

**Sermon preached by Dr. Neil Smith at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,
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A LIFE TRANSFORMED

John 21:15-19

INTRODUCTION TO SCRIPTURE READING

As we bring our study of the life and times of Simon Peter to a close today, we return to a passage of Scripture at the end of the Gospel of John, where Jesus speaks in a cryptic fashion of the death of Peter sometime off in the future. I invite you to turn in your Bible or one of the pew Bibles to John 21:15-19, which tells of the three-fold re-commissioning of Peter to the Lord's service by Jesus, after Peter had three times denied the Lord on the night Jesus was betrayed and arrested, the night before His atoning death on the cross for us. Let's give our full and reverent attention to this reading from God's holy Word.

INTRODUCTION

This is the final installment of a 26-part series of messages on the life and times of Simon Peter. We have followed Peter from the time his brother Andrew first took him to meet Jesus, when Jesus said to him, "You are Simon, but you will be called Peter" [which means "rock"] (John 1:29-42), all the way to the first General Assembly of the Christian church, also known as the Council at Jerusalem (Acts 15), in AD 49, which, as we said last week, is the last time Peter makes an appearance in the Book of Acts. We have looked at many of the defining moments in the life of Peter as a disciple and apostle and follower of the Lord Jesus – high moments and low moments, shining moments and not-so-shining moments. We have seen that there were plenty of both.

There was more to Peter's life and ministry after Acts 15, of course. He didn't just ride off into the sunset like a hero of the old west. Late in his life he wrote the two New Testament letters that bear his name, 1 and 2 Peter. 1 Peter was written to believers and churches in five provinces of Asia Minor – Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia – to remind them of the reason for our hope, and to encourage them to hold onto the hope we have in Christ, even in the midst of suffering and persecution. 2 Peter, written shortly before Peter's death, was not written to any particular church or churches. It is a general letter to the church at large, warning against the danger of false teachers, giving instruction on how to live "in the last days" (2 Peter 3:4) before the promised return of Christ, which could happen at any moment, and encouraging believers to continue to "grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ" (3:18).

According to ancient Christian tradition, as you probably know, Peter eventually travelled to Rome, which is most likely where he was when he wrote both 1 and 2 Peter. Though Peter went to Rome, he didn't start the church there. Nor did Paul. There were already believers in Rome, already a church there, before either Peter or Paul arrived in Rome.

The Bible doesn't give us all the journalistic facts of Peter's death – the who, what, when, where, how and why – but ancient tradition holds that Peter was eventually arrested and imprisoned in Rome, and martyred for his faith during a period of persecution against Christians authorized by Emperor Nero sometime between 64 and 68 AD. There is a widely held tradition, going as far back as the early church historian Eusebius around the beginning of the 4th century, that Peter was crucified upside down at his own request, because he did not consider himself worthy to be put to death in the same manner as his Lord. Whether this tradition is rooted in historical fact is an open question.

One thing that is not open to question is the fact that, at the end of his life, Peter was a far different man than when he first met Jesus and began to follow Him. Peter's life was transformed by God's sovereign grace. His life was radically transformed by being with Jesus as one of His chosen disciples for those three years before the suffering, death on the cross, resurrection from the dead, and ascension into heaven of the Lord Jesus. His life was transformed, too, by the coming of the Holy Spirit, and the presence and power of the Holy Spirit at work in and through him. In fulfillment of God's grand design for his life, Simon the rugged fisherman became Peter the rock.

A LIFE IN REVIEW

Let's take a few minutes to consider some of the things we've learned in this series, some of the things we know about Peter. We know he was a fisherman from Capernaum on the northern tip of the Sea of Galilee. He was brash and impulsive, often speaking before thinking, which got him into trouble on more than one occasion. At least you didn't have to wonder where Peter stood, whatever the issue.

Eugene Peterson has a terrific description of Peter in his introduction to 1 and 2 Peter in *The Message*. He says: "Peter seems to have been a natural leader, commanding the respect of his peers by sheer force of personality. In every listing of Jesus' disciples, Peter's name is invariably first." He was unquestionably the leader of the pack. "In the early church," Peterson continues, "(Peter's) influence was enormous and acknowledged by all.... He was easily the most powerful figure in the Christian community. And his energetic preaching, ardent prayer, bold healing, and wise direction confirmed the trust placed in him.

"The way Peter handled himself in that position of power is even more impressive than the power itself. He stayed out of the center, didn't 'wield' power, maintained a scrupulous subordination to Jesus. Given his charismatic personality and well-deserved position at the head, (Peter) could easily have taken over, using the prominence of his association with Jesus to promote himself. That he didn't do it, given the frequency with which spiritual leaders [in our day] do exactly that, is impressive. Peter is a breath of fresh air.

