

# *Truth for Today*

## *The Bible Explained*

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## **Peter's First Epistle**

### **Introduction to Peter and his Epistle incl Gospels and Acts**

Greetings and welcome to Truth for Today where we are beginning a series of three talks on the Apostle Peter and his first letter. Initially, we shall break off at the end of chapter two, only to complete our study by referring to chapters three, four and five next year. This week I have the task of introducing the themes of the letter, along with a look at the apostle himself, which is where I shall begin.

It has been said by a modern church historian that it is impossible to overestimate the importance of Peter in the rise of early Christianity, as he was the initial witness of the resurrection of Jesus and the proclaimer of His Messiahship to the people of Jerusalem. He was the man who, under God, also took the startling news that the crucified Jesus was the Messiah to the Jewish peoples of Galilee, Samaria and Judea. In doing this, he was fulfilling God's appointment of him, as Apostle to the circumcision, as recounted by Paul in his letter to the Galatians, chapter two. It is quite easy to miss this mission to his own people, accomplished by Peter, owing to the importance that Luke gives, in the Acts, to Peter's preaching to Gentiles such as Cornelius (Acts chapter ten). If there is one disciple that the man in the street could name it would in all probability be Peter. This is not the name he had before he met the Lord Jesus, for until the Gospel story opens he was Simon, son of John, as John chapter one verses 41 and 42 informs us:

*[Andrew] first found his own brother Simon and said to him, We have found the Messiah (which means Christ). He brought him to Jesus. Jesus looked at him and said, So you are Simon the son of John? You shall be called Cephas (which means Peter).*

That quotation comes from the English Standard Version of the Bible and, unless I state otherwise, all readings from the Scripture will be from the same source. Peter is referred to as Simon only five times outside of the Gospels and one of them is when Peter uses it to head his second letter. The other four times are found in the Acts, when Peter is used in conjunction with Simon meaning, for all intents and purposes, Peter is the name by which the brother of Andrew is known for the rest of his life. The Gospels usually refer to him by the Greek version of Cephas, which is Petros or Peter. That said we must note that he is regularly called Cephas by Paul especially in his first letter to the Corinthians.

After that rather protracted discussion of his name, we must now move on to consider some biographical details of the man himself. Simon Peter's home was originally in Bethsaida, which was to the east of the Jordan, where it entered the Sea of Galilee. This region was a Hellenized area, where Greek culture was predominant, meaning Simon's name, like that of his brother Andrew, was Greek. Philip, another disciple called by Jesus from Bethsaida, also bore a Greek

name. Since these men originated from Bethsaida, it is more than likely that Peter could speak the Greek language. Such a skill would have been useful when he exercised his ministry along the coastal plain of Judea to the Hellenized cities such as Caesarea, Joppa and eventually into the home of Cornelius, the centurion.

From Luke's Gospel chapter five and verse ten, we learn that Peter and his brother Andrew were in business with John and James, the sons of Zebedee, as fishermen based at Capernaum. Mark, in the first chapter of his Gospel and verses 16 to 20 tells us more:

*Passing alongside the Sea of Galilee, he saw Simon and Andrew 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. And going on a little farther, he saw James the son of Zebedee and John his brother, who were in their boat mending the nets. And immediately he called them, and they left their father Zebedee in the boat with the hired servants and followed him.*

I would like us to notice two or three points from this account by Mark. Firstly, that the fishing business was sufficiently prosperous to employ hired hands, so when these four men were called by the Lord they left behind a comfortable life style. I also wish to point out the word immediately which is used to show the nature of their response to the Lord's words. Is this a challenge to us? Do we hesitate to obey His commands or do we seek to fulfil His requests?

I would suggest that John chapter one and verses 35 to 42 more than hint that Simon Peter was one of the men who were disciples of John the Baptist. This surely means that he was earnest in his intentions to seek out the kingdom of God. When the Lord called, he readily obeyed by giving up his secular work to become a fisher of men. Regularly he is privileged by the Lord to witness special miracles, along with James and John. On many occasions in the Gospels, we find him acting as spokesman for his fellow apostles.

