads of fish. Some with enormous masses of nets on their backs to be brought in for repairs. Most things were wet. Many things were bloody. A lot of sweat, yelling, throwing, and heaving things. Everything was stinky. Everyone was exhausted as they did what they had to in the 'yes-it's-already-hot' of mid-morning on the North African coast. It all looked very difficult, tiring, hard, dangerous, monotonous. The most blue-collar work you can imagine. Just a bunch of men using their muscles, simple wooden boats, handmade nets, and wooden crates to haul thousands of kilos of fish out of the ocean, into their boats, and then up onto the docks. I suspect every day is pretty much the same. Fishing is not a weekend getaway to forget about the stresses of work. It is the every-day stress of manual labor.

That's probably more like what Simon Peter and his brother Andrew looked like. Peter and his friends didn't have a T-shirt with a silk-screened "Bass" pun and a venti-caramel-macchiato-half-caf-cappuccino-con-carni in the cup holder of their SUV. These fishers endured hard physical labor to get their boats out,

move them around the lake, get the fish into them, and then bring them back to shore and get the fish out. They didn't stop to buy burgers if they couldn't catch anything that day. It wasn't just their evening meal, but the entire livelihood of their family depended on a good catch. These are men who work physically demanding jobs in the scorching sun of the Middle East. For them, fishing was not a way to get away from it all, it was their 'all' and they probably would have enjoyed a chance to get away from it.

So what?

So Peter and his brother Andrew and their dad were all fishermen - what difference does that make?

Years ago, on a trip to Israel and Palestine, our family visited the remains of a 1st-century fishing boat recently discovered in the mud along the shore of the Sea of Galilee after a massive drought shrank back the lake. There are lots of boats that still take tourists out on the Sea of Galilee built in the same style - wooden boats made of large planks - sturdy oak for the frame, lighter cedar for the hull. Almost indistinguishable from those used in Morocco by the sardine fishers. What struck me was how small these boats are. When I was a kid, my picture of the "Sea of Galilee" was a small, calm lake surrounded by green hills. The hills are there, but it sure is not a small lake. Technically, the Sea of Galilee is only a lake. Lake Kinneret - what locals call it - is a freshwater lake. But so are the Great Lakes that lie between Michigan and Ontario. Technically, just a lake, but a big enough body of water that if I were to get caught in a storm, I'd rather be in a vessel with a bit of substance to it. If I were on a lake that big, that well known for storms, I'd prefer more between me and the water. But they didn't have that option.

When I combine these two images: the hard, sweaty, hot, physical labor of fishing and the massive size of Galilee and its storms, it gives me some sense of what Peter and his brothers did. And it's not pretty. It seems hard. It seems dangerous.

It's not just the physical aspects of this job, but also the reality that a certain type of person became a fisherman in those days. Fishing is not a clerical job. Becoming a fisherman is not what the best-educated people tend to do. This is

not employment for weak people who enjoy sleeping in. In my mind, this is the ancient, middle-eastern version of a person who replaces roofing shingles, hangs drywall, or works on an oil rig for a living. The kind of hard work that many of us went to university to avoid (!).

Now when I think about what kind of person Peter was, especially when I see his personality - his temper, his impulsiveness, his seemingly rash decision making - I picture a construction worker who ends up as a pastor and brings with him his blue-collar sensibilities. If you've ever worked those kinds of jobs, even part-time, or for a few months, you have a sense of what those people are like. I worked several of those jobs to put myself through college. The chain-smoking, constantly cursing, 'classic rock FM-station listening,' sports-junky, car enthusiasts I remember are more what Peter and his fellow fishermen were like than me and my lifestyle.

My father worked as a prison chaplain for much of my childhood, and we would go in with him on Christmas or Easter, sometimes just whenever. Usually when there, we'd help him set up for a service in the chapel or other menial tasks we thought were important. Of course, we were a bit of a curiosity to the inmates who were in the maximum-security federal penitentiary. I remember little from those visits, but I do remember stories that got told. Usually, Dad would later tell us why those guys were in there and what they had done. Stories of former bike gang members, thieves, and murderers. These were guys who, statistically, likely grew up in rough, blue-collar homes. So these tattooed, bearded, 2-pack-a-day-coughing guys are a bit more what Peter looked like than what I'd like to think.

For me, these are helpful images to keep in the back of my mind when I think about who Peter was and what he did. He was the Moroccan sardine fisherman in a tiny wooden boat on a vast lake. He's the career roofer, and the "25 to life" guy. A lot less like me who, if I'm honest, the only time I've hurt myself working is when I was up really late writing, dropped my laptop, and it broke my toe).

That Peter was a fisherman by trade also gives insight into some of the other interactions that we have recorded in the New Testament.

It gives better context to how others treated him and viewed his role. When Luke recorded how others reacted to Peter (and John) he made a special note that when the crowds "perceived that they were uneducated, common men, they were astonished. And they recognized that they had been with Jesus." (Acts 4:13) Peter was very likely under-educated, and like those who were well-trained in his time, he didn't know Greek and was not versed and educated like others in higher social classes.

His profession also means he was fully aware of the physical danger of stepping out of the boat when Jesus approached them. It's entirely possible (if not likely) that Peter knew someone who had drowned in the lake. He knew the power of storms on that lake, so Jesus' power to rebuke them would mean a lot to Peter. As a fisherman, Peter would have known what it takes to get enough fish to feed an enormous crowd, so Jesus' ability to get a few small fish to feed thousands would have a tangible comparison for Peter.

When we meet new people, often we ask before anything else "So, what do you do?" because (as misguided as it is) we feel it gives some insight into who they are. This information helps us figure out the person, at least a bit. The same is true for Peter. We start by remembering he is a fisherman by trade, a manual laborer who works out in the sun, on the water, with his father and brother. If we meet someone at the lake, just standing there stripped of most of the things we normally use to judge people, someone might answer either "philosophy professor" or "drywaller" and we might not be surprised. However, as much as we might subconsciously prejudice the manual laborer in our minds, some things are likely true of someone in that field. While we have no idea if they are intellectually brilliant or not, some things are likely true. Get up early, work a physically demanding job, work with some rough characters, and get treated a certain way by most of society. So let's do the same (dis)service to Peter. While not prejudging his capacities and aptitudes just because he works as a fisherman, there are certain things it means. That image I find helpful in trying to understand him better.

Chapter Three

PETER THE HUMAN FISHERMAN

One part of Peter's life that is incredibly fascinating (and very challenging) is his response to Jesus' invitation.

As we have already established, Peter is a man whose job is fishing. His identity would have been tied to his work, the same way ours are to our vocations. One day, this teacher shows up and tells him to leave behind the whole fishing business and follow him. To go somewhere else. Not clear where. Or why exactly? Or for how long. Nor is it really clear with whom. It's as if Jesus would come up to us and say, "Leave your spreadsheets and your phone. Drop off the keys to your office and turn in your ID badge. Now come and follow me." Leaving his boat would be both literally and symbolically leaving his job, his livelihood, and part of his identity behind.

Mark 1:14-20 tells us Jesus was "passing alongside the Sea of Galilee, he saw Simon and Andrew, the brother of Simon, casting a net into the sea, for they were fishermen. And Jesus said to them, 'Follow me, and I will make you become fishers of men.' And immediately they left their nets and followed him." Then the same interaction happens down the beach a little way with two other guys, James and John. Again, they were brothers who worked as fishermen with their father, and Jesus called them. They left the boat, and their father, to follow Jesus as well.

But before we think Peter is even more impulsive than he is (which is already a lot) we need to remember this is not the first time Peter has met Jesus. It's not as though he was sitting along the shore mending his nets and some random stranger he had never heard of walked up to him, and Peter blindly followed his invitation to abandon all he knew and put his life in the hands of a total outsider. If we read the account of Jesus' life written by John, there was an earlier interaction between Peter, Andrew, and Jesus.

John 1:35-42 shows Jesus and Peter's encounter along the Sea of Galilee was not the first time they had met. This passage takes place right after Jesus' baptism, which caused Simon and his brother Andrew to shift their allegiance from John to Jesus himself. Andrew was a follower of John, and seems to be one of the two with John when he looks at Jesus and declares him to be the "Lamb of God." Andrew and the other unnamed John-follower then follow Jesus around for the rest of the day. He later runs back to get his brother Peter and tells him "We have found the Messiah." This was an unbelievably loaded phrase for Jewish people of that time (and orthodox Jewish people of our time). The Jewish people had been waiting for the Messiah for centuries, so this would not have been an insignificant claim, even for a couple of fishermen to make. When Peter shows up later, Jesus tells him he won't be known as "Simon, son of John" anymore, but "Cephas" or "Peter."

They start to hang out with Jesus and follow him around after this, even if they haven't yet abandoned their work as fishermen to follow him around full-time. It's likely the story of Peter and Andrew abandoning their nets in Mark took place weeks, or even months later.

Perhaps the more interesting version of the events is how Luke noted them. Luke was a physician, and his record is one of details and precise accounts. He conducted thorough research to make sure he was getting as complete of a story as he could, and he gives more information on this same event. Luke's telling of the story includes the detail that the calling of Peter and Andrew took place immediately following several other remarkable events. At the end of Luke 4, we read Jesus was just starting his public ministry after his 40 days in the wilderness. He

first goes to his hometown of Nazareth, where they don't want to hear anything that he has to say. So he continues through the region of Galilee, surrounding the Lake of the same name, and comes to a town called Capernaum. Here he heals a demon-possessed man and Luke specifically adds "Reports about [Jesus] went out into every place in the surrounding region. [That is, Galilee.]" The next verse is the story of Jesus going to the house of Simon, soon to be known as Peter. Here Jesus enters his house and heals Peter's mother-in-law of an illness. Then, for the rest of the day, people brought the sick to Jesus, and he healed them. I think it's safe to assume that since Jesus came to Peter's house, healed his mother-in-law, and then, 'all those who were sick came to be healed', Peter had some idea of who Jesus truly was.

Perhaps even more significant is the way Luke 5 describes the interaction between Jesus, Peter, and Andrew. Here we read Jesus about teaching alongside the Sea, and considering what comes next, it seems very safe to assume that Peter and Andrew were right there listening. As the crowd keeps getting bigger and bigger and pushes in on Jesus, he has no beach left to stand on. He gets in a boat and asks the owner to push him out a little so he can continue to teach. That's Peter's (and Andrew's) boat. Peter is there when Jesus is teaching the crowd. Luke tells us that Peter and Andrew weren't using their boat since they were sitting there fixing their nets after a long night of fishing. Peter and Andrew are listening when Jesus was teaching on the beach, and suddenly he's teaching from inside their boat. Then perhaps the most remarkable interaction happens. When Jesus finishes teaching the people, he turns to Peter and says, "Put out into the deep, and put down your nets for a catch" (Luke 5:4). Peter and Andrew were sitting there because they had already fished all night. After all, that's when you fish. And they had likely been in the shallows, where the fish tend to be, and they knew this because they were fishermen. And they had already done this all night and yet had come up completely empty-handed. "Master, we toiled all night and took nothing! But at your word, I will let down the nets." Peter already is calling Jesus 'Master' and has some reason why he was willing to bet on this traveling carpenter-Rabbi from a hick town just down the lake. When Jesus tells them, 'Go

out to the deep and catch,' they do it. Then, just like Jesus said, they catch fish. But not just a few, or enough, to make up for a terrible night's work. Luke tells us they start pulling in so many fish that their nets start to break and they have to call for another boat. The other boat is owned by their fishing partners, James and John. There are so many fish that the weight of the catch is starting to sink both boats. Peter finally falls to his knees and says to Jesus, "Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord."

Then, in response to this, and after all that happened that morning. After Simon's mother-in-law is healed, after hearing John the Baptist tell them that Jesus is truly the Son of God, after his brother Andrew runs to tell him he had found the Messiah - it is in this context that Jesus says "Follow me." And they (Peter, Andrew, James, and John) all do.

So we can put away this image that Peter was simply sitting down on the lakeshore doing his job when some stranger came up to him and told him to follow, and he abandoned all he knew. I think many pastors are guilty of leveraging the John passage to make people feel bad about their 'lack of faith.' But this was not 'blind faith' at all. Blind faith would mean putting your trust in something you don't know or understand. Peter met Jesus, learned about who he was and what he was teaching, and then when Jesus extended an invitation for him to become one of his full-time followers, he accepted.

One of the most dangerous sentiments that 21st-century western-Christianity has adopted is the belief that faith is the opposite of knowledge. This is the idea that if we gain intellectual understanding about Jesus and his life (or the creation of the earth, eternity, or moral theory) it will take away from our faith. The idea that 'blind faith' is the goal. An assumption that we are called to have faith, and it ends right there. If we attempt to understand on a deeper level, we are cheating. "Faith is the evidence of things unseen" doesn't mean the same as "faith is proof of things unknown." Peter, and every other example that I can find in the Bible of people following God by faith, does so in response to God revealing himself. A burning bush, an encounter on the road to Damascus, the women who went to the tomb - are all responding in faith to something. From the evidence of an

empty tomb to the healing of their son to Jesus showing how he fulfills the words of the ancient prophets, I don't believe either Peter nor us are called to have, 'blind faith' to 'just believe' without reason. All of us have been shown something, given something, including the invitation to understand more, learn more, and find more evidence supporting our faith. Peter's life is a great example of faith and doubt, of stepping out in faith and demanding more evidence. This is how we all live. While we all are called to have faith in things unseen, we also are not called to blindly follow something we don't know anything about. Jesus introduced himself to Peter, told him about himself, then called him. Yet still, Peter repeatedly struggled and fell.

Despite his failures (or perhaps even more so because of them), Peter's response to the call to be a 'fisher of other people' is beautiful. He responded to the invitation to help gather others to be close to Jesus and his truth. The fact you are reading these words right now about this uneducated, manual laborer from ancient Palestine two thousand years ago is a magnificent image of what God can do with those who respond. When Jesus said to Peter and Andrew on the beach that morning, "Leave your nets, follow me, and you'll start to fish for people instead of just fish," there is no way they could have had any idea how powerful that response would be. They had no concept how following Jesus would change their lives and the lives of so many others. The call to Peter and the three others was a specific call to leave their careers to be with him for several years. However, the call to follow Jesus and to put ourselves to the same task of helping gather others is extended to all of us. May the beautiful image of nets so full they are bursting, and a gathering so immense that the boats are not built to hold them, give us a vision of what we are called to. That morning on the shores of Lake Galilee, Jesus performed a miracle not merely to give them lots of fish, reward them financially, or even prove his control over nature. I believe this miracle he performed right before he called them to follow is an image of Jesus' call to each of us. At least what our call could be. In some mystical way, co-working with others is part of the miraculous gathering that God himself is working. We don't 'create believers' any more than they 'caused the fish' to swim into those nets. But for

some reason, God has involved us in this work. He has called us. How will we respond?