".... From what we know of the (earlier days) of Peter, he had in him all the makings of a bully. That he didn't become a bully (and religious bullies are the worst kind) but rather the boldly confident and humbly self-effacing servant of Jesus Christ that we discern in 1 and 2 Peter, is a compelling witness" to the transformation which took place in his life through the grace and power of the Holy Spirit. What an amazing difference Jesus made in Peter's life.

But remember this: If it hadn't been for his brother Andrew, who introduced him to Jesus, Simon might never have become Peter. Andrew is one of the great unsung, or at least underappreciated, heroes of the Bible. After he met the Messiah, the first thing Andrew did was to go find his brother Simon, in order to bring him to Jesus. As we said way back at the beginning of this series, God wants *finders* of the Savior to be *seekers* of others. Never underestimate the influence you can have on the life of another. Like the influence Andrew had on his brother.

The subsequent call of Jesus to Peter, Andrew, James and John to leave their lives as fishermen in order to become His disciples and follow Him (Matthew 4:18-22) was a defining moment for all four of them. It was an invitation they could not ignore. And it would radically alter the course of their lives.

In the middle of the night out in the middle of the lake in the middle of a storm, when Jesus came to His struggling disciples, walking on the water, Peter had enough faith to get out of the boat and begin to walk on the water toward Jesus (Matthew 14:22-33). It was a shining moment for Peter – until fear of the storm overtook his faith and he began to go under. But Peter did exactly the right thing when he started to sink. He cried out to Jesus for help. This can serve as an object lesson for us when any kind of storm in this life threatens to pull us under. When you find yourself starting to sink under the weight of anxiety or fear or pain or discouragement or disappointment or doubt or heartache, call out to Jesus for help. And reach out to take His hand.

Peter's bold, clear confession of Jesus as the Christ, the Son of the living God (Matthew 16:13-20), was one of his shiniest moments. But it was followed immediately by one of his worst, when he rebuked Jesus for speaking of the suffering He would experience in Jerusalem (Matthew 16:21-28). Peter showed just how much of a "doofus" he could be, and how much work God still had to do in his life. Jesus rebuked Peter for rebuking Him, and then went on to explain to Peter and all the disciples that no one is a "doofus" who says no to self and yes to God, who takes up his or her cross of suffering for the sake of the Savior and follows Jesus all the way.

One of the great ironies in the Bible is that this impetuous, outspoken disciple who had the audacity to scold the Son of God, and who could not conceive of a Messiah who suffers, would later write in 1 Peter 2 to Christian believers facing the prospect, if not the actual fact, of suffering: "If you suffer for doing good and you endure it, this is commendable before God. To this you were called, because Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example, that you should follow in His steps.

‘He committed no sin,
and no deceit was found in His mouth.’
(Isaiah 53:9)

When they hurled their insults at Him, He did not retaliate; when He suffered, He made no threats. Instead, He entrusted Himself to Him who judges justly. He Himself bore our sins in

His body on the tree, so that we might die to sins and live for righteousness” (1 Peter 2:20b-24).

It took him a while, but Peter eventually got it. He really got it. Though he protested so loudly at first, in time Peter came to see the terrible but total necessity of Christ’s sufferings and their saving purpose.

Of course, Peter’s impulsive rebuke of Jesus was not his worst moment. The worst of Peter’s worst moments happened the night Jesus was arrested. In his cockiness, Peter had said he would never, ever turn away from Jesus. He would never abandon the Lord, no matter what all the others did. But then he denied Jesus three times in one night, just as Jesus said he would (Matthew 26:31-35). It was not a shining moment. When Peter came to his senses, when he remembered the words of Jesus and realized what he had done, his spirit was shaken, his self-confidence shattered. He was overwhelmed with a sense of shame and sorrow. The good news is that this is not how the story of Peter’s life and times would end. Even though Peter had failed Him when the heat was turned up, Jesus did not give up on Peter. The beauty of the gospel, which comes into focus here in John 21 where Jesus reinstates and re-commissions Peter, is that there is room in the kingdom of God for failures. There is a place in the kingdom of God for failures. There is a mission in the kingdom of God for failures like Peter. And me. And you. Praise God there is! Jesus gave Peter a second chance. And He is ready, willing, and able to give each of us another chance, too.

