

# The Meaning of the Disciple Peter

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Peter represents faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. He was not named Peter by his parents; by them he was called Simon, which means “to hear,” and in the spiritual sense “to obey.” The Lord surnamed him “Cephas,” which means “a rock”: not a loose stone, nor a carved stone, but a mighty foundation rock—the rock upon which to build the vast cathedrals of faith in the Lord Jesus Christ, the one God of heaven and earth. The Greek and Latin equivalent of “Cephas” is “Peter”, and so, when the Gospels came to be written down in Greek, his name appears as Peter—Simon Peter.

As we see this colorful character weaving his way through the Gospel stories, we may also visualize the loom upon which the fabric of our own faith is woven—the faith that leads to regeneration, the faith of a living church. Such faith is subject to many vicissitudes! At times it is irresolute, at times almost cowardly. But after a time, with the keenness of an eagle’s sight and with the strength of a lion, it sees and champions the eternal truth. The cycle of its variation moves from the height of being willing to give all, to the dark moment of bodily fear when, cringing from its accusers, it denies the Savior Himself.

Who among us has not passed through the cold and the warmth of faith? Who has not experienced moments of inspiration, when we would surrender all to the living reality of inner conviction, and then, in another situation, denied the power of faith by falling prey to some base appetite! This was Peter, irresolute of character, yet clinging to the Savior with the greatest fidelity, firmness and inward love, for even after his denial he went out and wept bitterly.

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Peter occupies a leading place among the disciples. In every list that is given, his name comes first. In many cases he is addressed by the Lord as the representative of the twelve, and frequently, when Jesus addressed them all in general, Peter answered for his fellows. In Roman Catholicism this forms the basis for the claim that Peter was the first of the Popes. But for the New Church it shows that faith must lead and that without a heart-felt and enthusiastic faith the church will perish. For when faith is kept burning brightly, it sheds a light that guides our faltering footsteps through even the bitterest trials.

Peter’s primary place is well illustrated by what happened after the Lord taught that He was the bread that came down from heaven; that unless men ate of His flesh and drank of His blood, they had no part in Him. The result of this teaching was that the multitude which had followed Him—those hungry for natural bread—melted away. It is said that even many of His disciples walked no more with Him. With infinite pathos, “Jesus said to the twelve, ‘Do you also want to go away?’ Then Simon Peter answered Him, ‘Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life’” (John 6: 67-68).

Nothing but an abiding faith can carry us through the darker moments of life, when all our efforts are for naught, and when even the things that we have cherished most are falling away. But there is still hope for us if we can retain a conviction in Peter's confession: "To whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life."

Peter's importance was also demonstrated by the Transfiguration. "Jesus took Peter, James and John...up on a high mountain by themselves, and was transfigured before them. His face shone like the sun, and His clothes became as white as the light" (Matthew 17:1-2). Peter found words to clothe his wonder: "Lord, it is good for us to be here; if You wish, let us make here three tabernacles: one for You, one for Moses, and one for Elijah" (Matthew 17:4). It is by means of faith that rare and sacred visions are preserved. We may not always see His face shine as the sun, but we may always keep a sacred tabernacle for Him in our own hearts.

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We are now in a position to understand why the keys of the kingdom of heaven were given unto Peter. Jesus asked the question:

*"But who do you say that I am?" And Simon Peter...said, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God." Jesus...said to him, "Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jonah.... And I also say to you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build My church, and the gates of Hades shall not prevail against it. And I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven" (Matthew 16: 13-19).*

Peter represents the rock of our faith in the Lord Jesus Christ as the one and only living God. It is this faith that builds the church in the hearts of people. It is this faith that opens heaven to us, even while we are here on earth, and it is the lack of it that closes heaven. That which is bound by faith on earth is bound in heaven, and that which is loosed by lack of faith here can never be reunited—not even to eternity!

Yet faith, by its very nature, is not constant. The sun rises and sets. Light follows darkness. Faith must ever be purified, lest it fasten itself upon natural objects and mistake them for spiritual ends. This is well illustrated in the life of Peter, who by now had become convinced that the Lord was the Messiah promised from old and that His kingdom was to be of this world. And so, when the Lord told His disciples of His approaching suffering and death, Peter rebuked Him, and said, "Far be it from You, Lord!" He did this because he loved the Lord. But his love was not yet typical of the supreme faith that sees the Risen Lord—the Divine Humanity. So the Lord said to him, "Get behind Me, Satan! ...[F]or you are not mindful of the things of God, but the things of men" (Matthew 16:22-23).

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Faith is never sure of itself until it has been tempted. It is not an abiding faith until it has become of life. And so, later in the Gospel story, in the confused, strange happenings of the night before the crucifixion, Peter became unmanned. The throngs that came to take Jesus filled him with panic. With the rest of the disciples, he forsook the Lord and fled. It is as the representative of a

dying church that Peter then thrice denied the Lord. But the dawn was coming—the dawn of a new day and a new faith. “[I]mmediately, while he was still speaking, the rooster crowed... Then Peter went out and wept bitterly” (Luke 22:60,62).

But Peter was not to live out his days in unaccepted repentance. Once again the Lord walked beside the shores of Galilee; once again the Divine Savior bade the fishermen lower their nets; and once again a multitude of fishes was enclosed. John said to Peter, “It is the Lord”, and Peter, girding his fisherman’s coat about him, plunged into the sea, so that he might sooner come to where Jesus was standing.

Again the disciples received food from His hands—food representative of the Divine nourishment of the spirit. And then Jesus spoke with Peter alone. Thrice had the old Peter denied his Lord, but a new day had dawned since Peter had first seen the risen Lord. His mind was no longer thinking of earthly kingdoms. It was dwelling upon eternal mansions and rich with the faith of Christianity. Now Peter was to be thrice forgiven. So the Lord asked, “Simon, son of Johah, do you love Me?” As Peter answered affirmatively three times, he was given these charges by the Lord: “Feed My lambs”, “Tend My sheep”, Feed My sheep” (see John 21:15-17).