Chapter Four

PETER, NOT SIMON

Changing your name is an interesting thing.

Some religious and cultural groups still do this. The boxer Cassius Clay became Muhammad Ali when he converted to Islam. ‘The Artist Formerly Known As Prince’ was surprisingly once known as Prince, later an unpronounceable symbol, and when he died, it seems we all went back to calling him ‘Prince’ (which I’m pretty sure was not his birth name). But he changed his name multiple times, as a signifier to others that something real and profound had shifted about his art, or him as a person, or both. For Cassius/Muhammad and TAFKAP/Prince, the shift in what they were called was an indicator that something had changed on the inside. It was something so deep, so profound, so close to the core of who they were that they wanted an external marker to help others understand the impact.

For most of us, the closest we get to this is when a couple gets married and one takes the other’s name (or they hyphenate) partially as a way of stating, “We have started a new family.” Again, it’s an outward sign used to show others that something significant has changed.

Peter wasn’t always known as Peter. He was probably originally called by the Hebrew name Simeon or the Greek form of that name, Simon. This would have been a common name, from the Hebrew word *Šim‘ôn*, meaning “listen.” The name Simon was so common it belonged to two of the twelve apostles. While it’s possible ‘Simon Peter’ was meant to avoid having an awkward ‘Old Simon and Young Simon’ or ‘Tall Simon and Fat Simon’ it appears this was not the case. Even

the authors of the Bible use various forms of his name when telling his story. He's called Simeon twice, and Simon 49 times in the New Testament. Sometimes he's referred to as 'Simon Son of John,' (John 21:15) to be even more precise. John preferred to refer to him as Simon or Simon Peter, much more often than the other Gospel writers who used the Greek translation Petros approximately 150 times. Paul is unique in his preference for almost exclusively referring to Peter by Kēphas (written in Latin as 'Cephas').

It was Jesus himself who first called him 'Peter.' Well, actually, he would have called him Kephas, which was Aramaic for 'rock.' The Greek equivalent is Petros, which is where we get Peter. Jesus changed Simon's name just after his brother Andrew witnesses John the Baptist call Jesus "The Lamb of God." Andrew runs home to get his brother Simon and returns with him. The account can read like this: Andrew goes home; gets his brother; arrives; says "Look, Simon, this Rabbi is truly the Messiah!"; Jesus essentially turns to him and says, "Hi Simon, your name is now Peter." (see previous chapter if this seems too crazy)

Jesus renaming Simon Peter is strange for several reasons. For one, none of the other disciples got this treatment. It's not like Islam, where many converts change their name as an outward marker of an internal change. Nor did Jesus even change the name of other apostles who had identical names. There were two guys named James, and often one of them is literally called "little James" or "James the Lessor." So what's the deal? If I were "Little James" I would probably be thinking "Come on! How in the world did Simon get another name, and I continue to be called Shorty?" Not even James and John, the other two members of Jesus' inner circle are each given alternative names.

On top of the name change, there is the meaning of the name itself. Peter means 'rock' while Simon means 'listen' or 'hear.' In many cultures, names have a much clearer meaning. For years my family and I lived in Burundi, which is a culture where names have obvious meanings. People have names that are literally just a noun, or a few words mashed together. Almost every set of twins is named Bukuru (older) and Butoyi (younger). Bucumi is your name if you're the 10th child in your family because the word simply means 'tenth.' Some names translate

to things like “I am great and good.” Some have meanings like “everyone is talking about me,” “disliked by neighbors,” or even “one with messy, unkept hair”. Many however are names like “I am loved by God,” “I am known by God,” or “I trust God.” When parents decide on a name for a child, it’s not as simple as ‘we like the way it sounds’ or ‘it was my favorite uncle’s name.’³ When parents there choose a name for a child, they are assigning some deeper meaning to it. Jesus calling Simon ‘Rock’ must have meant something. Why didn’t he just stay with ‘Simon’ instead, which means ‘listen’ or ‘hearing’? Is it because Jesus knew listening was perhaps not this man’s strongest characteristic? Sitting back and truly hearing others does not seem to match this man’s personality which is better described as a rock, a tough, abrasive, unlistening thing that can be used to build up something (or knock someone over the head).

God also changed the name of others in the Bible. For each of these, the name change is very intentional. Jacob became Israel (‘one who wrestles with God’) after he spent the night grappling with the angel of God (Genesis 32:28). Abram becomes Abraham (‘father of many’) and Sarai becomes Sarah (‘princess’). Although the change was a bit different, Paul was once Saul.

So this Simon, the son of Jonah, we refer to simply as Peter.

A rock is rough, strong, and occasionally breaks other things. A rock can cause damage but can be formed into a useful tool. Peter is like a stone that looks incredibly strong until pressed in the wrong way, and then it crumbles. A rock where you can see the layers built up over time. A pebble is worn down by the harsh passage of time, yet still has sharp corners. In some ways, we all are. Peter’s life is a helpful reminder of that.

God gives him a new mission and purpose. He was so unstable, inconsistent, and subjective, almost irrational. Now Jesus wants him to become a ‘rock.’ He would show himself to be bold enough to attack a soldier, then hours later he’s so scared he won’t admit to a small girl that he knows who Jesus even is. But Jesus sees beyond all this. He doesn’t pull up the record of what Peter’s already done (and what Jesus knows he will do), but what Jesus can help him to become. Not

what's on the outside, or even who we are, but what he can make us. Jesus looks past who we are when he finds us, and he calls and draws out the best of us.

Jesus calls this wavering impulsive man 'Rock' before he does anything that warrants it. He is willing to do the same for us. He calls us 'child' when we don't earn it, calls us 'friend' when we have not been one, and calls us 'loved' when we turn our back. He changes what he calls us because he alone knows what he can actually transform us into. And that should give us hope.

Chapter Five

PETER THE ENTITLED

Matthew 20 records a parable Jesus told about day laborers in a vineyard. Some had worked since daybreak, others just an hour or so, but at the end of the day, they are paid the same amount. Those who toiled the entire workday became upset that they hadn't been treated as they expected.

What is often lost regarding this parable is that it is Jesus' response to something Peter had just said. In Matthew 19, a wealthy young man comes to Jesus and then goes away sad because he is not willing to give up his wealth to follow him. When talking about the guy often referred to as 'the Rich Young Ruler', Jesus gives us one of his most quoted sayings: "It is easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than for the rich to enter heaven." Jesus concludes his teaching with the almost as well-known, "This is impossible, but with God, anything is possible." However, we often ignore the conversation sandwiched between Jesus' statements. Right there, we have Peter stating his belief that the rich have a better chance than anyone to get into heaven. (Which has all kinds of theological issues to unpack...but that's for another time.) But after that, Peter has another very interesting statement. "See, we have left everything and followed you. What then will we have?" Peter feels the need to remind Jesus what he and the other eleven had given up, following up with a question about their payback. The Message translates Peter's words as "We left everything and followed you. What do we get out of it?"

'What do we get out of it?'

‘I’ve done so much for you, Lord. What do I get in return?’

This is the attitude Jesus is responding to with the parable of the vineyard workers. The point of the parable is that we shouldn’t focus on what we think we’ve earned, rather, we should be happy that we were sitting around the marketplace with no means of feeding our family and a land-owner offered us a job.

There is a fundamental flaw in Peter’s belief as he approaches God with a win-lose mentality. ‘God, let’s make a deal here, and I better benefit from it.’ There is a sense of a financial transaction. I give something, and God will give me something back. This is a deeply disturbing view of God that sees him not as a loving Father who delights to give to his children, but as a tricky and untrustworthy guardian. If you want something from God, you need to offer him something in exchange. Peter is like a child trying to argue, “I stopped crying when we were in the grocery store, so now you owe me extra screen time.” There is an underlying assumption about an exchange with God that needs to balance, or better yet, benefit us.

This ‘I’ve given up so much for you, Jesus’ mindset is so dangerous because it reveals that on a deeper level, we have grossly misjudged the value of what God has given us. There is a major misunderstanding of what God has given us compared to the value of what we think we walked away from. Peter (or any of us) is saying, “Yes, you have given me eternal life, and forgiveness of sins, and peace in this world, and a purpose for living, and a family here on earth in your church, etc., etc. ... but I really had this great job before....”

Really, Peter? You gave up working as a fisher with your brother and your dad and you feel the need to point out how much you’ve sacrificed?

We might say, “I was having so much fun” or “I was so popular” or even “I was going to be so...” if we gave up the potential for something.

‘I gave up a lot for you, God, so what do I get out of it?’

Self-declared martyrdom is all too easy.

“I gave up my Friday evenings for years to help with the youth group ... how can my child walk away from you?”

“I passed up that job with the huge raise because the travel would have been hard on my family. Now I’m getting laid off?”

“I spent three years getting my family ready to move to the foreign mission field, and now my Mom is sick and we have to pack up and move back after six months?”

“We left everything and followed you. What do we get out of it?”

Truly, this is a tempting attitude to have. I’m sure Peter and the others felt like they had given up a lot. Who knows what happened to their boats when they left? Perhaps their father sold them. Maybe he hired workers to replace them. Maybe someone else took that spot on the lake that everyone knew was the domain of Andrew, Peter, and their father John, and now it’s gone. Maybe he ruined his reputation by following around this itinerant Rabbi, who is just a carpenter’s son from Nazareth, of all places. Maybe he disgraced his family - an enormous deal in that culture.

But of course, the point is not what they gave up. Peter was focusing on the wrong things. He was concerned with whether he’d gotten a good deal. Whether he’d come out ahead. Whether the decision to follow Jesus and his simple command to become a fisher of men was a huge mistake.

Jesus’ parable of the vineyard workers is for us whenever we’re tempted to say, “I’ve given up so much for you for God. Look at what I’ve sacrificed.” or some variation.

Usually, when people use this phrase, it’s hyperbole, an overstated exaggeration for emphasis. “We gave up everything to move to this orphanage in rural Mexico...”

If it’s not an exaggeration, there are several deeply troubling truths behind the statement.

First, it shows a very skewed sense of what “everything” is. If I give up a large house, nice cars in my attached garage, and tennis lessons for my kids in order to help orphans in rural Mexico, and I now consider that as ‘everything’, there are some deep problems with my theology and worldview. We are buying into the lies our culture tells us that, more than anything else, security (financial, physical,

social, emotional) is the end goal. We love to have stable, secure, reasonable plans. The kinds of plans that get messed up when we follow God. Perhaps that's what was bugging Peter. Not that his life was so great before, but at least it was his life. He knew what he would do and had the illusion he was in control. Now he gave that up.

Second, this attitude shows how significantly we have misjudged what we've been given. Even if we have given up something of value, to compare it to what God has given us is grossly misunderstanding the value of what God has done for us. Like Peter, we probably poorly understand what we've gained in our relationship with God, and don't clearly see what we have been given. I suppose the nice thing for us no one is recording the times we speak our poorly thought-out points. So, thanks for the example Peter, and sorry you had your dumb ideas written in the greatest-selling book in human history.

Jesus' rebuke of Peter is a good reminder for us whenever we find ourselves saying, or even thinking, 'Look how much I've given up for church, missions, family, etc., because of God.' We ought to think back to this interaction between Peter and Jesus and try to put our perceived losses into perspective with our actual gains.

Chapter Six

PETER THE SWIMMER

One of the best-known stories of Peter's life takes place when he is out in a boat on the Sea of Galilee. The setting itself is, of course, not strange at all. It's not like Peter would have been uncomfortable in a boat. The guy had made his living as a fisherman, so being on water would be as common to him as an office, coffee shop, or a commuter bus is to most of us. Also, these particular waters were familiar to him as this was the Sea of Galilee, the very body of water from which Peter and Andrew were pulling their boats when Jesus walked the beach and called them to leave those boats and follow him. He lived in Capernaum, a town right on the shores of this massive lake.

It was also not strange that they were experiencing extreme weather in this place. The fishermen on the Sea of Galilee fished at night and were painfully aware of how quickly and violently a storm could appear. This massive body of water is still known for how fast storms can emerge and wreak havoc on whoever has the misfortune of finding themselves far from shore. There is a similar story in the New Testament of these same disciples on this same lake (maybe even the same boat) where they are so scared of a violent storm they think they're going to die, and Jesus miraculously calms the storm.

Once again, it's tempting for those of us familiar with the Bible who know the ending of a story, to not fully enter into its tension. Like watching a movie a second time, the stress of the situation is nowhere near the same if we know how it will be resolved. However, we have to take the situation as it's presented to us.

These were young men in a small boat, in the middle of an enormous lake, in the dark of night, struggling viciously against the wind to get their boat to the other shore.

But here the story gets very interesting and honestly, more than a little weird. The disciples are in the boat, scared for their lives, but then Jesus comes out to them. Not in another boat. He doesn't suddenly appear next to them in their boat. Nope, he walks out towards them on top of the water, treading this massive sea underfoot like it's a puddle no deeper than his sandal (at least that's how I picture it. There is surprisingly little detail given, so we have to go with what we imagine, I guess). The disciples think they are watching a ghost walking on the water toward them.

The story of Jesus walking on the water is found in three of the four Gospels with Matthew (14:22), Mark (6:45), and John (6:16) all recording it. However, only Matthew's account has the detail that Peter also got out of the boat towards Jesus. All three have a very similar account of how the disciples got into the boat and set out for the other side of the Sea of Galilee. John adds the detail that they were heading for Capernaum (Peter's hometown). They push off while Jesus was dispersing the crowd he had just miraculously fed. All three Gospel records then note how Jesus headed off by himself, up the mountainside to pray. The group of disciples is in the boat, across the lake and suddenly they are battling against wind and waves to get themselves and this boat where they want to be. What appears next, however, worries them a lot more - the ghost they see walking toward them. Matthew then records "But immediately Jesus spoke to them, saying, "Take heart; it is I. Do not be afraid." (Matt. 14:27) Interesting to note that given Jesus' words, we can assume the disciples are now terrified of what they see coming toward them.

