



The Christian Inquirer

Seeking wisdom in an Age of
Information

"... with Christ Jesus himself as the chief
cornerstone" (Ephesians 2:20)
"Test everything ..." (1 Thessalonians 5:21)

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Pete

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Jesus called Peter the rock on which he would build his church. What did Jesus see in Peter? Did he not see him as one of little faith and foresee him denying him? Peter seems a surprising choice for an apostle. Who was this Peter? Was he Saint Peter or Sinful Simon? If the New Testament is a photo album, let us take a look at a few snapshots of the man Peter. Perhaps Jesus saw something else in him.



A man and his fish

The Martyrdom of Saint Peter
Mattia Preti (1613–1699)

Peter was a Jew born in Bethsaida on the northern shore of Galilee. His original Hebrew name was Simeon and his father's name was Jonah.¹ He grew up as a fisherman, moving a short way west to Capernaum in early adulthood. Peter was unschooled and had a thick northern country accent. If a picture had been taken of him he would no doubt be holding up a prize catch.

An enigmatic man and his faith

In the middle of his ministry, Jesus focuses his camera on the disciples asking, "Who do you say I am?"

Simon Peter answered, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God."

What picture does Jesus have of Peter from his answer? Jesus replied, "Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah, for this was not revealed to you by man, but by my Father in heaven. And I tell you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it."²

It is instructive to compare the pictures we have of Peter and Herod. Herod believed³ that miraculous powers were at work in Jesus and that Jesus was John the Baptist raised from the dead. This is quite respectful, partly true, but also partly ridiculous - since Jesus and John the Baptist lived for the most part concurrently and John had only recently died. So, is God impressed when people just have respectful and partially true ideas *about* Jesus? Is not the important question whether they have faith *in* Jesus?

In contrast to Herod, Peter did have such a faith. His faith was directed towards the Person of Jesus Christ. He was blessed because truth about Jesus was revealed to him by God rather than by man. Why is this so important? It is important because it is quite possible to have true beliefs about Jesus while our faith actually rests on something other than him. For instance, it can rest on man's wisdom. Remember what Paul said,

"When I came to you, brothers, I did not come with eloquence or superior wisdom as I proclaimed to you the testimony about God. For I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and him crucified. I came to you in weakness and fear, and with much trembling. My message and my preaching were not with wise and persuasive words, but with a demonstration of the Spirit's power, so that your faith might not rest on men's wisdom, but on God's power."⁴

Paul is talking to the church - not to unbelievers. He is implying that it is possible for believers to have a faith that has the wrong foundation. To be blessed like Peter one's faith must come from God and must return to God. God is both the object of our faith and the means to faith. He is whom we believe and he is why we believe.

We need to be careful not to see more in the picture than was there. What did Peter mean when he said, "you are the Christ, the Son of the living God?" It does not mean that he had great faith. Earlier Jesus had said to Peter, "You of little faith."⁵ It is worse than this. Straight after complimenting Peter, Jesus explains to his disciples "that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things at the hands of the elders, chief priests

and teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and on the third day be raised to life." Peter takes Jesus aside and begins to rebuke him. "Never, Lord!" he said. "This shall never happen to you!"

Peter does not get very far because Jesus interrupts with a shockingly stern rebuke. Jesus turned and said to Peter, "Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me; you do not have in mind the things of God, but the things of men."⁶ According to Jesus, he had taken a mug shot of an indignant Satan! It is striking that while Peter (like Herod) did not object to the miracles of Jesus, he had a problem with the crucifixion - and he had the gall to declare it. Can you see it? Peter beckoning to Jesus. "Look - as the rock of the church - I have to say, Lord, that you must not be so defeatist with this stuff about you getting killed." How arrogant of Peter! Andrew Murray puts it this way, "There was Peter in his self-will, trusting his own wisdom, and actually forbidding Christ to go and die. Whence did that come? Peter trusted in himself and his own thoughts about divine things."⁷

The cross is a scandal and an offence and it still is repugnant today. Billy Graham wrote, "I find that I can preach on any subject other than the cross, and it does not seem as offensive to people as the cross does. I can preach on doing good works, on social improvement, on all kinds of things, and people will applaud me. But when I preach on the cross and the blood of Christ, there is an offence."⁸ The Revd. Sun Myung Moon suggests that "we de-emphasise the cross" in order to reduce tension between religions. He even arranged a ceremony in which a cross was taken down and buried in Israel.⁹ At least Peter and Moon were honest.

