

Preface

The story of Simon Peter never fails to fascinate. Most of us are able to identify with him more easily than with any of the other disciples. This fisherman turned apostle seems to come closer to us than the others, and the reasons for this are not difficult to understand.

Apart from the Saviour Himself, Peter appears far more often than anyone else in the gospel narratives. In addition to hearing a great deal about him, we hear a great deal from him as well. When others felt they had to be quiet, time and again, Peter was up front as the self-appointed spokesman.

The big fisherman was boastful, impulsive and enthusiastic. He had a short fuse and a quick tongue, and he could even tell a lie when he judged it convenient to do so. Moreover, the ease with which he lapsed into swearing when he denied his Lord, would suggest that he was prone to that sort of thing in his earlier years.

Nature endowed Peter with a temper we can all recognise. And the temperamental highs and lows of his career resonate so very clearly with our own that we are already disposed to accept him, and to think of him as one of ourselves.

That he was a God-fearing man is beyond doubt yet, for all that, the fear of man sometimes got the better of him. For

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instance, on one very important occasion another apostle had to withstand Peter to his face because of this very weakness. (See Gal. 2: 11,12.) All these varied facets in his make-up combined to force Peter into many a corner.

A Study in Contradictions

The extremes in which we find him, make it well-nigh impossible to say what normality could possibly have meant in Peter's case. Almost immediately after winning the exceptional distinction of being told, '*Blessed art thou, Simon ...*' the Lord Jesus said to him '*Get thee behind me Satan!*'

Again, on the occasion of the miraculous catch of fishes, he could say to Jesus, *Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord*, and then, in the next moment, he would avow his readiness to leave all and follow Christ. And besides his protest on that extraordinary occasion, there was his memorable cry amid the storm on the lake, "*Lord, save me!*"

`We are told how his limit on forgiveness to seven times, was lifted to seventy times seven. Then, after the Lord's resurrection and following Peter's own great personal failure, probably the greatest failure of his life, we hear his unrestrained affirmation of his love for the Saviour, "*Lord, you know all things: You know that I love you!*"

There was above all a nobility and a gentleness about Peter. His winsome sincerity and his singular compassion and, in the end, his Christ-like humility cause us to dwell much less upon his faults, and maybe even to exaggerate his strengths. Perhaps what we like best about him is that there were no back doors with Peter, he was always up front. With Peter, what you saw was what you got.

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Crisis and Process

Peter's history, especially his early history, helps us to see the Christian life, as a series of perpetual crises rather than as a simple and uneventful process. Becoming a Christian marks the beginning of a process of sanctification. For a while this will continue without distraction until, perhaps quite unexpectedly, we find ourselves battling our way through a crisis. When the upheaval passes we settle down again, and the process is resumed. But only for a time, because in due course, it will be punctuated by a further crisis. And the crisis will be very real, even though it may be of a different order from the first.

After a while this pattern compels us to engage in some serious and prudent reflection. We must take stock of the way we have travelled and of how far we have come. What progress, if any, have we made? Our musings will usually convince us that in allowing us to pass through those various crises, the Lord was indeed accomplishing a work of grace in us.

Gradually we will begin to discern that in those hard times we learned all over again, only in a more acute way, the very things the Lord had been teaching us all along, in the calmer periods of process. Those negative experiences, often so difficult to bear, were not just chance happenings; real meaning and spiritual good lay behind them.

Patterns for us

Our Lord's pilgrimage on earth was like that: His baptism was a crisis, as was His temptation in the wilderness. His transfiguration was another, and so was His experience in the garden of Gethsemane. Such was the way the Master trod, and shall not the servant tread it still.

The apostle Paul too seems to have lived from one crisis to another. His conversion, on the Damascus Road was certainly a crisis, as was his baptism, when his physical

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sight was restored. What happened at Derbe and Lystra, at Athens, Phillipi and Corinth were all times of great spiritual crisis in that apostle's life.

But this principle can be seen in an even more acute form in the life of Simon Peter. We speak of blustering Peter, because we find him on the heights of brilliance one moment, only to be plunged into the depths of despair in the next. But when we see what grace ultimately made of this man, we are content to number him among those whose faith we do well to follow.

For this man's fitful life, so marvellously honed by divine grace, became a mighty instrument in the Lord's hand. Beyond all doubt, Peter proved himself the chosen and proper leader to guide the Church in it's first days, when all the world, and especially the religious world, united against it and threatened to strangle it at birth.