And then the next verses in Matthew recount what Peter (and only Peter) does:

And Peter answered him, "Lord if it is you, command me to come to you on the water." He said, "Come." So Peter got out of the boat and walked on the water, and came to Jesus. But when he saw the wind, he was afraid and beginning to sink, he cried out, "Lord, save me." Jesus immediately reached out his hand and

took hold of him, saying to him, “O you of little faith, why did you doubt?” And when they got into the boat, the wind ceased. And those in the boat worshiped him, saying, “Truly you are the Son of God.” (Matt 14:28-33)

There is so much to unpack there. First, there are Peter’s words to Jesus. Why does Peter ask Jesus to tell him to come? Why doesn’t he ask if it is Jesus, and then decide what to do? Or, why not ask the more logical question and ask Jesus what he thinks Peter should do? It’s like he’s so eager to jump out and do something amazing, but still lacks the courage to do it without more confirmation. So Peter tells Jesus what he wants Jesus to tell him to do.

Second, we have Jesus’ response. Interestingly, Jesus answers Peter’s strange request... kind of. He doesn’t shout out, “Yup, it’s me, and now what you need to do is...” He merely answers with one word. ‘Come.’ It’s an invitation given to Peter, which is apparently enough for him. It seems to answer his request both for confirmation that what he thought moments ago was a ghost is actually his teacher and friend, and also enough direction for him to do something that appears insane.

Then we have such an incredibly understated sentence it can be easy to just skip it. Peter steps out of a boat in the middle of a massive lake in bad weather. Imagine sitting in a small wooden boat, surrounded by crashing waves, howling winds, and nasty clouds covering the moon. Now, someone in the boat with you decides to get out. The boat is the only shred of safety you have in this entire situation. The boat is the only thing that can protect you from dying in the water. The boat itself is all that is keeping you alive. Unless you realize that the one who is calling you out is the one who can offer you safety, protection, and life in an entirely new and dramatic fashion.

Next, we see Peter do something that appears suicidal, yet isn’t. He also can stand and walk across the surface of the water in the middle of this storm, in the middle of the lake. Surely this very act would solidify Peter’s faith, and that of everyone watching him, in the most miraculous way. Walking across the water would be absolute proof Jesus is who he says he is, that he is powerful over all

creation, and that he can be trusted. So just by taking one step, Peter would have his faith firmed up to an unshakable place. Right?

“When he saw the wind, he was afraid, and began to sink...”

How is this possible?

I’ve heard a lot of different explanations about why this happened to Peter. Potentially, the surrounding danger caused him to fear the storm more than he trusted Jesus. Perhaps he actually didn’t have faith that he could do what Jesus was asking him to do. Maybe he doubted Jesus could keep him safe.

Possibly Peter was thinking this was some strange circle of life. Jesus first called him to step away from his boat and his life on the shores of this sea, and now here he was about to die in those very same waters because he literally stepped away from his boat. Peter, the Galilean fisherman, drowns in the sea of Galilee. He could almost see the headlines in his mind (well, not ‘headlines’ per se - but mockingly written cuneiform tablets - you know the ones - lined up by gum and batteries next to the check-out).

Worrying about your kids’ school is like a crashing wave. Not knowing what my job will be like next month is a howling wind. The lack of certainty about housing feels like water smashing over the side and getting our feet wet. Yet in the midst of this, what if Jesus is still saying “come”? The storm won’t necessarily go away. It didn’t for Peter. The wind was still enough to scare him. But Jesus is there, and he’s asking us to trust him.

The words of Psalm 121 feel incredibly fitting to Peter’s situation, and to ours:

I lift up my eyes to the hills. From where does my help come? My help comes from the LORD, who made heaven and earth.

Peter started to sink when he looked down at his problems and not to God. The remainder of the Psalm feels equally applicable:

He will not let your foot be moved; he who keeps you will not slumber. Behold, he who keeps Israel will neither slumber nor sleep. The LORD is your keeper; the LORD is your shade on your right hand. The sun shall not strike you by day, nor the moon by night. The LORD will keep you from all evil; he will keep your

life. The LORD will keep you going out and your coming in from this time forth and forevermore.

We will all face these stormy times. Peter, you, I - all of us. Times when everything is clearly spinning out of control around us. I believe Jesus still says "come" to all of us in those times. He still tells us to come to him. We may - just like Peter - take one or two steps in faith, then sink even worse than before. But Jesus is still there. He still calls. He still saves. He still is.

Chapter Seven

PETER WHO SEES DEAD PEOPLE

Peter was privileged to witness many things most of us can only dream of. He followed Jesus for three years, watching him perform miracles, heal the sick, walk on water, and raise the dead. When the event that we refer to as ‘the transfiguration’ occurred, there were few mere mortals privy to it. In fact, there were only three: Peter, James, and John. The Gospel records of Matthew (17:1–9), Mark (9:2-8), Luke (9:28–36), and one of Peter’s own letters (2 Peter 1:16–18)⁴ all record this strange event.

Matthew records it like this:

And after six days, Jesus took with him Peter and James, and John his brother, and led them up a high mountain by themselves. And he was transfigured before them, and his face shone like the sun, and his clothes became white as light. And behold, there appeared to them Moses and Elijah, talking with him. And Peter said to Jesus, “Lord, it is good that we are here. If you wish, I will make three tents here, one for you and one for Moses, and one for Elijah.” He was still speaking when behold, a bright cloud overshadowed them, and a voice from the cloud said, “This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased; listen to him.” When the disciples heard this, they fell on their faces and were terrified. But Jesus came and touched them, saying, “Rise, and have no fear.” And when they lifted up their eyes, they saw no one but Jesus only. And as they were coming down the

mountain, Jesus commanded them, “Tell no one the vision, until the Son of Man is raised from the dead.” And the disciples asked him, “Then why do the scribes say that first Elijah must come?” He answered, “Elijah does come, and he will restore all things. But I tell you that Elijah has already come, and they did not recognize him, but did to him whatever they pleased. So also the Son of Man will certainly suffer at their hands.” Then the disciples understood that he was speaking to them of John the Baptist. Matthew 17:1-13

Now, there are so many things in this short passage that can (and should) be explored, never mind the implications for the disciples who were there, and then trying to figure out what it means for us. But instead of diving too deeply into the theological implications of the event, we (and by ‘we’ of course I mean ‘me’, and there’s not much you can do about that) will try to understand what it may have felt like to be there. The word “transfiguration” literally means to change form. It’s the Latin *trans* (across) and *figura* (form or shape). Jesus’ form was changed from a normal-looking Palestinian carpenter/rabbi to something that can only be described as ‘glory.’

Many New Testament commentators argue the transfiguration is a pivotal event. It fundamentally changed things and was significant in the history of the Jewish people. As far as hearing from YAHWEH, these are arguably the two most important men in their history. Moses, the giver of the law, and Elijah the greatest prophet, were both there. Not only that, but they spoke of what Jesus was going to accomplish. It is one of the most direct, unabashed teachings of how the entire Old Testament (The Law and the Prophets), and the entire relationship between the Jewish people and YAHWEH up to that point, were pointing to Jesus, and what he was about to do.

The transfiguration is also a key event because it is the very fulfillment of a prophecy Jesus gave to his disciples a week earlier. He told them some of them would see the coming of the Kingdom of God in power before they died. While some of them (and some still now) thought Jesus meant they would not die until his second coming, Jesus fulfills this prophecy on the mountaintop.⁵ The three

disciples see the Kingdom of God in power in a unique way that had not been experienced before (or really since).

And once again, Peter was there.

Luke has a few details that aren't recorded in the other three accounts. He points out that it happens while Jesus was praying, that Peter, James, and John were tired and falling asleep, and that it was specifically Peter who suggested building a place for Moses and Elijah to spend the night.

I don't want to ignore that James and John were also there... but if someone wants to write about them somewhere else, that's fine... but here we're focusing on Peter. Once again, Peter is at the heart of the activity. Right there, with Jesus. He is in that position we find him so often, the inner circle - Peter, James, and John. The same three with Jesus when he is arrested in the Garden of Gethsemane.

We can view the people around Jesus in concentric circles. The closer they are, the more access they have to him, and the more intimate the relationship. Starting on the outside are the crowds, then his followers, then the twelve disciples, and finally Peter, James, and John. The crowds occasionally saw Jesus, heard some of what he said, and that was mostly the extent of their relationship. Followers were actively trying to hear what Jesus said, likely discussed it with each other, and more importantly, it changed how they lived. His twelve disciples had gone a step further as they were literally following Jesus around, staying with him almost all the time. They traveled with him and had access to him after he would give messages to the people, giving them the opportunity to ask clarifying questions. Jesus also asked them questions directly. Not only were they trying to follow the teachings of this Rabbi, but they had all made some radical changes in their lives (walking away from their jobs, families, etc.) and were committed to spending their days working with, listening to, and trying to obey Jesus. Then there is the innermost circle. For whatever reason, Peter, James, and John form this subgroup of the disciples. These three had access to Jesus in a way that essentially no other humans did. They were with him when no one else was. One of these significant moments is this mystical mountaintop experience.

The transfiguration was intended to strengthen the disciples' faith, yet Peter didn't want to be encouraged and return to the task at hand. He wanted to stay there and never let it finish. He didn't want his faith built up so he would be more sure, more bold, and more excited about telling others the good news about Jesus. He wanted to stay there and hang out with Jesus, Elijah, and Moses. To set up camp and stay a while.

Matthew reveals that Peter said 'he' would make three tents. Again, we confront some incredible confidence from Peter. Confidence, arrogance, overconfidence, (stupidity)? I don't think we can figure out which one it is with the sparse details that we have of this interaction, but it was in that family of character traits.

"Wow - three of the most important figures in our history, religion, and nation. Let me take care of them. I got this!"

The voice in the cloud says, "Listen to Him." My whole life I've thought of that as a general instruction. "Listen to Jesus." But perhaps it was a bit more pointed. Jesus has been hinting about his coming execution, and there is pushback from his own disciples. Now there is a specific discussion of "what he will accomplish in Jerusalem," and Peter is like, "Nah...let's just camp here for a while."

We can easily do the same. Jesus points us towards something and we say, "Nah...I think this will work better." We would also be wise to hear God telling us, "Listen to Him." If we truly feel God is calling us to something but we don't really like it, or it doesn't really line up with our plans, or we feel it's not a good use of our talents, perhaps we need to take a step back and listen. Let's not take the same over-confident stance as Peter, and assume we know better. Let's make sure if there is a correction going on in our relationship with God, it's us being corrected, not us doing the correcting.

Chapter Eight

PETER THE REBUKER OF GOD

Few of us, even on our most confident day, would look Jesus in the eye and say, “You’re wrong!” But Peter did. The story comes right after Peter’s confession that Jesus truly is “The Christ, the Son of the Living God” and right before The Transfiguration.

Matthew records this God-rebuking event like this:

From that time Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things from the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him, saying, ‘Far be it from you, Lord! This shall never happen to you.’ But he turned and said to Peter, ‘Get behind me, Satan! You are a hindrance to me. For you are not setting your mind on the things of God, but on the things of man.’ (Matthew 16:21-23)

Jesus tells his apprentices what is going to happen to him, and then Peter replies basically, “Sorry Jesus - you’re wrong - that’s not going to happen.”

The Contemporary English Version makes it sound as though Peter takes Jesus aside and tells him to stop talking like that. In that translation, Peter says, “God would never let this happen to you, Lord!”

This section is titled “You’re Not in the Driver’s Seat” in The Message translation and reads:

“Then Jesus made it clear to his disciples that it was now necessary for him to go to Jerusalem, submit to an ordeal of suffering at the hands of the religious leaders, be killed, and then on the third day be raised alive. Peter took him in hand, protesting, ‘Impossible, Master! That can never be!’”

Protesting.

“Impossible.”

“Sorry, Jesus, you’re just wrong on this one.”

There is confidence, there is boldness, there is hubris...and then there is this interaction between Peter and Jesus. After all they had been through together, and despite all of Jesus’ teaching Peter heard. After all the time they spent traveling, eating, chatting. The healings. The miracles. Peter had already confessed Jesus was the very Son of God. Despite all the times Jesus said something that seemed difficult, or unlikely, or counter-intuitive, or against cultural norms, or even impossible - he was always right. Now Jesus says that he will suffer and die, and Peter says, “Sorry, not going to happen.”

For Peter, it seems Jesus had finally taken this “Humble Messiah” thing one step too far. He was supposed to be the strong, empire-busting, nation-saving Messiah to free the people of Israel. So far, he had turned out to be more of a poor, itinerant teacher born in the backwaters of Israel. He was constantly in trouble with their religious authorities and hanging out with criminals and deadbeats more than movers, shakers, and opinion shifters. But this statement, that he was going to allow himself to be murdered by the authorities, was just too much.

Interestingly, Peter takes Jesus aside. He leads him by the hand to speak to him alone. There seems to be a lot of agreement by scholars that this phrase, ‘took him by the hand,’ does not mean merely that he held his hand as he said the words, but that he took him aside. Peter attempted to have a small off-stage interaction with Jesus. So whether he was sternly correcting Jesus or pleading with him that he couldn’t possibly be right, at least he was polite enough to not correct him in front of the others.

Some commentators argue that the word ‘rebuke’ here is too strong. Perhaps Peter was not taking authority over Jesus and telling him he was wrong, but rather

he was trying to admonish or earnestly entreat him. It's the same word that's used in Luke 17:3, "Pay attention to yourselves! If your brother sins, rebuke him, and if he repents, forgive him." So perhaps Peter is trying to guide someone he loves back to the truth.