The Gospels also tell us that he was married and living at Capernaum with his wife and mother-in-law (Mark chapter 1, verses 29 and 30). Consequently we must note the extent and cost when Simon Peter left all to follow Jesus. We get a further flavour of this in Mark chapter 10 verses 28 and 29 when Peter exclaims that the disciples had left everything which, according to the Lord's answer, would include all family relationships. This is similar to Paul's statement in Philipians when he wrote:

*Indeed, I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ (chapter 3 and verse 8).*

We have every reason to believe that what was true for Paul was true for Peter. I shall confine myself to looking at just two more examples of Peter's experience as he walked in company with his Master. The first of these can be found in Luke chapter 5 and is sometimes referred to as the miraculous draught of fish. After the Lord had finished teaching the multitude from Simon Peter's boat, He instructed him to cast his net for a haul of fish. Somewhat reluctantly, Peter obeyed only to be amazed at the large quantity of fish contained in the net. He had to call for James and John,

his partners, to help to haul the nets in. We can read the impression that this made on Peter in verse 8:

*But when Simon Peter saw it, he fell down at Jesus' knees, saying, Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord.*

This is when Peter learned a truth that we all need to learn, namely, that we are sinners in the sight of God.

The second example I want to consider is found in chapter 16 of Matthew, when the disciples were at Caesarea Philippi and the Lord asked them a question about whom people thought He was. Then He asked His disciples a question that we all have to answer:

*He said to them, But who do you say that I am? Simon Peter replied, You are the Christ, the Son of the living God. And Jesus answered him, Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father who is in heaven.*

In addition to realising his own sinfulness, after witnessing the miracle of the fishes, Peter now expressed his conviction of the uniqueness of the Lord Jesus. Though two thousand years have passed, those two confessions are still required of us.

We must now move on to consider Peter's ministry in the formation and development of the early church, but before we do, can I mention to any who have just joined us that you are listening to a broadcast from Truth for Today about the Apostle Peter.

Using information from the Acts, along with Paul's letter to the Galatians, we can learn something of the actions and ministry of Peter in the region surrounding Jerusalem, when he gave up the leadership of the Jerusalem church to James, the brother of the Lord. For approximately ten years after the descent of the Holy Spirit, at Pentecost, it would seem that Peter was the leader at Jerusalem. A few minutes ago, I referred to Peter's ministry in Joppa and the coastal plain of Judea which took place during these years. This must have resulted in assemblies of Christians being formed for according to Paul's first letter to the Thessalonians chapter 2 and verses 14 and 15, we learn that the churches in Judea had been persecuted.\_

About 43 AD, (we can never be sure of the exact date), Peter left Jerusalem following the persecution of Herod Agrippa. After escaping from Herod's prison, he went to the house of Mary, mother of John Mark and then elsewhere, as we can read in Acts chapter 12 and verses 17 and 18:

*But motioning to them with his hand to be silent, he described to them how the Lord had brought him out of the prison. And he said, Tell these things to James and to the brothers. Then he departed and went to another place. Now when the day came, there was no little disturbance among the soldiers over what had become of Peter.*

It is possible to conjecture the location of that other place where Peter departed to, though as Scripture does not tell us it is foolish to try and guess. What we do know is that it was somewhere

away from Jerusalem meaning that, for at least the next few years, Peter was engaged on mission activities, leaving James to take a position of leadership at Jerusalem. The last mention of Peter in the Acts is verse 7 and chapter 15:

*And after there had been much debate, Peter stood up and said to them, Brothers, you know that in the early days God made a choice among you, that by my mouth the Gentiles should hear the word of the gospel and believe.*

The debate mentioned in this verse was the matter of Gentiles being accepted into the church without being circumcised and embracing the whole Jewish law and practice. It was customary for Jews to eat separately from Gentiles, but when Peter preached to Cornelius, he (Cornelius) received the Holy Spirit and was baptised without being circumcised. This upset many of the Jews, especially any Pharisees, who were utterly convinced that all Gentile Christians must become proselytes of the Jewish faith. Despite an occasional lapse, (see Galatians chapter 2 and verses 11 to 16), Peter stood for the sufficiency of the death of Christ to justify believers, as he makes abundantly clear in his first letter chapter one and verses 18 and 19:

*...knowing that you were ransomed from the futile ways inherited from your forefathers, not with perishable things such as silver or gold, but with the precious blood of Christ, like that of a lamb without blemish or spot.*

This became a desperate issue in assemblies of Christians, hundreds of miles from Jerusalem, as many of Paul's letters make clear. When he was imprisoned, the circumcision party took advantage of his absence by attempting to force the practice onto Christians young in the faith. In his letter to the Philippians, the Apostle to the Gentiles warned the church to look out for those who mutilate the flesh. As far as Paul was concerned, Christians were free to live life in the Spirit, for they were the real circumcision who glory in Christ Jesus with no confidence in the flesh. I have pressed the matter of circumcision because of its importance at that stage. If Peter had put his weight against allowing Gentiles to be free of the Jewish cultic practices, matters would have developed differently. As we have seen from Scripture, however, Peter was led by the Spirit of God and preached the atoning death of the Lord as the complete and only basis of salvation.

There is one more feature of Peter's ministry that I wish to isolate. This is that he was commissioned by the Risen Lord. We can read this in John chapter twenty-one and verses 17 to 19:

*He said to him the third time, Simon, son of John, do you love me? Peter was grieved because he said to him the third time, Do you love me? and he said to him, Lord, you know everything, you know that I love you. Jesus said to him, Feed my sheep. Truly, truly, I say to you, when you were young, you used to dress yourself and walk wherever you wanted, but when you are old, you will stretch out your hands, and another will dress you and carry you where you do not want to go. (This he said to show by what kind of death he was to glorify God.) And after saying this he said to him, Follow me.*

From then on Peter sought to evangelise and feed the sheep of the House of Israel. Do not fail to notice the reference to Peter's death at the end of verse 19.

Time has almost gone for us, but I must quickly refer to Peter's first letter to conclude our time together today. Each chapter will be dealt with individually by various members of the team which means that my task this morning is to give a brief introduction. A minute or so ago, I referred to Peter being commissioned to feed the Lord's sheep. This letter is shot through with overtones of the spiritual care of the true pastor for his sheep. Instruction in Christian truth is there, as is exhortation and practical advice on how to live a life that is pleasing to God. His letter is replete with references to the Old Testament, which would suggest that there were many of his fellow Jews amongst the recipients of his letter.

In chapter 5 verse 13 Peter states he is writing from Babylon, which is probably a code word for Rome. He begins his letter with the benefits, along with the implications, of being a Christian. For instance, he desires them to have peace and grace in abundance, while at the same time they had to live as obedient children. Surely, to be aware of our many blessings, yet also to be obedient to the words of Scripture is instructive to us all. Between verses 3 of chapter 1 and verse 10 of chapter 2, he outlines salvation and its effects on the believer, including the believer's life style, and the necessity for the pure milk of the word to enable the Christian to grow. He is concerned for God to be honoured and respected in chapters 2 and 3, before going on to bring the very real possibility for the believers to be persecuted and to suffer for the Lord's sake.

That is all I wish to say about the contents of the epistle for, as I stated previously, each chapter will be dealt with comprehensively. I shall now read the last three verses of the letter, where there is an emphasis on the grace of God:

*By Silvanus, a faithful brother as I regard him, I have written briefly to you, exhorting that this is the true grace of God. Stand firm in it. She who is at Babylon, who is likewise chosen, sends you greetings, and so does Mark, my son. Greet one another with the kiss of love. Peace to all of you who are in Christ.*

I finish by quoting the comments of a favourite minister of the word:

*Let us never forget that we stand in grace, the true grace of God. All our relationships with God are on the basis of grace. He began with us in grace on our conversion to Himself. He continues with us on the footing of grace and with grace He shall end – only there is no end - for we shall enter His eternal glory as called to it by the God of all grace.*

It has been good to have had your audience this day. May we all experience God's richest blessing in Christ. Thank you for listening to this programme numbered 1097 concerning the Apostle Peter and his First Letter which is the first in the series entitled Peter's First Letter.

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