Many deal with the ugliness of the cross by sanitising it, romanticising it or playing it down. From early in the Christian Era up to the present there have been those who de-stress the cross by claiming that Jesus was not distressed by the crucifixion at all.¹⁰ They argue that since Jesus was divine, he could not really suffer. This may be subtler than Peter's way of dealing with it (was he ever subtle?), but is it any less satanic? Is it not devilish when we try to let human sensibilities dictate God's agenda? Ironically, some sceptics have the right idea. Richard Dawkins approvingly quotes, "If Jesus had been killed twenty years ago, Catholic school children would be wearing little electric chairs around their necks instead of crosses."¹¹

One way we can downplay the cross is by saying "God cannot forgive me." This is false humility and actually very arrogant. We are telling God that the cross is not powerful enough to grant us redemption. Does

this sound satanic to you? Peter eventually came to realise that an important part of being saintly is to remember that we have been forgiven.¹²

So, was he Sinful Simon or Saint Peter? The answer is yes. He was both. Peter reflected the enigma of the human condition. His faith was imperfect. Nevertheless he did have faith in Christ. Note both the graciousness and the severity of Jesus. Jesus is quick to recognise and reward even imperfect faith directed towards him,¹³ but we become objects of His anger if we try to monkey around with his mission.

A man with a confident demeanour and a cowardly heart

The picture of Peter at the end of Jesus' ministry is remarkable. It is remarkable because if we look closely we can make out both God and Satan standing behind Peter.

"Simon, Simon, Satan has asked to sift [each of you] you as wheat. But I have prayed for you, Simon, that your faith may not fail. And when you have turned back, strengthen your brothers."

But he replied, "Lord, I am ready to go with you to prison and to death."

Jesus answered, "I tell you, Peter, before the rooster crows today, you will deny three times that you know me."¹⁴

That confident smile on Peter's face is false, of course. It is hiding a notoriously cowardly heart. However, there is a much more significant scene somewhat in the background. There are revealing expressions both on the face of God and Satan.

A picture of Satan

Satan's face has a religious aspect. He is praying to God. He asks for permission to test Peter. The "but" reveals that God has granted Satan's request. Jesus' prayer reveals what Satan and God are up to. Satan does not want Peter to simply deny Jesus. This is the easy part. It depends on human weakness and humans are weak. He wants Peter's faith to fail. Satan wants Peter to say something like this to God "I have failed you. I do not deserve you. I am no good for you. You cannot love me." Satan wants Peter to think that God's acceptance of him depends on his performance. Whatever the religious demeanour, the one behind Peter's left shoulder has an expression of satanic derision.

A picture of God

Jesus' prayer reveals God's heart. What he prays and does not pray for reflects His priorities. Jesus does not pray that Peter would not be sifted. God's first interest is not in giving us positive experiences. It has always been this way. Consider the prophet Isaiah.

Who among you fears the LORD
and obeys the word of his servant?
Let him who walks in the dark,
who has no light,
trust in the name of the LORD
and rely on his God.

But now, all you who light fires
and provide yourselves with flaming torches,
go, walk in the light of your fires
and of the torches you have set ablaze.
This is what you shall receive from my hand:
You will lie down in torment.¹⁵

This passage is addressed to believers. So much for this idea going around that believers should never find themselves walking in darkness.

Jesus does not pray that Peter would not deny him. God's first interest is not in our performance even when *we are performing for him*. Peter is about to deny that he even knows Jesus, yet the Lord does not shout "Get behind me, Satan!" Instead, Jesus prays that Peter's faith would not fail. God's first interest is in Peter's (and our) faith in him.

The trouble with Peter's faith is that it was imperfect; it was complicated by his own faith in himself: "I am ready to go with you to prison and to death." Notice that his assertion comes soon after the disciples were bickering among themselves as to who was the greatest.¹⁶ Their eyes were on themselves rather than on Christ. It took the darkness of Gethsemane to expose the disciples. The unthinkable started to happen – the temple guard came to arrest Jesus and take him away. Peter, instead of turning to Jesus' word that he must be killed, turned to his own flaming torch - his sword. He cuts off the ear of one of the guards. Peter's self-confidence would still fail him – even denying that he knew Jesus. Then he goes out and weeps bitterly? Do you think Peter was in torment? Perhaps the rock of the church was contemplating the rock

from which he was cut. The torment is both an act of judgement and an act of grace. It is an act of grace because God does not just leave us to our own devices. He is in the business of perfecting faith and this sometimes requires torment.