It may have been like how we correct a close friend, particularly if they have said something that you deem to be beneath them. If a child says, "Well, I didn't make it into medical school, I guess I'll become a construction worker instead," a parent's reaction may be, "Far be it from you son!"⁶ Even if said with a genuine "you could do better than that" attitude that the parent thinks is based on love and respect, the reality is that you're telling that person "nope." A Father is saying, "No, I know what's best for you - and that isn't it." If the conversation is between a parent and child, it's a bit more understandable. Parents are older, wiser, have more life experience. However, in the situation between Peter and Jesus, we have two men about the same age. One of them is a former fisherman, the other is the Son of God. And the correcting is not going in the direction that you'd expect it should. No matter how friendly, polite, or however well-intentioned Peter's words were, there is the unmistakable point that he was correcting God. He was telling Jesus this idea of a suffering Messiah was not correct, and the triumphal, conquering Christ that he had hoped for, was more correct. Whether it's a rebuke, a reproof, or whatever, the point is that he was so unable to accept a suffering Messiah that he finally had to call out Jesus on this.

In the end, how strongly he did it, or how politely is really beside the point. The fact is, Peter is telling Jesus he's gone off script and needs to get back on message. It feels like we're getting the same feeling here we get from Peter in the garden that night: "Not if I can help it!" (but we'll get to that in the next chapter)

The Son of God just explained to Peter a fact about his role as Messiah in the salvation of humanity, and Peter told him he was wrong. Even if Peter was doing so, as some commentators say, more like a plea, "God forbid." it's still the same. He is still correcting God.

We can learn a lot about Peter in this exchange, and hopefully learn a bit from Peter. We see again his impulsiveness, his passion, and, in this case, particularly his

confidence. However, what we can learn from Peter is that we may need to dial down our self-confidence a little. Especially when it comes to interactions with God.

This happens when God does not fit our expectations of him. Often, instead of changing our expectations of God, we try to change God.

Peter knows the Messiah will bring triumphant, powerful military authority, and overthrow the godless Romans who were subjugating the people of God. He knows this because he has learned this from his religious upbringing. The Messiah will come and kick the Romans' collective butt. So when this person in front of him, who he believes to be the Messiah, says that instead of destroying the Romans, he will be killed by them, it collides head-on with his expectations. So, instead of adjusting his expectations of the Messiah, he tries to adjust the Messiah. Jesus says he will suffer and die. Peter knows that isn't the right way, so he tries to make the Messiah work in the way he wants.

There are so many issues that I have faced in my life that at first, I think, "God would never want/like/approve of that." I know I have to be right because I've always believed this to be true of God. But then, as I go back and study scripture, I realize it was me who was mistaken, not God.

We need to be careful when God presents us with something that doesn't line up with how we know God works.

Do we try to change God or do we accept we may be wrong? If Peter had gone back through the scriptures, he could have seen everything Jesus was saying is what God had promised all along. We need to do the same.

"Sorry God - you're wrong," is not a good look on Peter, nor is it on us. We would be wise to reflect on our own hearts the next time we're tempted to think the same thing.

Chapter Nine

PETER THE ARROGANT

We have already seen Peter reveal his confidence (arrogance), but few examples are more extreme than when Jesus gathered his followers to celebrate Passover. The thirteen gather for the Seder Supper, the feast that starts the Passover celebration. It's a traditional meal dripping with rich symbolism that held (and still holds) deep significance for the Jewish people.

Leonardo da Vinci's interpretation, one of the most famous paintings in the entire world, likely comes to mind when we think of The Last Supper. This masterpiece still has interesting details visible centuries later. We see the shock on John's face, we see Judas already has a small coin purse in his hand, and right between them is Peter, knife in hand. The expression on his face shows he has already decided it's time for action, even though the scene takes place mere seconds after Jesus announced that one of them will betray him. We'll look at what he did with this knife in the next chapter, but it's here, earlier in the evening, where Peter's arrogance really shines.

There is a large section in the Gospel of John of the teaching Jesus gave his followers on the night he was betrayed, often referred to as Jesus' Farewell Discourse. In a red-letter Bible, where Jesus' words are highlighted by color, these are pages covered in crimson text. In fact, there are very few words other than Jesus speaking from John 13 to 17.

In first-century Palestine, you wore sandals as you walked on dirt paths and dusty roads where you constantly dodged animals and their droppings. It was customary, and seems reasonable, for the host of a meal to have a servant wash their guests' feet. Remember, people often sat on the floor, so feet were close to your dinner companions, and the food. Everyone would wash their own hands before eating, but feet were so soiled that cleaning them was too low and dirty of a job to ask of dinner guests. The host typically relegated this job to the lowest-ranking servant. Not the kitchen laborer who brought out the food, certainly not the cook, not the master of the banquet, but the most junior house worker.

So when Jesus takes on the role of that servant and washes feet, he is doing something unimaginable. He takes those dirty, stinky, dusty feet of his apprentices in his hands and starts to scrub the filth off them. The leader, teacher, and master of this group, is the one saying, "I will act as your servant - not the other way around."

In this chapter, the few non-red-letter words are Peter speaking to Jesus, "Lord, do you wash my feet?" (John 13:6); "You shall never wash my feet." (13:8); "Lord, not my feet only but also my hands and my head"(13:9) Many of the rest are Peter's actions "Simon Peter motioned to him to ask Jesus of whom he was speaking." (13:24).

Even many of the words of Jesus are directly addressed to Peter: "What I am doing you do not understand now, but afterward you {Peter} will understand." (v7); "If I do not wash you {Peter}, you have no share with me." (v9); Jesus said to him, "The one who has bathed does not need to wash, except for his feet, but is completely clean. And you {Peter} are clean, but not every one of you" (v10).

All twelve disciples are sitting down for Passover, eating, listening, and learning. Except for Peter. He's got all sorts of questions. And some objections. And again, Jesus has to go out of his way to specifically address Peter's concerns.

Imagine being one of the other disciples at the table listening to Jesus, learning from him things no human has ever heard from the mouth of God before. But you're also listening to Peter because, apparently, he's got a lot to say.

We have seen this kind of behavior from Peter in other circumstances, but few are as bold as this. He tells the Son of God “no,” and then shows him what he should do instead. The interaction is a string of Peter questioning Jesus. He’s not sure that Emmanuel - God with us - knows what he’s doing.

In my mind, I had always assumed Peter was concerned for Jesus to maintain his dignity. Peter doesn’t want Jesus to be acting in a way that brings himself humiliation. However, when we recall the relationship between a Rabbi and his followers, and what Jesus said to Peter, perhaps it wasn’t about Jesus at all. We’re back to Peter and his pride.

“No disciple is above his master,” Jesus reminded them (Luke 6:40), but this would have already been made clear. In their society, this was the relationship between rabbi and follower, and it was rigidly hierarchical. The end goal of the hundreds of disciples following dozens of rabbis at the time was to be like their teacher. They wanted to imitate their rabbi. Disciples wanted to understand the Torah the way their teacher did, view YAHWEH the way the rabbi did, and to treat people the way the rabbi did. One reason the twelve apprentices of Jesus were such a bizarre group was how Jesus chose them. Most rabbis essentially had tryouts to get the brightest and the best as disciples. The twelve that ended up as followers of Jesus had clearly not made the cut with any rabbi when they were young, so they mostly fell back to manual labor with their fathers. They were not good enough to imitate a rabbi, so they settled on being fishers, farmers, or whatever. So for Peter to tell Jesus his rabbi what he should do, would be absolutely shocking. John records details that should make Peter’s motivation obvious, but since all this foot washing, hierarchy of servants, and feasting is so removed from our modern understanding, it goes right past us, directly in front of our faces.

When he had finished washing their feet, he put on his clothes and returned to his place. “Do you understand what I Have done for you?” he asked them. “You call me ‘teacher’ and ‘Lord’ and rightly so, for that is what I am. Now that I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also should wash one another’s feet. I have set you an example that you should do as I have done for you. I tell you the

truth, no servant is greater than his master, nor is a messenger greater than the one who sent him. Now that you know these things, you will be blessed if you do them.” (John 13:12-17)

Everyone in that room (and that society) were clear on the fact that a follower was never above their teacher. So, if high as a teacher was elevated, the followers would be as well. So, if a teacher lost status, the social standing of the followers decreased. If a Rabbi were to fall out of favor with those in power, it was obvious the followers dropped out of favor with him as they were always at least one rung below. This was likely the core of Peter’s objection to Jesus’ foot-washing. If Jesus was washing feet like some low-ranking servant, then what did that make Peter? Peter’s social standing, image, and status are directly linked to Jesus. Most of the time, this had worked pretty well for him. Now, it seemed it was all crashing down. If Jesus was jumping to the lowest rung of a hierarchical society, where class levels were important and obvious, then he had just dragged Peter down with him. Even worse, he had dragged Peter down to one level below that of the lowly foot-washing servant.

It’s likely pride was the source of Peter’s problem with Jesus’ actions, not his concern for Jesus’ dignity.

We often do the same. We defend Jesus to others, telling ourselves it’s a noble battle, but in our hearts, it’s because we don’t want people to think we follow a loser. If Jesus is dumb, then we’re even dumber for following him. So we try to convince people that Jesus is culturally relevant, or whatever. All of that is true, and helping people understand that is good, but we need to check our motivation. We need to ensure we’re not Peter at the Last Supper, upset that Jesus’ bad image affects our street cred. We need to ensure when we speak up for God, that we’re truly defending him, and not in some back-handed way trying to defend ourselves.

Chapter Ten

PETER THE DENIER

If there is one time in Peter's life that stands out as the most shocking (for me) and most impactful (for him - I'm assuming), it must be the evening before Jesus is executed. Right there, plain for everyone to see, Peter blatantly denies he even knows Jesus, just like Jesus said he would. That scene gets played out in sermons and books an awful lot. It's a pivotal point in the story of Easter. A snapshot that makes the events leading up to and including Jesus' execution very real and incredibly personal. It's probably the one part of the Easter story where we've all thought, 'If that were me, what would I have done?'

Peter, the leader of the disciples, one of the inner three, lies to save himself. He denies his teacher, friend, mentor, Lord, and God. Peter claims he doesn't know Jesus because he wants to spare himself. He publicly lies about his relationship with Jesus, because he has done a quick calculation, and figures it's better to lie than bear the consequences of the truth.

Maybe. It's also possible the words Peter says at this point are not completely untrue. Maybe at that moment what he said was at least partially true.

It's difficult for us to read the stories in the gospels and appreciate the confusion of the original participants. We see the stories about Jesus' life on earth as a complete package. We have everything from his birth in a manger in Bethlehem to crucifixion, resurrection, and ascension, all tied up into a narrative many of us have known since we were toddlers. Because of this, the overall story arc of his life

makes sense to us. We can look at any of the events in Jesus' life and easily place them in the larger context of the entire story.

But living it out in real-time, one day after the next would have been completely different. When Jesus said confusing things, we have the benefit of seeing the resolution. When he said things like “destroy this temple and in three days I will rebuild it” we immediately see that he is simply talking about how he will be killed and raised again on the third day. But imagine for a minute that you are a first-century Jew who is following this traveling teacher. A man with a common name, from a backwoods part of the land, with no particular training, and a socially unconnected family. He stands in front of the temple, the center of your religion, the one place on earth where God and humans intersect. The temple was also a symbol of the power of the Jewish nation. It was an architectural marvel, the largest, most expensive, glorious building any of those people had ever seen. Then one day, this carpenter/rabbi from the rural region of Galilee, not even an educated Jerusalem man, starts saying these crazy things. It would be like an olive grower from southern France standing next to the Eiffel Tower, a Bedouin camel herder standing next to the Burj Khalifa, or an oil worker from North Dakota standing in front of the White House - and saying “I will tear all of this down. Not only that, I will rebuild it all. And I’ll do it all by myself. And I’ll do it in 72 hours.”

That is crazy talk.

Literally, crazy talk.

But we don't read the passage that way because we know where it's leading. We have the benefit of the explanation that comes after.

In order to have some empathy for those like Peter who lived these stories as they happened, we have to enter into the confusion of the moment. In order to even partially understand what Peter was going through that evening in the courtyard, we have to temporarily suspend our knowledge about the conclusion. Recall it was Peter who, several times previously, had thought Jesus had come to bring the ‘new kingdom’ by force. He was the conquering Chosen One, coming to ‘free the people of YAHWEH.’ Israel didn't feel free with a Roman occupying

force running things, so it was clear the only way to be free would be to throw off that Empire. The Roman army will not leave if you just ask nicely, so rising with force is clearly the only way forward. Most in Peter's time thought that's what would happen when the Christ - The Messiah - would come. It seems pretty clear that's what Peter thought would happen (at least partially). He expected a Rome-busting, people-freeing king from the line of David sent to liberate the people of YAHWEH from oppression. So if we give Peter the benefit of this confusion, perhaps his words are not altogether untrue.

"Woman, I don't even know him."

Part of what makes Peter's denial so forceful, so real, is that he repeats it three times in what feels like a rather short time period. The ESV translation of Matthew's account says:

Now Peter was sitting outside in the courtyard. And a servant girl came up to him and said, "You also were with Jesus the Galilean." But he denied it before them all, saying, "I do not know what you mean." And when he went out to the entrance, another servant girl saw him, and she said to the bystanders, "This man was with Jesus of Nazareth." And again he denied it with an oath: "I do not know the man." After a little while, the bystanders came up and said to Peter, "Certainly you too are one of them, for your accent betrays you." Then he began to invoke a curse on himself and to swear, "I do not know the man." And immediately the rooster crowed.

First, it's "I don't know what you mean" when accused of merely being around Jesus. Then, "I don't know the man" when accused of being with Jesus. Then when accused of being one of his followers, he swears, "I don't know the man."

The most literal translation of verse 74 is something like, "He began to curse and swear an oath 'I do not know the man.'"

Perhaps he meant what he said. Peter had been following Jesus for a few years at this point. Then, finally, when it seemed like it was go-time, Peter grabbed his sword to draw first blood in this epic battle. Jesus from Nazareth was going to lead the rebellion that would finally oust the foreign occupiers, and give the people of God their land back. Peter would be a General in this Army, and this would be his

origin story. Peter, the one who killed the first Roman in the great deliverance of the people. But that's not how the evening played out. The armed rebellion was over as quickly as it started. Peter cut a man's ear, Jesus healed him, and now, just a few hours later, this same Jesus was in custody.

This man who was supposed to start an eternal kingdom was going to be publicly executed.

The rabbi who seemed to know more than all others was captured by the religious leaders.

The friend to all was betrayed by one of his twelve closest companions.

The one who was supposed to redeem Israel and throw off the Roman occupation was heading towards execution on a Roman cross.

