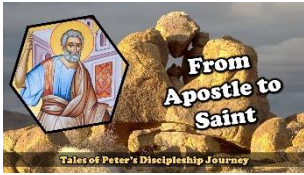


## From Apostle to Saint

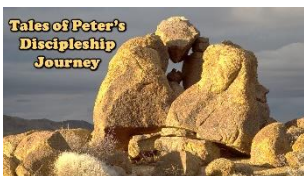


<Acts 11:1-18>

*1 Now the apostles and the believers who were in Judea heard that the Gentiles had also accepted the word of God. 2 So when Peter went up to Jerusalem, the circumcised believers criticized him, 3 saying, "Why did you go to uncircumcised men and eat with them?"*

*4 Then Peter began to explain it to them, step by step, saying, 5 "I was in the city of Joppa praying, and in a trance I saw a vision. There was something like a large sheet coming down from heaven, being lowered by its four corners; and it came close to me. 6 As I looked at it closely I saw four-footed animals, beasts of prey, reptiles, and birds of the air. 7 I also heard a voice saying to me, 'Get up, Peter; kill and eat.' 8 But I replied, 'By no means, Lord; for nothing profane or unclean has ever entered my mouth.' 9 But a second time the voice answered from heaven, 'What God has made clean, you must not call profane.' 10 This happened three times; then everything was pulled up again to heaven. 11 At that very moment three men, sent to me from Caesarea, arrived at the house where we were. 12 The Spirit told me to go with them and not to make a distinction between them and us. These six brothers also accompanied me, and we entered the man's house. 13 He told us how he had seen the angel standing in his house and saying, 'Send to Joppa and bring Simon, who is called Peter; 14 he will give you a message by which you and your entire household will be saved.' 15 And as I began to speak, the Holy Spirit fell upon them just as it had upon us at the beginning. 16 And I remembered the word of the Lord, how he had said, 'John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit.' 17 If then God gave them the same gift that he gave us when we believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I that I could hinder God?"*

*18 When they heard this, they were silenced. And they praised God, saying, "Then God has given even to the Gentiles the repentance that leads to life."*



This is the final sermon in this series about the disciple Peter. We have been following Peter's journey with Jesus, from being called as a fisherman to leave his nets, to hearing of the many times when Peter stepped out boldly and faltered, to Jesus forgiving Peter and appointing him as the one upon whom the church will be built. Last week, we heard how Peter received the Holy Spirit and boldly proclaim that Jesus was the long-awaited Messiah. Peter called the crowd to repentance, to recognize the ways in which they had turned from God's path, to yield their hearts and lives to God, asking for forgiveness and pledging to follow Christ. And on that day, three thousand people said 'yes' and became a part of the church. *Acts 2:28. [Then] They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.* Today, we will take a quick look at some of the stories of the early church leading up to Peter's death, and then the church declaring him a saint.

From Pentecost onwards, Peter was used by God to do amazing things, acts that he had never done before, things that he had only seen Jesus do. Some of those amazing, bold and courageous things are told in the book of Acts. In Acts 3, he healed a man who had been lame since birth. In the temple courts, as the man rejoiced, Peter preached another sermon, this time in

front of the religious leaders. That got Peter arrested by the chief priests and elders and the following day in Acts 4, Peter boldly tells them that the man was healed in Jesus' name. With nothing to say in opposition, they release him. In chapter 5 as the apostles continue to heal and preach, the high priest put him in prison, but the Lord opened the doors of the prison and he went back to the Temple again to teach. This time the high priest was persuaded by a Pharisee named Gamaliel to leave him alone, *Acts 5:28-29 because if this plan or this undertaking is of human origin, it will fail; but if it is of God, you will not be able to overthrow them.* More and more believers come to Christ and large numbers are added to the church. Peter has lived up to his name and is becoming the rock on which the church is being built.

We do not hear explicitly of Peter again until Acts 9 when he heals a paralyzed man, and then raises a woman called Tabitha from the dead. Jesus had seen the potential in Peter right back from when he was a fisherman and now Peter is living boldly and courageously up to that vision with the power of the Holy Spirit.

In Caesarea there was a Gentile man named Cornelius, a centurion, who was a man of faith, and an angel told him to invite Peter to his house. Peter went because of a vision that Peter himself had. Cornelius called his relatives and friends together and Peter preached the good news to them. And the Holy Spirit was poured out again, this time on all those gathered – Jews and Gentiles and they all spoke in multiple languages. Then, even though the Gentiles were not circumcised, Peter went ahead and baptized them. It's the Christian Jews now who are not happy with Peter. Listen to Peter's report to the church at Jerusalem as Peter justifies his actions. <Read Acts 11:1-18>.

The church would continue to wrestle with this question of whether Gentiles needed to become Jewish converts, be circumcised and follow the Law, in order to be part of the Christian community, or whether the only requirements were faith in Christ, repentance, and baptism. The last time we hear from Peter in the book of Acts is in Acts 15, when Paul and Barnabas have come to Jerusalem for a definitive ruling from the leaders of the church concerning the question of the Gentiles and Peter gives his testimony.