Is God big enough to accept us despite our failure? Jesus knows that Peter will deny him. Far from rejecting him, we find Jesus praying for him. When Jesus repeats his name "Simon, Simon" in the culture of the time, it was a token of affection. In our day it is like calling him, "Pete." There is a tender expression on the divine face behind Peter's right shoulder. Peter's failure does not induce Jesus to disqualify him from a relationship with him or from service for him. Instead, Jesus commands him to strengthen his brothers when he has turned back. And this was not the last time that Peter failed Jesus – that we know about. Much later, after the ascension and resurrection, Paul had to take Peter to task for hypocritical conduct and for not living up to the truth of the gospel.¹⁷ We can be sure that Satan was at his left shoulder again saying something like, "And you call yourself an Apostle, the rock of the church! How can God accept such a man?"

Peter repeatedly stumbled, but his faith remained. And Jesus knew his Father would answer his prayer. Why was he so sure? Surely it was because Jesus had God's heart. He knew he was praying according to his Father's will because he had the same priorities. Are you ever unsure what to pray for when someone is going through a hard time? Why not pray that their faith will not fail?

The final portrait – a man of faith upside down

The last page in the album is empty. The picture is still to be taken. Jesus says, "'I tell you the truth, when you were younger you dressed yourself and went where you wanted; but when you are old you will stretch out your hands, and someone else will dress you and lead you where you do not want to go.'" Jesus said this to indicate the kind of death by which Peter would glorify God. Then he said to him, "Follow me!"¹⁸ Jesus is predicting the final scene in Peter's life. According to second century sources Peter asked to be crucified upside down.¹⁹ Look what has happened to him! He started out objecting to the cross – even rebuking Jesus over it. Then he runs away from Christ crucified. Now he embraces Christ crucified. Peter was able to face his own crucifixion *because of Christ's crucifixion*. He had the same inspiration as the writer to the Hebrews, "Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning

its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God."²⁰ Peter had his eyes so fixed. In a letter written shortly before his death, Peter encouraged suffering Christians with the reminder that "when they hurled insults at him [Jesus], he did not retaliate; when he suffered he made no threats."²¹ For Peter, Jesus was "the living Stone--rejected by men but chosen by God."²²

The shadow of the cross is the greatest light in our darkest hour. Peter finally had an uncomplicated faith in God. In the end God did answer Jesus' prayer. Peter's faith did not fail because it was sustained, not by his own strength, but by Christ and him crucified.

What picture do you have of Peter? Do you see a pebble? Was he not an ordinary, enigmatic, self-confident, even satanic man? But these snapshots are not all there is to Peter. Jesus takes the final picture and he saw a rock. What was so special about Peter? How could Jesus rest the future of the Church on this fisherman and a little band of disciples? Was it not whose Peter's eyes were on that made him so special? Peter was a rock of unfailing faith because of, and in the dying and living Cornerstone. Jesus was confident that Peter would put his confidence in God. Two thousand years later we can see that Jesus was vindicated. The church has been established.

If you found this article helpful please give it to someone else.

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Notes

- ¹ Douglas, J.D. (1988) *New Bible Dictionary*. Inter-Varsity Press, Leicester, p. 916.
- ² Matthew 16: 15-17.
- ³ Matthew 14:1-4.
- ⁴ 1 Corinthians 2:1-5.
- ⁵ Matthew 14:31.
- ⁶ Matthew 16:21-23.
- ⁷ Murray, A. (1897) *Absolute Surrender and other Addresses* Fleming H. Revell Company, New York. p. 51.
- ⁸ Quoted in Beaird, M (2000) *Living in the Shadow of the Cross*. <http://www.nationalbaptist.com/images/documents/635.pdf>
- ⁹ Moon, S.M. (2009) *As a Peace-Loving Global Citizen*. The Washington Times Foundation, Inc., p.242
- ¹⁰ Yamauchi, E.W. (1982) *The Crucifixion and Docetic Christology*. *Concordia Theological Quarterly*. 46(1):1-20.
- ¹¹ Dawkins, E. (2006) *The God Delusion*. The Random House Group, Ltd, London, p. 251.
- ¹² 2 Peter 1:5.
- ¹³ Almost causally Jesus says to his disciples that they are clean (John 15:3).
How quick God is to forgive us!
- ¹⁴ Luke 22:31-34.
- ¹⁵ Isaiah 50: 10-11.
- ¹⁶ Luke 22:24.
- ¹⁷ Galatians 2:11-14.
- ¹⁸ John 21: 18-19.
- ¹⁹ Ehrman, B.D. (2006) *Peter, Paul, and Mary Magdalene: the followers of Jesus in history and legend*. Oxford University Press, p.85.
- ²⁰ Hebrews 12:2.
- ²¹ 1 Peter 2:23.
- ²² 1 Peter 2:4.