The one who Peter thought was the true Son of God was now arrested, undergoing a trial.

The one he believed was the Messianic king that Israel had been waiting on for hundreds of generations was now treated like a common criminal.

Jesus seemed helpless, and the situation seemed hopeless.

Perhaps Jesus wasn't really who Peter thought he was, or at least who he thought Jesus was about to become.

Maybe when he says, "I don't even know him," he was being totally honest.

"I have no idea who this man Jesus is. I thought I did. But clearly I was wrong. I obviously don't even know him."

Perhaps at that exact moment, Peter realized the man he had followed for three years and had devoted his life to was not at all who Peter thought he was.

I had always read that story as Peter being too scared to admit that he was one of Jesus' followers. The story serves as a warning to not think we are such devout followers of Jesus because, when things get tough, we show how much we really love him. That we must not be too proud of being his follower when we're in a crowd of his followers, as that's the easy part. This is all true, at least partially. We should keep in check the difference in our fervor to declare our devotion to Jesus when we're with those who love him and those who ridicule him. However,

what if at least part of what Peter was saying was that he felt tricked? Maybe not deceived intentionally, but he had been mistaken.

“I thought I was following the Chosen One to lead our people out from oppression. I thought I knew this man. Now I realize...I don’t even know the man. This Jesus from Nazareth, when he now reveals himself for who he truly is...I have no idea who he is or what he’s doing.” Three times, Peter is asked if he is one of Jesus’ followers. Three times, the question is posed in slightly varied ways.

Maybe him saying “I’m not his follower” was true - at that time. Maybe he decided at some point between the garden and the courtyard that he was out. He was ready to draw his weapon for his Messiah-King, but when he had to accept this was not going to end with overthrowing the brutal empire that constantly crushed him and his entire family, Peter was out. He loved the idea of YAHWEH sending the Anointed One to save his people in real and tangible terms. He wanted God to act like he did the last time a brutal empire tried to hold the people of Israel in submission. Pharaoh’s army was swallowed up in the Red Sea, and Moses, who YAHWEH appointed, led them out. Why not now? Why not again? Why not the once-for-all-appointed-one lead the people and God crush this empire?

I don’t think he was merely scared and wanted to save himself. Just moments earlier, he was more than willing to engage in hand-to-hand combat when it was him versus “a crowd armed with swords and clubs.” So I don’t think the individuals who were confronting him now in the courtyard - including a woman - were a threat to him. Why would we assume he still was not carrying the knife he had earlier that evening? Has he gone from fighting a gang of trained killers by himself to cowering in the corner at mere words in a few hours? Of course, it’s possible. Maybe because in his mind he has gone from following the Chosen One of Israel to just another delusional Rabbi.

Again, we’ll never know on this side of eternity what Peter was thinking. However, the more I look into who Peter was, the less comfortable I am assuming that on that night he was simply lying to save himself. Yes, the words he said feel

like an objective lie and yes, in doing so, he saved himself. But my hunch is that his words were a little more nuanced than how we often read them. That there was some truth to his “I don’t know that man” statement. Maybe saying he didn’t follow him was true at that point. Peter denied he truly knew Jesus, but perhaps that was not a lie.

A few days later, Jesus welcomes back Peter by specifically asking him three times, “Do you love me?” Three times he is asked again about his relation to Jesus from Nazareth. But this time it’s Jesus himself doing the asking, and he doesn’t ask, “Are you with me or are you one of them,” like he had that night in the courtyard. Instead, Jesus asks simply: Do you love me? Three times Peter says yes. Jesus then gives him the simple instruction: feed my lambs, take care of my sheep, and follow me.

Perhaps again we see Peter’s assumptions about Jesus get in the way of the real Jesus. Maybe we need to remember to not get out in front of Jesus, and lead where he’s not going. To not try to make ourselves the second in command to God. Simply serve others. Take care of others. Love God by loving people. Follow Jesus in his ways, his example. Not what we think he should be. Jesus didn’t live up to the ideal that Peter had created for what he wanted the Messiah to be. He probably won’t meet all the expectations we have invented for him either. Let’s make sure we go back and see who God said He is, not what we think He should be.

Chapter Eleven

PETER THE MEDIOCRE RUNNER

“Peter, however, got up and ran to the tomb. Bending over, he saw the strips of linen lying by themselves, and he went away, wondering to himself what had happened.” Luke 24:12

Once again, Peter is singled out for his anxiousness, his boldness, and his quickness to act. Here we have Simon Peter at the turning point in human history and what we learn about him - is that he ran.

By now, this shouldn't surprise us. We see how often he physically responds before anyone else: jumping out of boats, attacking with knives, heaving in nets. Here we have no words from Peter, and no aside from the narrator of the Gospel mentioning, ‘Now Simon, called Peter, realized fully all the words Jesus of Nazareth had said to him. Peter now understood how Jesus fulfilled all the law and the prophets. Now believing Jesus was the Messiah, he got up and ran to the tomb.’

Nope, all we know is that he took off running.

He was running in response to what Mary and the others told them. The women¹² found the tomb empty and returned and told Jesus' (now eleven) closest followers. “But they did not believe the women, because their words seemed to them like nonsense.” The eleven think the women have lost their minds. Perhaps

delusional from grief, or unrealistic from hope, but either way, it didn't seem possible that Jesus's body was gone.

Mark specifically records the women were told by the angel at the tomb, "Go, tell his disciples and Peter..."

His disciples AND PETER.

What in the world is going on now?

A few pages ago, Peter was not only one of 'the twelve' but also part of the inner circle together with James and John. How is he no longer 'a disciple' like the others? Somehow from the original twelve, Judas is out (obviously) but Peter is too?

"... tell his disciples AND PETER."

Seriously... what is going on?

Why are the angels of YAHWEH excluding Peter from 'the disciples'? Was it just because he was off on his own and the women would have to find the ten, and then go find Peter? Was it because Peter's denials earlier excluded him from being a disciple? Was it just because he was the default leader of the group, so he had to be included in the ones who were directly told? Or is it because Peter had excluded himself since he denied his rabbi?

We don't know what any of the disciples were doing the night Jesus was arrested (other than Judas and Peter - and it's not pretty for either of them). Peter denies his Lord (like Judas). He likely feels he has separated himself from the other disciples. The others didn't turn their back on Jesus (at least that we know of). Only Peter... and Judas. Judas is not invited to the tomb, so why should Peter think he is? It was Peter himself who said, "I am not one of them" when asked if he was Jesus' disciple. So if the angel wanted Jesus' disciples to come, it doesn't seem unreasonable that Peter would NOT be included in that group.

Personally, I appreciate the ambiguity here around Peter and what is the most critical event in Christianity. The day that Jesus rises from the dead proving that he truly is the Christ sent by God, the Messiah the people had been waiting for since Jacob, since Moses, since Abraham, since David, since Adam. Yet Peter, arguably the one person in human history who was right there experiencing more

life with this Messiah than anyone else... he kind of drops from center-stage for a bit. Where was he? What did he say? What did he do?

For someone who has so many details recorded about his interactions with Jesus, about his relationship with Jesus, about he interacts with others in the presence of Jesus, we are suddenly left with a deafening silence.

Where did he go?

What did he do?

Who did he talk to?

Honestly, I am dying to find out. Who did he confide in about his morally bankrupt episode of denying his friend, leader, and teacher? Was he making plans to head back to Galilee and try to get his old fishing boat back from the pawnshop? Was he with Zealots drawing up a scheme for a militia force to end this struggle against Rome? Did he just wander somewhere, and sit, dejected, confused, and alone?

“But Peter jumped to his feet and ran to the tomb. He stooped to look in and saw a few grave clothes, that’s all. He walked away puzzled, shaking his head.”
Luke 24:12 (The Message)

Then, after “the disciples AND Peter” are invited to the tomb again, there are surprisingly few details. We know that he ran, and others didn’t. And that afterward he was singled out from the rest of the disciples. That’s pretty much it. Why did he run and others didn’t? Why was he then singled out by Jesus?

The other really fun detail is in John’s account of that first Easter Morning (John 20:1-10):

Now on the first day of the week Mary Magdalene came to the tomb early, while it was still dark, and saw that the stone had been taken away from the tomb. So she ran and went to Simon Peter and the other disciple, the one whom Jesus loved, and said to them, “They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid him.” So Peter went out with the other disciple, and they were going toward the tomb. Both of them were running together, but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first. And stooping to look in, he saw the linen cloths lying there, but he did not go in. Then Simon Peter came,

following him, and went into the tomb. He saw the linen cloths lying there, and the face cloth, which had been on Jesus' head, not lying with the linen cloths but folded up in a place by itself. Then the other disciple, who had reached the tomb first, also went in, and he saw and believed; for as yet they did not understand the Scripture, that he must rise from the dead. Then the disciples went back to their homes.

There is so much to love about how John he records this part of the story. First, there is his knack for referring to himself, throughout his gospel account, as "the one whom Jesus loved." But that needs more unpacking than we can do here. Here we have Peter and John running together. Yet John feels it necessary to add, "Both were running together, but THE OTHER disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first." Uh, John, it's not a race. Then only a line later he recalls for us "Then the other disciple, who had reached the tomb first, also went in.." Yeah...we got it John. You are loved. You are fast.

But what's more telling of their personalities isn't which one is physically capable of running faster, but what they do when they get there. It feels like John ("the one who had reached the tomb first" - in case you forgot) was scared, anxious, or hesitant to actually enter the tomb. And for good reason. The body of their Rabbi was in there. Or at least they thought it was. Or they thought it was until the women came and said otherwise. Peter makes up for his medium-distance running skill with his boldness. I picture John standing by the open tomb, perhaps a bit scared, and Peter rushes in, shoves him to the side, and barges in.

So even if running is not Peter's strongest skill, his boldness will make up for it. He is willing to do something potentially scary, potentially horrifying, and socially unacceptable. Enter into the tomb with a body in it. But that's what's so beautiful. There is no body. Peter's boldness is rewarded with tangible evidence to strengthen his faith. "Bending over, he saw the strips of linen lying by themselves..." Even if he still didn't understand exactly what was going on, "Bending over, he saw the strips of linen lying by themselves, and he went away, wondering to himself what had happened." Jesus allowed Peter to see things that

gave him reason to believe in his unbelievable claims. He does the same for us if we are willing to look, listen, and pay attention.

Chapter Twelve

PETER THE SHEPHERD

The days around Jesus' crucifixion rocked Peter to his innermost core. The Last Supper, that night in the garden, his denial, then the crucifixion and the resurrection, shook everything Peter thought he knew. Yes, he had received forgiveness, but his denial still haunted him. Yes, he more accurately understood why the Messiah came, but he couldn't shake how he tried to force a war. Sure, he now saw Jesus was not a Jewish freedom fighter, but he still couldn't shake his hatred of Rome. When Peter tries to deal with his new post-resurrection reality, he does what many of us do when things are uncertain. He returns to what is most familiar. For Peter, that is fishing.

He goes back to the activity that muscle memory can run by itself. Fishing on Lake Galilee with his brother. We have no record that Peter has fished even one time in the few years since he left his nets to follow Jesus. Yet although it seems he never turned back, he never forgot.

It's hard to understand what exactly Peter was thinking. Maybe he didn't even know what he was thinking, and he needed some space to figure it out. We all have something so familiar that our conscious and unconscious thoughts overlap. Maybe it's driving the freeway to work, standing in the shower, running the same 5k trail, playing the piano, or whatever. Something so familiar your mind can wander as your attention is not required.

Matthew's Gospel doesn't mention much about post-resurrection time. He skips from the empty tomb to the Great Commission with only this in the

middle: "Then the eleven disciples left for Galilee, going to the mountain where Jesus had told them to go. When they saw him, they worshiped him—but some of them doubted!" Matthew: Matt 28: 16-17 "Some of them." We don't know who. We assume Thomas. Poor Thomas. Peter gets his name changed to 'Rock' but Thomas is known throughout history as 'Doubting Thomas'. But Matthew doesn't say "one of them," he says "some of them," so clearly Thomas wasn't the only 'Doubter'. But he's the only one who gets tagged with that name.

Mark has the same scant details between Gethsemane and the Great Commission, mentioning only: "Still later he appeared to the eleven disciples as they were eating together. He rebuked them for their stubborn unbelief because they refused to believe those who had seen him after he had been raised from the dead." Mark 16:14

Luke has a long, detailed section about the two disciples who were walking the 10km stretch from Jerusalem to the village of Emmaus. We know one of these disciples is named Cleopas. Jesus started walking with them and asking why they were sad. They told him the story they thought everyone in Jerusalem knew. Jesus, who was supposed to be the Messiah to rescue Israel, was dead. Some women claimed he rose from the dead, and sure, his body was gone, but they didn't know what to believe. They later realized they had been walking and talking with Jesus the whole time, so they turned and ran back to Jerusalem to tell the others. Luke's gospel then skips from the two on the Emmaus road telling the others, all the way to Jesus' Ascension in Bethany.

The last chapter of John is very different. Some translations even title this chapter "Epilogue: Jesus appears to seven disciples." John tells us who they were, "Simon Peter, Thomas (nicknamed the Twin),¹³ Nathanael from Cana in Galilee, the sons of Zebedee, and two other disciples."

They're sitting along the lake when, like always, Peter is the one to speak up and take action. "Simon Peter said, 'I'm going fishing.' 'We'll come, too,' they all said. So they went out in the boat, but they caught nothing all night." John 21:3 We know they normally fish at night, so this is basically them saying, 'Let's do what comes naturally. James and John, Peter and Andrew were all fishermen. Not sure

about Thomas (I don't think 'Doubter' was his occupation before meeting Jesus) or "the other two." But for at least four of the seven, fishing would be that thing that feels the most normal. Push out the boat as the sun sets, sit quietly, pulling in the nets full of fish. Except this time they weren't pulling in any fish. They caught nothing.

At dawn, Jesus was standing on the beach, but the disciples couldn't see who he was. He called out, "Fellows, have you caught any fish?"

"No," they replied.

Then he said, "Throw out your net on the right-hand side of the boat, and you'll get some!" So they did, and they couldn't haul in the net because there were so many fish in it. John 21:4-6

This should sound familiar. We're back to what feels like a replay of Jesus' original call to Peter. Spending all night fishing, catching nothing, then a miraculous catch just on the other side of the boat.