This was the first of many periods of intense debate within the history of Christianity over matters of theology, ethics, and the interpretation of Scripture. **This is a pivotal moment in the life of the early church and the Christian faith. Peter's views were changing. What he thought he knew about God and God's grace was being turned on its head. Even how he read and interpreted Scripture was changing in response to seeing God working in the lives of those he previously considered unclean.**

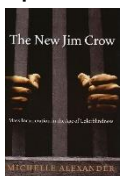
Are our theological views set in stone? When Jesus ascended into heaven, Peter's faith formation did not stop. Filled with the Holy Spirit, Peter had the gifts to be able to preach and heal and bring others to Christ. But Peter still had to wrestle with his faith understanding. Faced with the success of the gospel message, and what he was experiencing, Peter had to rethink his views on the Jewish laws and dietary requirements and circumcision. He, and the church, had to decide: did new converts have to follow those old rules? What did it mean to be a first century Christian? Jesus had said, Love your neighbour, and expanded the meaning of the word neighbour. But what did that mean in practice? Did they have to follow what good Jews had done for centuries or was God leading them and giving them a vision for a new direction? How should they interpret the scriptures? What would be a grace-filled, life-giving message for the Gentiles?

As Christians, there are many topics today that we are called to wrestle with. Do we abide by how the church has done things for Centuries? Or is God giving us a vision of something new that is good news and grace-filled for all our neighbours?



The 'God in Love Unites Us' report about marriage and relationships is an example of how we as a church are responding to something new as the church talks about co-habiting, rituals for divorce, and marriage for same-sex couple.

Filled with the HS, Peter's views did not stay static. He faithfully grew and changed and matured in the faith. I know that I am not the same person of faith as the one who went off to seminary, and not even the same one who graduated. My outlook on various things has changed. One of the pivotal points for me was a conference that I went to in New Orleans. One of the speakers was Michelle Alexander, an African American female lawyer. She had not long released her book *The New Jim Crow* about how the mass incarceration of a disproportionate number of black men amounts to a devastating system of racial control. It was a hard book to read, but an important one as part of my education on systemic racism. A topic that is ever prevalent, and becoming increasingly more urgent. The Old Testament prophets had a lot to say about social justice - how do they speak to us today. What does God's grace look like in the midst of the race riots? How I am being called to be courageous and bold? *And I am still working on that!*

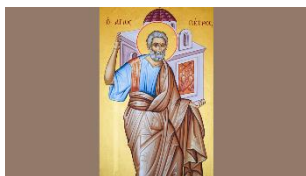


We can learn from Peter that it is okay to change. To have our eyes opened to things we have not noticed before. And to extend grace in extravagant ways, so that the gospel is good news to all. *And you can thank Peter, and Paul, that circumcision is no longer mandatory and that you eat pork & shellfish!*

So what happened to Peter after he vanishes from the book of Acts? Paul mentions Peter in 1 Corinthians, so it is likely Peter visited Corinth. And the letter 1 Peter is written to Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia, which are all in modern day Turkey, so it is likely that he visited there too. It is believed that Peter finally ended up in Rome, in the 60's when Nero was Emperor.

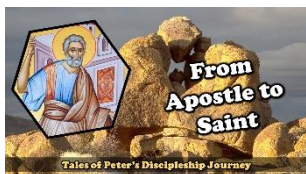
There are two letters in the New Testament with Peter's name: 1 and 2 Peter. It is disputed as to whether Peter actually wrote them. First Peter was written from Rome. If it wasn't written by Peter, it was written near enough to his time that it likely contains the ideas he shared in his preaching and teaching. While Peter's preaching in Acts is evangelistic and aimed at nonbelievers, his words in First Peter are aimed at believers, and the letter gives contemporary readers a chance to hear what Peter might have shared as he was seeking to pastor and shepherd the flock. Second Peter was written as Peter's farewell address shortly before his death. The letter reminds the believers that Christ will in fact return one day. But its main focus is on living "holy and godly lives" particularly in light of the return of Christ.<sup>1</sup>

It is likely that Peter was captured and imprisoned, with Paul, in a wave of persecution in the year 64. One tradition has Peter baptizing his fellow prisoners whom he led to Christ while in prison, Peter was then crucified; fulfilling the words of Jesus in John 21:18 *when you grow old, you will stretch out your hands, and someone else will fasten a belt around you and take you where you do not wish to go.* The apocryphal Acts of Peter say that he was crucified head down.



While as a young man Peter's faith at times faltered, he now faced death with an unshakable faith. Peter's words and influence paved the way for the Christian faith to spread, unabated, across the Roman Empire and around the world. Peter was proclaimed a saint by early Christians because of his martyrdom. Saint Peter is the first Pope of the Catholic Church and there remains an unbroken line of Popes from Saint Peter to Pope Francis.

<sup>1</sup> Adam Hamilton, *Simon Peter: Flawed but Faithful Disciple* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2018), 170.



What a story! What a faithful witness! What a discipleship journey Peter had. What a difference the Holy Spirit can make in our lives. What a lot we can learn from Peter. While few become Saints with a capital 'S', we all leave a legacy behind us. What is your story to pass on? What do you hope people will remember? Who do you know who needs a word of encouragement and to hear of Jesus' love today?

For the very faithful witness of **Saint Peter**. May we be as bold as him.

Thanks be to God.

Amen.

### Resources

Hamilton, Adam. *Simon Peter: Flawed but Faithful Disciple*. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2018.