The Peter we encounter in the Book of Acts is definitely a changed man. You can see it on the Day of Pentecost (Acts 2), when the Holy Spirit came in power on the followers of Christ, and the church was born. It was Peter who preached the first gospel sermon on Pentecost, resulting in the conversion of three thousand people to Christ. It was Peter and John whom God used to heal a crippled beggar at the entrance to the temple courts (Acts 3:1-10). When Peter and John were arrested and brought before the Jewish council, it was Peter, filled with the Holy Spirit, who gave this testimony to Christ: “Salvation is found in no one else [but Jesus], for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved” (Acts 4:12). This was another of Peter’s shiniest moments, and Luke points out in Acts 4:13 that “when (the members of the council) saw the courage of Peter and John and realized that they were unschooled, ordinary men, they were astonished and took note that these men had been with Jesus.” Isn’t it remarkable what God can do with “ordinary” men and women who have been with Jesus?

God gave Peter the courage and spiritual discernment to confront both Ananias and Sapphira over their conspiracy to deceive both the church and the Holy Spirit (Acts 5:1-11), and Simon the sorcerer, who professed faith in the Lord Jesus, but wanted to buy and use the gift of the Holy Spirit for his own purposes and gain (Acts 8:9-24). In between, Peter ended up in jail again, this time with all the apostles (Acts 5:12-42). When they were brought before the council and accused of violating the council’s orders to stop teaching and preaching about Jesus, Peter and the others said: “We must obey God rather than men” (5:29). That didn’t go over real well with the council. They beat Peter and the rest of the apostles with whips before letting them go. And the apostles did the most amazing thing: They praised God for the honor of being dishonored for the name of Jesus. And they kept on teaching and preaching

the good news about Jesus (5:41-42), even though they suffered for it. Actually, that is two amazing things, not just one.

Here is another amazing thing: Through a vision repeated three times and a request from a devout, well-respected, God-fearing Gentile named Cornelius, Peter learned another invaluable life-lesson, which is that the gospel of God's saving love in Christ is meant for everyone, for Jews and Gentiles alike. Following the prompting of the Holy Spirit, Peter went to Caesarea and preached the gospel to Cornelius and his family, who became the first Gentile believers in Christ (Acts 10:1-11:18), inaugurating a bold new era in the Christian mission to the world. When he addressed the Council of Jerusalem in Acts 15, Peter talked about what God Himself did in the salvation of Cornelius and his household, how God "made no distinction between us and them" – between Jews and non-Jews – in the way of salvation, how God "purified their hearts by faith," and how God showed His acceptance of these Gentile believers "by giving the Holy Spirit to them," just as he had done with Peter and all the Jewish believers in Christ (15:8-9).

No distinction. Salvation is by grace alone, received through faith alone in Jesus Christ alone. There is not one way for Jews to be saved, and another way for Gentiles. It is the same for all. It is all by grace.

After the conversion of Cornelius but before the meeting of the first General Assembly, Herod initiated a new round of persecution against the church in Jerusalem, and had James (the brother of John) put to death. When his approval numbers went up as a result, Herod had Peter put in prison, too. Again. Luke says in Acts 12:5 while Peter was in prison, the church was earnestly praying for him. That is a good thing to remember, and a good example for us to follow. We saw two weeks ago that the Lord heard the prayers of the church for Peter, and He answered their prayers by rescuing him, by releasing Peter from prison and from Herod's evil intentions. I believe God wants to use this as a reminder to us of the power of prayer, and to urge us to pray with an expectation that God will hear and answer our prayers according to His perfect will. Amen?

THE END OF PETER'S LIFE

As far as we know, Peter spent his final days in Rome, just as Paul did. As far as we know, both were eventually martyred for their faith during the latter part of the reign of Nero. The prophetic words of Jesus to Peter in John 21:18 are a bit cryptic. What Jesus meant may not have been intuitively obvious to Peter. It would eventually become clear to John, who didn't write this Gospel until after the death of Peter. From his vantage point, knowing of Peter's death for the sake of the Savior, John understood that Jesus was speaking of the way Peter would die, and how his death would glorify God (21:19).

A 7th century Christian named Isaac the Syrian said: "Prepare your heart for your departure. If you are wise, you will expect it every hour." That is good counsel, don't you think?

There is no doubt in my mind that, when the time came, Peter's heart was prepared for his departure from this life. Though these next words are Paul's they could just as easily be

Peter's as he awaited his deliverance through death: "The time has come for my departure. I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. Now there is in store for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord... will award to me on that day – and not only to me, but to all who have longed for His appearing" (2 Timothy 4:6b-8).

The testimony of Peter is the testimony of a life transformed by the power of Christ. Peter was a much different man at the end of his life than when we first encounter him in the New Testament gospels. It is all by the grace and power of God. And all the glory belongs to Him. Peter was saved by grace. He was transformed by grace. He continued to grow in the grace and knowledge of the Lord Jesus Christ.

In fact, here are the very last recorded words of Peter, and it is a good place to conclude this series of messages on the life and times of Simon Peter: "But grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. To Him be glory both now and forever! Amen" (2 Peter 3:18).

Lord, let it be so in us. Amen.