Then the disciple Jesus loved said to Peter, "It's the Lord!" When Simon Peter heard that it was the Lord, he put on his tunic (for he had stripped for work), jumped into the water, and headed to shore. (Verse 7)

Of course it's Peter who jumps in. At this point, the only thing that should surprise us about Peter's response is that he had enough peace of mind to put on his clothes. It seems John recognized Jesus first, but it was Peter who acted first.

The others stayed with the boat and pulled the loaded net to the shore, for they were only about a hundred yards from shore. When they got there, they found breakfast waiting for them—fish cooking over a charcoal fire, and some bread. (verse 8 and 9)

Once again, Peter does something different from all the others. It almost feels like John is pointing out how rashly Peter was acting. John basically writes, "The other disciples realized they were only 100m from shore, so had the sense to just row the boat in. They got there about 30 seconds after Peter, but not dripping wet, and without abandoning the boat they had borrowed."

“Bring some of the fish you’ve just caught,” Jesus said. So Simon Peter went aboard and dragged the net to the shore. There were 153 large fish, and yet the net hadn’t torn. (verse 10and11)

Again, of course, it was Peter

“Now come and have some breakfast!” Jesus said. None of the disciples dared to ask him, “Who are you?” They knew it was the Lord. Then Jesus served them the bread and the fish. This was the third time Jesus had appeared to his disciples since he had been raised from the dead. (Verse 12-14)

If John’s account would have ended here, we would know a lot less about Peter.

After breakfast Jesus asked Simon Peter, “Simon son of John, do you love me more than these?” “Yes, Lord,” Peter replied, “you know I love you.” “Then feed my lambs,” Jesus told him. Jesus repeated the question: “Simon son of John, do you love me?” “Yes, Lord,” Peter said, “you know I love you.” “Then take care of my sheep,” Jesus said. A third time he asked him, “Simon son of John, do you love me?” Peter was hurt that Jesus asked the question a third time. He said, “Lord, you know everything. You know that I love you.” Jesus said, “Then feed my sheep.” (verses 14-16)

It can be tempting to skip this section as we, once again, see Jesus using a metaphor to instruct. Act like a shepherd. Good - we got it. However, this would have seemed strange to Peter. Remember, Peter was a fisherman. And when Jesus called him, he said, ‘You’ll no longer be a fisher of fish, but a fisher of men.’ So Jesus used Peter’s vocation, his life, his default, and shifted it a bit. You have always been a fisher of fish, but with me, you’ll be a fisher of men.

But this is something entirely different. Peter becoming the fisher of men is a nice analogy that takes what is familiar to him to show how Jesus can use his life experience to further the Kingdom of the Messiah. But now, after several years as a fisher of men, what exactly is Jesus saying, “ok, never mind that fisher of men thing. Let’s try you acting like a Shepherd... which you’ve never done, and is not your family business, nor what your hometown was known for. But let’s try this anyway... you know, just for a change.” That doesn’t seem very God-like... so what is it?

Not only does Jesus ask Peter to be a shepherd, but he does it three times, seemingly to counter his three denials.

The first time Jesus asks the original Greek word for love is *agapaó* which has a connotation of preferring or choosing, even a love of reason. In the New Testament, it's the word that relates to loving God by choosing his choices, following his will, and actively doing what God prefers.

Peter replies to Jesus' question with "You know I love you" but the word he uses is *phileó* which has a sense of dear affection, and friendship.

The second time Jesus uses the same verb, and so does Peter.

It's like Jesus saying, "Peter, am I the first priority in your life?" and Peter replies, "Jesus, you know we're great friends." They do this two times.

The third time Jesus uses a form of *phileó*. "Peter, do you have strong affection and friendship for me?" and Peter again replies with a form of that same word "Yes - lord, I love you as a dear friend."

But there is not just the 'love' that changes in Jesus' question. The third time, Peter has a different response because he follows up on his previously stated answer.

Then he said it a third time: "Simon, son of John, do you love me?" Peter was upset that he asked for the third time, "Do you love me?" so he answered, "Master, you know everything there is to know. You've got to know that I love you." Jesus said, "Feed my sheep." John 21:17.

So not only does the word 'love' change, but Jesus also alters his request that accompanies Peter. The first time, Jesus asks Peter to take care of the young, the defenseless, those who need more help by saying 'feed my lambs.' The second time Jesus tells Peter to 'take care of my sheep,' showing he doesn't just want him to feed them, but to show them a more wholistic care and concern. The third time, Peter is told to 'feed my sheep.' Now it's not just the lambs who need to be fed, but all the sheep.

If all this love, reinstating, and teaching isn't enough, Peter then does something that feels so incredibly on-brand for him.

Turning his head, Peter noticed the disciple Jesus loved following right behind. When Peter noticed him, he asked Jesus, "Master, what's going to happen to him?"

Jesus said, "If I want him to live until I come again, what's that to you? You—follow me." That is how the rumor got out among the brothers that this disciple wouldn't die. But that is not what Jesus said. He simply said, "If I want him to live until I come again, what's that to you?" (John 21:18-22 MSG)

This is a fantastic final dialogue we have between Jesus and Peter. Jesus reinstates Peter and tells him to be a shepherd. Then he's like, "oh yeah...well what about John? I'm still kind of upset about him running faster than me.... so what's the deal with him?"

Peter can't leave it with just being forgiven, re-accepted, and given his divine command. Nope, he needs to follow up like a petulant sibling who says, "Fine, if I have to clean the garage, what does HE have to do?"

There is, of course, no proper answer from Jesus other than "I have this work for you - what I have for him is not really your concern." It feels very fitting that this is the last real dialogue we have between Jesus and Peter. The rough fisherman demands answers he feels he has the right to know, and his Savior simply responds, "just do what I asked you to do ... follow me."

Chapter Thirteen

PETER THE PREACHER

Of all the events in Peter's life, one stands out as particularly impactful. The four Gospel accounts detail various interactions between Peter and Jesus, but in the book of Acts, we see Peter's ministry after Jesus' ascension. Pentecost, often referred to as 'the birth of the church,' the day the Holy Spirit came upon those gathered, it was (of course) Peter who spoke to the assembled people. But one of the first things he says, is what feels like an odd denial.

But Peter, standing with the eleven, lifted up his voice and addressed them: "Men of Judea and all who dwell in Jerusalem, let this be known to you, and give ear to my words. For these people are not drunk, as you suppose, since it is only the third hour of the day."

I've always considered this such a strange response to the accusation that the apostles are all drunk. "What are you talking about? It's only brunch time..."

Anyway, we continue with Peter quoting from the Old Testament.

"But this is what was uttered through the prophet Joel: 'And in the last days it shall be, God declares, that I will pour out my Spirit on all flesh, and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, and your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams; even on my male servants and female servants in those days I will pour out my Spirit, and they shall prophesy. And I will show wonders in the heavens above and signs on the earth below, blood, and fire, and vapor of smoke; the sun shall be turned to darkness and the moon to blood, before the day of the Lord comes, the great and magnificent day. And it shall come to pass that

everyone who calls upon the name of the Lord shall be saved.'" Peter is addressing a Jewish audience, so it's critical to point back to their relation with YAHWEH as given through the prophets. He reminds them that centuries before, their God had promised to send His spirit in a very special way. To emphasize this point, he harkens back to David, the greatest King Israel had known, who yearned for the coming Messiah. Peter reminds his audience that David was dead and buried, but Jesus broke the holds of death. "Now when they heard this they were cut to the heart, and said to Peter and the rest of the apostles, 'Brothers, what shall we do?' And Peter said to them, 'Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.'

Peter's preaching connected their history, culture, religion, and knowledge of the Hebrew scriptures to Jesus. He helped them see how this man from up north in Nazareth was the fulfillment of what their nation had been waiting for.

So those who received his word were baptized, and there were added that day about three thousand souls.

Three thousand.

Consider that for a bit - those numbers would be incredible in any context. If a "celebrity pastor" spoke to a packed stadium and a few thousand people committed to following Jesus, it would be a big deal. These converts, however, are not people who have come to the front during an event when something like that was expected. These aren't people who joined a religion in a society where it was okay to do such a thing. These individuals were of Jewish ethnicity, religion, and politics. Following the path of Jesus would have an effect on all of that. They could be viewed as turning away from their religious beliefs as descendants of Abraham, they could be seen as disrupting the expectation of the arrival of the Son of David, and they could be perceived as political revolutionaries. Regardless, a few thousand of them thought it was worth it, anyway. They would not stand to gain much in society from their decision, but a few thousand of them still did it.

"And they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. And awe came upon every soul, and many wonders and signs were being done through the apostles. And all who believed were together and had all things in common. And they were selling their possessions and belongings and distributing the proceeds to all, as any had need. And day by day, attending the temple together and breaking bread in their homes, they received their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved."

Perhaps the most jarring aspect of this huge alter-call is not just how many made a commitment on that day, but what happened in the days, weeks, and months to come. They started giving up their personal possessions in favor of helping each other. They shared things with the group. They sold what they had in order to give to the needy. They gathered regularly to study God's word, to worship him, and to eat together as a community.

To our modern individualist-materialist mindset, this is revolutionary, if not outright blasphemous. Peter's message was clearly not one that sent people along with a "Jesus and me" personal religious experience, but something that upended their lives. This shouldn't surprise us too much if we remember what happened to Peter when he decided to follow. He left his home, his family, and his career, to follow Jesus. It stands to reason that the life he calls others to should look similar.

Peter as a preacher is impressive, but maybe it's due to what he had experienced. He was a witness. He testified to others what he had seen Jesus do in his life, and in the lives of others. Since he experienced such radical transformation, that's what he told them about. Perhaps one of the reasons why the preaching we have now does not have the same impact is that the preachers have not had their lives transformed like Peter's was.

Yes, Peter the preacher is an impressive speaker. But it's because Peter the human was someone who had had their life completely transformed. Peter followed and obeyed, poorly as we've seen, but he was genuinely pursuing the man he believed to be the Messiah. And that's why he had something to share.

Peter the Jail-Breaker

Peter was so outspoken about Jesus being the Christ that it often got him into trouble. The book of Acts mentions several times he had with the law. He succeeded in irritating both Jewish religious leaders and Roman political authorities. Peter's relationship with the Roman occupiers hit rock bottom when King Herod threw him in jail¹⁴.

After he saw that it pleased the Jews, he proceeded to arrest Peter also. (This was during the festival of Unleavened Bread.) When he had seized him, he put him in prison and handed him over to four squads of soldiers to guard him, intending to bring him out to the people after the Passover. While Peter was kept in prison, the church prayed fervently to God for him. Acts 12

So far, everything is pretty normal. We read these opening verses, but honestly, you probably just skimmed them, as there didn't seem to be anything remarkable, which is strange since I assume you've never been arrested and threatened with execution for your beliefs knowing. But let's continue...

The very night before Herod was going to bring him out, Peter, bound with two chains, was sleeping between two soldiers, while guards in front of the door were keeping watch over the prison. Suddenly an angel of the Lord appeared and a light shone in the cell. He tapped Peter on the side and woke him, saying, "Get up quickly." And the chains fell off his wrists. The angel said to him, "Fasten your belt and put on your sandals." He did so. Then he said to him, "Wrap your cloak around you and follow me." Peter went out and followed him; he did not realize that what was happening with the angel's help was real; he thought he was seeing a vision. After they had passed the first and the second guard, they came before the iron gate leading into the city. It opened for them of its own accord, and they went outside and walked along a lane, when suddenly the angel left him. Then Peter came to himself and said, "Now I am sure that the Lord has sent his angel and rescued me from the hands of Herod and from all that the Jewish people were expecting."

The handcuffs holding Peter to the cell wall miraculously open and fall off. Don't forget, this happens after he's woken up, not by his cell-mate, but a heavenly

messenger. Peter and the angel then snuck out of the prison with no one noticing, took a few turns, and finally Peter thought to himself, "oh no, this isn't a dream." We probably can't blame him for not always being sure of what was real and what was a dream.

"As soon as he realized this {that is - that he was actually awake} he went to the house of Mary, the mother of John whose other name was Mark, where many had gathered and were praying. When he knocked at the outer gate, a maid named Rhoda came to answer. On recognizing Peter's voice, she was so overjoyed that, instead of opening the gate, she ran in and announced that Peter was standing at the gate. They said to her, "You are out of your mind!" But she insisted that it was so. They said, "It is his angel." Meanwhile Peter continued knocking; and when they opened the gate, they saw him and were amazed. He motioned to them with his hand to be silent, and described for them how the Lord had brought him out of the prison. And he added, "Tell this to James and to the believers." Then he left and went to another place.

If there were an accurate movie version of these events, we would find ourselves laughing at several places. The scene starts with Peter on death row, and his friends praying for his release. He gets away and heads to the very house his friends are in, still imploring God for his release. He taps on the door, exclaiming, "It's me!" and instead of opening the door, the person is so thrilled that she runs to tell the others, leaving him standing outside. I imagined her opening a little slot in the wooden door, and when she sees Peter, she slams it shut and shouts for joy. Then I see Peter, a bit stunned, waiting for her to open the door. But he's left standing there. A few people pass by and he gives them an awkward nod. He hears a girl yelling in the house, telling the others. He attempts to casually greet someone on the sidewalk as they notice his prison overalls. The whole time "it's Him! It's Peter!" echoes down a hallway behind the locked door. Peter continues standing, smiling and nodding, knocking even harder every 30 seconds. Fortunately, the girl finally opens the door, and he greets those who were worried about him.

This story is a testament to the power of prayer and how God can answer our prayers with miracles. That is clear. However, we need to remember that

those who were praying for Peter's release didn't believe God had answered their prayers. Did they doubt God would or could do what they had asked? Were they just going through the motions, praying for Peter's freedom, but knowing he would die in prison, anyway? Did they feel obliged to pray since they shouted "we'll be praying for you" as Roman soldiers dragged him away?

I don't think so.

I think this story is more an example of how God can surprise us.

I think they trusted God could do something, but it was the overwhelming response that stunned them. Maybe they were asking "God, may the judge show mercy to him and give him a shorter sentence," or "Lord, enable the guards to let us bring him food and water to keep him going," or perhaps "God, we pray for the opportunity for Peter to come closer to you - despite his problems..."

In all sincerity, these words are exactly what I would pray if I had been there.

God, however, had much more ambitious plans. He could certainly do any of those things. I am not claiming to understand why God behaved in this manner. But for whatever reason, he did. He made it possible for Peter to escape prison miraculously.

Another lesson we should take away from this story is that we should not be scared of praying bold prayers. boldness.

But something we should not neglect is how Peter reacted to God's direct intervention. He tells them the story of how he got out of prison. Then it seems he immediately turns and adds, "Go tell James and the others," and then he moved on somewhere else.

Peter was completely aware of his role as a witness to God's actions. He was aware that 'giving testimony' meant witnessing something, then sharing it with others. Similar to a witness in court, it wasn't the fact that he had knowledge that mattered most, but that he shared it with others. He knew that a testimony is only useful when it is shared truthfully with those who can learn from it. He felt it was his responsibility to not only live a life following Jesus, but also to spread the word about what God was up to. We should learn from Peter on this one.

Chapter Fourteen

PETER THE RACIST APOSTLE FIGHTER

We have already seen that many, many, times Peter disagrees with those around him. However, his fight with Paul was probably the most noteworthy. I always pictured Peter as a wise, old man with a beard. If that was the case, Paul was always a bit more of all those things than Peter was. To me, Paul is the kind old uncle of the Bible, the Santa Claus of the New Testament.

The thing about Paul (and many Protestant theologians have stoked this fire) is that many consider him just one small notch below Jesus. If you dive into New Testament scholarship, you'll soon see 'Pauline' isn't a female name, but the label for a whole area of thought. Pauline literature, Pauline texts, Pauline doctrine, Pauline views on this or that are all dissected with eagerness. When two Apostles argue about how to follow Jesus, and one of them is Paul, it's significant. And Sorry Peter, but it's clear when Paul and someone else disagree Paul will win the argument. So, even for Peter, this seems like a big deal¹⁵.

So what was this argument about? The problem was that Peter was okay being with Gentiles until leaders from Jerusalem who knew him showed up. Suddenly, he declined to sit at the same table with non-Jewish people. He didn't think he was too cool for them, but he just didn't want to be associated with them because of their ethnicity. So less 'My old friends are here and too cool.', and more 'My old friends are here and I'm racist again.' We hear about the encounter from Paul

himself, who felt it was important enough to share at length in the letter he sends to the church in Galatia. So far, we know about Peter from the Gospels, Acts, and his two letters. These books put down the details of Jesus' life and the early church's so people in the future could know. Now, Paul is writing to another church, and he's talking about Peter. And it doesn't go well for Peter.

Later, when Peter came to Antioch, I had a face-to-face confrontation with him because he was clearly out of line. Here's the situation. Earlier, before certain persons had come from James, Peter regularly ate with the non-Jews. But when that conservative group came from Jerusalem, he cautiously pulled back and put as much distance as he could manage between himself and his non-Jewish friends. That's how fearful he was of the conservative Jewish clique that's been pushing the old system of circumcision. Unfortunately, the rest of the Jews in the Antioch church joined in that hypocrisy, so that even Barnabas was swept along in the charade. But when I saw that they were not maintaining a steady, straight course according to the Message, I spoke up to Peter in front of them all: "If you, a Jew, live like a non-Jew when you're not being observed by the watchdogs from Jerusalem, what right do you have to require non-Jews to conform to Jewish customs just to make a favorable impression on your old Jerusalem buddies?"

Galatians 2:11-14 The Message

When the opening line is, "We had it out in public because clearly he was wrong," you can guess how the author feels about the other person.

Peter had fallen into the trap of not living out what he believed. Rather, he was living how he truly thought, and it appears he thought his reputation before others was significant enough to change how he acted. He seemed to think it was okay to be racist if others agreed with it.

Peter's behavior should revolt us, yet a lot of us read the Bible in a way that severs it from real life. We overlook the fact that these are stories about real people. Even though it was an option for God to give us pre-written tablets with everything he wanted us to know, he chose to use human authors. The New Testament was written to a particular group of people by a certain author, at a specific point in

time, in a certain context, for a particular purpose. Separating those facts from the theological truths we want to apply to our lives is not an option.

We should feel the same level of shock when reading a passage about someone who judges people based on their ethnicity as we do when we hear such talk today. If a church leader today said we should avoid certain people because of their ethnic background, we should meet it with shock and disgust. We owe Peter the same reaction. Of course, we need to keep in mind Peter wasn't living in our pluralistic world mixing dozens of cultural groups, but in a time and place where some groups were treated differently. This does not make it right, or excuse his behavior, but it helps us understand it. He was an ethnic Jewish believer who, for centuries, had an almost complete integration of their religious and ethnic identity. Israel is merely Jacob's other name, as the nation is his family tree. It was a religious group whose boundaries mimicked both political and ethnic lines. We must be cautious to not presume that Peter's lived experience was the same as ours. The sins our society immerses us in are not the same as what Peter encountered in his society. We may be appalled by the amount of racism present in their culture, while it was commonplace to them. Individuals living in the first century would probably be horrified to see the extreme individualism, consumerism, combination of aggressive nationalism and religion, and unabashed greed that are typically seen as acceptable by modern Western Christians. Regardless of our cultural perspective, sin is sin, and Peter was in the wrong.

It's an intriguing scenario. Peter was straight-up told in a dream that Jews weren't any better in God's eyes than anyone else. The example God used to get the point across was the Jewish eating rules. And yet, Peter still managed to mess up exactly that. At least, he did when certain people were watching. When none of the prominent leaders from the congregation in Jerusalem were around, he had no problem eating non-kosher meals. Since he had been told directly in a dream that this was fine, he ate with Gentiles. However, Peter's behavior shifted when any of the Jerusalem leaders were around.

Paul refers to this incident in his letter to Galatia's church to teach them a lesson, not to embarrass Peter. After he explains the encounter with Peter, he says,

“We Jews know that we have no advantage of birth over ‘non-Jewish sinners.’ We know very well that we are not set right with God by rule-keeping but only through personal faith in Jesus Christ. How do we know? We tried it—and we had the best system of rules the world has ever seen! Convinced that no human being can please God by self-improvement, we believed in Jesus as the Messiah so that we might be set right before God by trusting in the Messiah, not by trying to be good.” Gal 2:15-16

Paul wants them to see that the regulations of the old covenant are no longer beneficial. Even this interaction with Peter gives us a reminder that those who should know better still make mistakes. Peter, a founding member and now a leader of the church, still struggles with the temptation to win approval from people, even if it means not living out his faith. In his letter to the Galatians, Paul urges them, “Look, Peter made a mistake. He went back to the old ways. But we got it straightened out.”

There is some debate about the quotation of Paul’s words to Peter in Galatians. Not that Paul said it, or that he said it to Peter, but specifically where the quote ends, and where Paul returns to addressing the church in Galatia. Some think the words Paul spoke to Peter are merely those in verse 14 “If you, a Jew, live like a non-Jew when you’re not being observed by the watchdogs from Jerusalem, what right do you have to require non-Jews to conform to Jewish customs just to make a favorable impression on your old Jerusalem buddies?” The assumption is the following verse reverts to Paul’s direct instructions to the Galatians. However, many scholars argue that Paul’s words to Peter continue through the end of the chapter:

“We who are Jews by birth and not sinful Gentiles know that a person is not justified by the works of the law, but by faith in Jesus Christ. So we, too, have put our faith in Christ Jesus that we may be justified by faith in Christ and not by the works of the law, because by the works of the law no one will be justified. But if, in seeking to be justified in Christ, we Jews find ourselves also among the sinners, doesn’t that mean that Christ promotes sin? Absolutely not! If I rebuild what I destroyed, then I really would be a lawbreaker. For through the law, I died

to the law so that I might live for God. I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I now live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me. I do not set aside the grace of God, for if righteousness could be gained through the law, Christ died for nothing!" Galatians 2:15-21.

That famous verse, Galatians 2:20, takes on a very different flavor if we assume Paul is not simply instructing a church with good doctrine and is rather correcting Peter for his racist ways. If we imagine Paul correcting Peter's ethnic discrimination with these words, it feels different: "I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I now live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me."

The fact is, Paul did share about this interaction, which sheds more light on Peter's character. At the very least, it demonstrates Peter was a man of action. It is undeniable there were other Jewish believers who still felt animosity toward non-Jewish Christians. Despite his misguided beliefs, Peter was at least honest enough to act on them. Peter is a person who sticks to his word and is determined to do what he says. As we've seen multiple times, he does things others only say, and often says things others only think.

However, we can also take from this that two honestly sincere, God-following believers can disagree. They can point out each other's mistakes. Christians can and should correct each other when they see mistakes being made. If Paul hadn't stepped in when he did, there may have been a very different path for Peter moving forward. We can't assume that who Peter is was not impacted by those around him. We are the same, whether we are doing the correcting, or are being corrected. Those other voices being used by God to correct us like Paul's voice was for Peter are essential in our walk with Christ. Even if they aren't always fun.

Chapter Fifteen

PETER THE WRITER

Peter is an important figure in the Gospels (Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John) that share the story of Jesus, as well as the Book of Acts which details the life of the early church. What's more, two books in the New Testament are called by his name. Maybe he wanted to get ahead of the Galatian letter thing and make someone think he wasn't a total failure.

Peter sent his two letters from prison in Rome, most likely in the late 60s AD. In his first letter, he spoke of the horrific conditions his fellow believers had to endure under Nero's rule, which got worse around 64 AD. He encourages them to stand firm, maintain their hope, and live according to their calling. In his second letter to the churches of present-day Turkey, he urged the believers to be steadfast and mature in their beliefs, pushing back against the false teachers who had come among them.

It's remarkable to think of being in a small, young church and getting a letter from a distinguished pastor in the city considered the epicenter of the known world.

Peter addresses his first letter to God's elect, those believers gathered in various places. He urges them to follow Jesus, despite difficulties. Peter uses Babylon as a metaphor for Rome, as the Babylonian empire previously had the role of political, religious, economic, and military center of its world. It had also willingly given itself over to the worship of idols and was intent on the persecution of the people who identified themselves with the God of the Bible. He reminds them that even

though suffering will come, they should continue in their faith. He urged them to submit to earthly authority, but reminded them that the overall focus must always be Jesus. That's why they suffer, that's why suffering is worth it, and that's what they should be thinking about.

Peter wrote his second letter because there were other issues affecting these churches besides the persecution that they, and Peter himself, were experiencing. Here, Peter addresses some false teaching that was causing divisions and dissension within the churches. Peter encouraged them to stay focused on the one goal he set out in his first letter - Jesus.

With what we know of Peter from other events, it's hard to understand how he could be the one giving advice. Peter was not an educated man who had spent his life shepherding groups of people in the way of Jesus. Peter was an undereducated manual laborer from a backwater rural part of the country who only had a few years following Jesus. He frequently demonstrated that he didn't understand what Jesus' actual message and purpose were, and at the end of Jesus' life, Peter publicly denied even knowing Jesus. That doesn't seem like the person who writes a letter to a church to encourage the believers. If we could choose anyone to send a letter to encourage us, Peter's resume is not likely the person we'd pick. Out of all the people in the world, God had the option to choose anyone to write the letters that were later included in the Bible, so why did he specifically select Peter?

I think it was not in spite of the fact that he was a flawed, broken, person with low social ranking, but because of all these things. God chose Peter in some measure to show that anyone can play a role in moving forward of the Kingdom of God. Yes, of course, there is room for the well-educated and connected (like Paul), but lest we think that only those who have the best pedigree may speak on behalf of God, we get the letters of Peter.

So what qualifications did Peter have to instruct churches and teach young believers?

Peter knew what it meant to mess up. More importantly, he knew what it was like to mess up and get a second chance. Peter was familiar with the struggle we all face to stray away from Jesus, the main issue these churches were dealing with.

Multiple times, Peter had to face the prospect of denying Jesus. Sometimes he did it, sometimes he didn't.

Above all, Peter knew Jesus. Even if he couldn't always make sense of Jesus' actions and didn't always understand the depth of what he said, Peter was there, living, traveling, and watching Jesus. He asked Jesus questions, got direct answers, and was corrected by Jesus. Peter could relate to those he was writing to since he knew exactly what they were going through.

One reason Peter had the opportunity to write to the Galatian Christians was his imprisonment in Rome. Sitting in a jail cell gave him the time to crank out some letters since he couldn't travel around speaking. Peter frequently tangled with the authorities of his time. He was aware of the strong inner struggle between doing what he thought was right and what the leaders were ordering him to do. He was familiar with the quandary of having to choose between two paths.

That's likely why his writing was so meaningful to the people who received his letters, and it's honestly why they still are meaningful to this day. Peter isn't an academic who has devoted his life to studying and debating systematic theology. He is someone who was there when it happened. Who would you deem more dependable, a historian who has devoted their life to researching the invasion of Normandy on June 6, or an uneducated farmer's kid who was one of the soldiers fighting in the battle? You can miss subtle details and essential facts when you only learn about something without experiencing it. But Peter was like the soldiers who charged the Normandy Beaches. He may not have always understood the nuance of the strategy, he may not have spent his life studying battle plans, and he may not have even understood the significance of what he was doing. But he was there. Peter's direct experience with Jesus meant he had a lot to communicate to these young churches, and his words still carry value for us today.

Chapter Sixteen

PETER THE DEAD

We have considered many aspects of Peter's life, but now we arrive at his death. The Bible doesn't actually give us information on when, where, or how Peter died.

Many Bible experts, various historical records, and early church tradition hold that he was executed in Rome in the late 60s AD during Nero's reign over the Roman empire. Nero is best remembered for setting fire to the city of Rome to clear land for his palace, poisoning his stepbrother, lighting his garden at night by burning Christians tied to poles, murdering his mother, and generally being an unlikeable guy. He was fervent in his persecution of the early church and was likely the man who (at least indirectly) ordered the execution of Peter. Two early Christian historians of the second century, Tertullian, (from Carthage in present-day Tunisia) and Origen (from Alexandria, Egypt), as well as Eusebius (a third-century Roman scholar) all claimed Peter was executed on an upside-down cross, probably in the Circus of Nero.¹⁶ The consensus is that he requested the inverted cross, as he denied he was worthy of the same execution as Jesus. The historical evidence for Peter being crucified in Rome is significant, but less so for the actual site and if it was upside down. But what is almost certain is that he was murdered by the Roman Empire, in the city of Rome. And one thing that is absolutely certain is that he is dead.

To this day, there are great reminders of Peter in the city of Rome. St Peter's Basilica, in many ways the very heart of the Roman Catholic church, is a massive

Renaissance building. It is still one of the largest churches on the planet, some half a millennium after it was built. When you enter, it feels completely over the top, beyond what you even imagine. Not really what I picture the building's namesake to be like. To think that a simple fisherman from Palestine who followed Jesus until he was killed by powerful authorities in Rome is remembered by an immense cathedral built by the most influential church in the world, at their headquarters in Rome... must be seen as at least a little ironic... right? A building whose chief architect was Michelangelo and which still claims the tallest dome in the world centuries after its completion, with the words of Matthew 16:18-19 "... you are Peter..." written in solid gold letters over 2m tall.

The other issue connected to St Peter's Basilica is how it was partially financed by the Catholic Church by selling indulgences. The Roman church created indulgences to give a pardon for individuals (or others already dead) to avoid some of the punishment due to them in purgatory. They believed purgatory was the state between life and eternal life where one was purged of their sins, making them ready for heaven. Pope Leo X (no relation to Malcolm X) authorized giving out indulgences 'in exchange for gifts' toward the building of the new basilica. This did not sit well with many, and when some in the church reduced it to the actual sale of indulgences, where one could simply buy God's pardon, a German monk named Martin Luther protested. That protest became the Protestant Reformation. It must feel more than just a bit ironic to have 'St Peter's Basilica' partially financed through the immoral sale of faux-salvation.

After his death, Peter became many things other than what he was during his life. I suppose the most obvious one is the role that he played in the collective history of what we know as "The Roman Catholic" church. There is a lot that can be said about the idea that Peter was a Pope, or how that role has changed through the complex and messy history over centuries. Peter was, of course, never the bishop of Rome nor even an authority figure who spoke for an enormous group of believers. However, there are plenty of others who understand that much better than me, and who have responses to those claims. What Roman Catholic doctrine has become is a completely separate matter, but at least for the

sake of our discussion here, on what we do with Peter the Dead, we can probably agree that what he has become posthumously is far different from what he ever was in life.

For starters, we still don't even know the details of how he died. Yes, we know he was likely crucified in Rome under Nero. If Peter had been considered the head of the fledging church at the time of his death, we would know the details. The spot would be enshrined, the date would be a yearly event, and the story would be recorded. Rulers, leaders, and key figures have events of their lives recorded. Every King's tomb is known, and the dates and locations of a president's birth are celebrated and the details of a religious leader's death are recorded somewhere. But we know very little about Peter's death. However, when we fall back on merely the historical records that we have, and especially the Bible itself, we are not sure about many of the details around Peter's death.

I like that his earthly time ends with a healthy sense of ambiguity. Despite all that Peter did, and we've seen he did an incredible amount, he was not a lot of things. He was not a powerful political figure, and he was not some central church leader, not someone with a large personal following. Since he was none of those things, we have this vagueness to his end.

One thing that is sure is that he is dead. While that may seem strange to say it seems like a fitting conclusion for a reflection on his humanity, his common nature, and his flawed and quick-tempered life. In many ways, since he was merely a human like us, there is hope for us. If Jesus can find ways to use such a short-tempered, often proud man, who lied about even knowing Jesus, then maybe we're not written off. Peter was not taken up in a fiery chariot, he was not spared death. He died just like you and I will die.¹⁷

Peter dying in an unknown manner, in a location not fully agreed upon, without fanfare or a shrine left behind, is a fitting way to remember that he died. He was an uneducated fisherman from Palestine who ended up being murdered by the most powerful empire in the world. The reason for his execution was the message of Jesus that he would not stop sharing. This simply must be an

encouragement to us. It wasn't Peter that was powerful; it was the message of Jesus that he was sharing.

Peter's death didn't change the message. It's still there, and it's still powerful. It's still a threat to the powerful and a consolation to the marginalized. It still afflicts the comfortable and comforts the afflicted. Peter spent his life spreading this message, and he gave up his life to defend it. That in itself should say something to us.

Chapter Seventeen

PETER'S MOST IMPORTANT ROLE

We now have a better understanding of who this man Peter was. A sense of what he did, how he thought, how he reacted, what drove him, what broke him, what caused him to go off like cheap fireworks with a defective fuse. So the question is: What do we do now? Do we try to emulate his life? Do we just set him aside? Do we place him on a pedestal where we can look at him admiringly, but only go near to clean the glass case with velvet gloves so we don't mar his image? Or, now that we have seen him for who he truly is, a troubled man, full of impulse, temper, and willing to disown his friend and Savior, do we dismiss him as merely someone who occasionally had a few good things to say? Is he one more among the many famous pastors who have fallen into a scandal, not really a life worth emulating?

For me, the beautiful part about the life of Peter is precisely how perplexing it appears. Preacher, denier, follower, violent, kind, passionate, boastful. The man who denies Jesus, just after he makes a point of publicly announcing how he would never do that. He follows Jesus, yet he wants to be the lead disciple if a vice-Saviour role opens up. Enough faith to jump out of a boat into a storm, yet not enough faith to keep him afloat.

Sinner.

Saint.

Perhaps the most encouraging thing is the progression we see during his life. The more time he spent with Jesus, the more he changed. We can view this utter transformation in his life. What should encourage us is that Peter was affected by Jesus, not only during the time he spent with him in person. Peter's denial the night before they executed Jesus (only days before he left this earth) shows Peter still had a lot of growing to do in his faith. The letters of 1 and 2 Peter written later in his life are evidence of this growth. Sure, you can be more thoughtful in a written letter, taking time to put together your ideas and even count to ten out loud and no one notices. But there is more than just editing evident in Peter's words. We see that Jesus continued to mold and shape Peter, long after they could no longer spend time together. We can't write off the changes in Peter as something only attainable through years of time with Jesus as a human here on earth. There is just too much evidence that this simply wasn't the case with Peter. He continued to grow, mature, and grow closer to Christ, and more like him, even after he left.

This study of who Peter was as a person - not merely a "Saint" or "disciple" or "bible Character" - has changed how I read his letters. When I have a rich, accurate image of Peter in mind, I notice things. I see the messiness of a guy with a bad temper telling me to be self-controlled. An arrogant guy admonishing me to be humble. He comes across as a lot more real, a lot more authentic. He's speaking not from a lofty throne but as one who has messed up so many times and has the wounds that make him believable. His scars make him relatable.

Peter is such a beautiful picture of a follower of Jesus precisely because he is not what my Sunday-School-derived image was. He was not that polite man with a long beard who thoughtfully reflected before saying words full of truth for the ages. He overreacted, spoke out of turn, jumped the gun, misunderstood, thought too much of himself, and ignored truths that he really should have known. Several times, he was just plain wrong.

Yet when we see how God used him in moving the Kingdom forward, we should be amazed. Not at Peter the man, but at God. If God can do that with a man like Peter, then perhaps the rest of us are not that far off. He was under-ed-

ucated, poorly trained, bad-mannered, rash, and, at times, racist. He got into arguments with other church leaders, resorted to violence, and denied his own Saviour. Yet God spoke through him, worked through him, and moved through him in ways that cannot be ignored. The way his life was utterly transformed cannot be denied.

What a beautiful image that should be for us. God doesn't wait until he finds 'perfect' people. He takes what is available, broken, but willing people, and works in spite of who they are, not because of who they are.

So we end on the most important role of Peter - 'follower of Jesus.' It's the trait weaved throughout his life, from his first interaction with Jesus until his murder. The very first thing Jesus ever says to him, and the very last thing before his death, are the same: "Follow me."

This is the key to Peter's life because it's not about Peter. It's about Jesus. Following someone is not about the follower, but what or who they're following.

Everything we know about Peter in the New Testament is bookended with the following two passages:

As Jesus was walking beside the Sea of Galilee, he saw two brothers, Simon, called Peter and his brother Andrew. They were casting a net into the lake, for they were fishermen. "Come, follow me," Jesus said, "and I will send you out to fish for people." At once they left their nets and followed him. Matthew 4:18-20

The third time he said to him, "Simon son of John, do you love me?" Peter was hurt because Jesus asked him the third time, "Do you love me?" He said, "Lord, you know all things; you know that I love you." Jesus said, "Feed my sheep ... Then he said to him, "Follow me!" John 21:17-19

'Follow Me.'

The words Jesus spoke to Peter changed his life. It was the first thing we read Jesus say to Peter and the very last. Jesus' lifetime of instructions to Peter is bracketed with this simple, yet life-altering command. Follow me. However, they only changed Peter's life because he obeyed them. Jesus spoke these words to plenty of others, but they had no meaningful impact on them. Many others heard Jesus' invitation to follow but did not. But for Peter, this one simple phrase

revolutionized his life. It became his identity. He became a disciple. Peter became a person whose goal was to follow Jesus, learn from him, and try to be like him. Peter became a follower of Jesus.

As a child, I saw the disciples as a set of holy men, who did no wrong, spoke only truth, were gentle, generous, and acted out of an endless well of compassion. Now, as I try to read the New Testament more accurately, I find passages that completely contradict every one of those qualities. And that's fantastic.

In my childish understanding of the apostles, they were a special forces team, 'a few good men' who responded to the call. God is not looking for 'a few good men' or 'The A-Team' he's looking for "a bunch of broken men and women who admit they're broken but are willing to be used." He's looking for people who don't try to clean themselves up enough for God to use. He's looking for people like Peter who heard Jesus say 'follow me' and maybe realized they were not up for the task but followed, anyway.

We should be incredibly thankful to Peter, for how God used him, and for what God accomplished through him. It should also encourage us that a man like him was used by God. If a violent, racist, uneducated man who scolded and denied Jesus was fit for his innermost circle, then there is hope for all of us. This incredibly improbable life of a flawed man following Jesus should encourage each of us. There was hope for Peter because he followed. That was the key to who he was. Sure, he was a fisherman, a human fisherman, and really named Simon. He was an entitled, a swimmer, and saw dead people. He was a rebuker, proud, a knife fighter, and a denier. He was a mediocre runner, a shepherd, a preacher, and a jailbreaker. He was an apostle fighting racist, but also a writer. And now he is dead. His life on earth is over, and I'm sure is living his best life ever with God in heaven. But also - he is dead. Yet through it all, he was a follower of Jesus. The utter transformation we see in his life is because he followed Jesus.

I can't help but think that of all the titles given to Peter over the past two thousand years, the one he might actually appreciate is 'follower of Jesus.'

That's the Peter we should aspire to imitate.

Follower of Jesus.

NOTES

[←1]

Many art historians point out that Peter is hiding the knife directly behind Judas' back, alluding to his willingness to go after a betrayer with a physical attack.

[←2]

If the phrase “bringing a gun to a knife fight” has an amped-up version, it’s “bringing a knife to a celebratory religious meal.”

[←3]

Or what seems to be very common in North America now - ‘this will be confusing, impossible to spell, and non-phonetic...but I think it’s clever and original.’

[←4]

Also, the Sufjan Stevens song is a pretty good version. Actually - the Crowder cover of the Sufjan song is even better.

[←5]

Immediately before In Luke 9:27, at the end of a speech to the 12 apostles, Jesus adds, enigmatically: “There are some standing here who will not taste death before they see the kingdom of God.” This has sometimes been taken as a prophecy that the end of the world would occur before the first generation of Christians died out. However the phrase “kingdom of God” also refers to other things. The kingdom is embodied in Christ himself and thus might be “seen” if Christ were to manifest it in an unusual way, even in his own earthly life.

Pope Benedict agrees with this point stating, “The placing of this saying immediately before the Transfiguration clearly relates it to this event. Some—that is

to say, the three disciples who accompany Jesus up the mountain—are promised that they will personally witness the coming of the Kingdom of God 'in power.' On the mountain the three of them see the glory of God's Kingdom shining out of Jesus" (Jesus of Nazareth, vol. 1, p. 317).

[←6]

I am honestly not belittling the vocation of anyone here - merely using a very common attitude towards it to make a point.

[←7]

Pun, completely intended.

[←8]

In fact, to this day, they still claim that some of the trees there are likely over 2,000 years old, so they could very well have been the exact same trees that were growing there when Jesus and his disciples were there.

[←9]

If you've never thought of that before.....er...you're welcome (?)

[←10]

Perhaps he yelled the Aramaic version of "snitches get stitches" at this point - we don't know - the Biblical text is unclear.

[←11]

Leonardo da Vinci seems to think so. In his infamous Last Supper painting, Peter is very aggressively holding a knife in his hand.

[←12]

Verse 10 specifically points out it was women who first saw Jesus had been raised, and who told the disciples. The first people to testify to Jesus' resurrection were women. Considering their testimony was not even acceptable in a court of law, this says something about God's counter-cultural-when-necessary approach to showing how serious he is about equality among everyone.

[←13]

OK - fine. He does get another name. But not sure Thomas appreciated pointing out "there is another one just like him" is much better than "doubter"

[←14]

OK fine, not quite as bad as when the Roman Empire killed him, but this was still pretty bad.

[←15]

Just to be clear - I'm not saying this is right. I think many have taken Paul's role and importance WAY Too far. But I'm just saying - this is what it is.

[←16]

The Romans really did not use the word 'circus' in the same way we do. Less popcorn and dancing animals and more chariot racing and publicly executing people for sport.

[←17]

Well, likely not that whole executed publicly on an upside-down cross bit...

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

George Watts and his family have lived and worked in East Africa since 2015 where he has co-directed an impact-driven consulting firm, managed capital projects for a mission hospital, lead an MBA program at a Christian university, and helped educate and disciple students.

Their home has moved from Canada to France, the US, Kazakhstan, Burundi, Rwanda, and now Kenya. Before moving to Africa he was a high-tech marketing manager, a business consultant, and a university professor, Also a grass-cutter, a barn painter, and the guy who put the trolleys of food on airplanes. George holds degrees in biblical studies (how God works among us), history (how people have lived before us), and management/organizational behavior (how we work together) including a Ph.D. studying how impoverished coffee farmers can benefit from your daily cappuccino.

He and his wife of 27 years are based in a village in Kenya, with their four children scattered around the globe.

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