Our intention in this study is not to pick up every reference to our friend in the New Testament; it is rather to look at the outstanding moments in his life. We will revisit some of the highs and lows of his career, and we will take our journey in the knowledge that retracing Simon Peter's steps can only minister spiritual good to our own souls.

Simon Peter

A Fisher of Men

Family Background

The ageing Jonas, or John, must have relied heavily on the help of his two sons in the family fishing business. Andrew and Simon went down together to the sea in ships, and having weathered many a storm, they must have known as well as any, the moods that made the Galilee famous. Since they plied their trade in the great waters they must often have seen the works of the Lord and His wonders in the deep.

Peter's Wife

Although Simon Peter hailed from Bethsaida, it would appear he had moved to reside in the larger and more important Capernaum. In all probability this was at the time of his marriage. Bethsaida and Capernaum were adjacent towns situated on the western shore of Galilee. They were singularly privileged to have witnessed most of the Lord's mighty works and, in the end, a woe was pronounced upon them both because of their failure to repent.

When Peter is first introduced in the Gospel narratives he is already a married man. Some have tried to discredit this fact, but scripture is emphatic in asserting it. True, we

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know very little of Peter's wife, and even her name is kept from us. We are told, however, that at the time when Peter was introduced to Christ, his wife's mother was still alive. In fact, at one point when she was ill with a fever, the Lord Jesus performed a miracle of healing on her, and her health was restored.

From a passing reference by Paul, it has been inferred that Peter's wife accompanied him on his later evangelistic travels. (See 1Cor.9: 5.) Tradition also has it that when he died his wife died with him, but then, tradition is not always a reliable guide. We do know that Peter died a martyr's death, thus fulfilling the prediction of His Lord. (See John 21: 19.) Historians tell us that he died by crucifixion and that, at his own request, he was crucified upside down. The reason, it is said, was that he felt himself unworthy to die, exactly as his Lord had died.

Not the first Disciple

Peter was not the first of our Lord's disciples, that honour went to his brother Andrew, and to his companion, both of whom had been disciples of John the Baptist. (See John 1: 35-37.) And yet in the four lists of the members of the apostolic band, Peter always appears first. And on those very special occasions when the Lord selected just three of the number to be with Him, He always chose Peter, James and John, and always in that order.

Moreover, it is simply a matter of observation to say that between Jesus and Peter, there seems to have been a rather special rapport. There were exchanges between them that would seem almost out of place, had they been between the Lord and any of the other disciples. All these things gave Peter a certain prominence among the apostles, or so it would appear.

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But there is nothing to suggest that Peter had an advantage over the others, or that he exercised an authority over them. Much less, that he held a position of supremacy, such as Rome attributes to him right down to this present time. On the contrary, the Lord exhorted the disciples and said, "You know that the princes of the Gentiles exercise dominion over them ... but it shall not be so among you, but whosoever will be great among you, let him be your minister, and whosoever will be chief among you, let him be your servant" (Matt. 20 :25-27).

The keys of the kingdom

However, if we were to identify one thing above another as a matter of special privilege, it would be that the Lord gave to Peter *the keys of the kingdom of heaven*. In the citation He told him, "Whatsoever you shall bind on earth shall be bound in heaven; and whatsoever you shall loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven" (Matt.16:19). Good men still differ as to the precise meaning of this binding and loosing.

What we know is that Peter had the privilege of opening the door of faith, first to the Jews (Acts 2), and then to the Gentiles (Acts 10). The first turn of the key was at Jerusalem, on the day of Pentecost, and the second was when he proclaimed the gospel at Caesarea, in the house of Cornelius the Roman centurion. Soon after that Peter moved into the background, and Paul came more and more into prominence.

Of this change in circumstance, *Alexander Whyte* wrote in his *Bible Characters*, "Peter's gifts of mind, and force of character, and warmth of heart, and generosity of utterance - all these things gave Peter the foremost place in the Apostolic Church till Paul arose. But Peter, remarkable and outstanding man as he was, had neither the natural ability nor the educational advantages of Saul of Tarsus. His mind was neither so deep nor so strong nor so many-sided nor at all so fine and so fruitful as was Paul's incomparable mind.

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And as a consequence he never was able to come within sight of the work that Paul alone could do. But, at the same time, and till Paul arose and all but totally eclipsed all the disciples who had been in Christ before him, Peter stood at the head of the apostolate, and so leaves a deeper footprint, in the pages of the four gospels at any rate, than any of the other eleven disciples."

Finding Christ

"We have found the Messiah ... the Christ"
(John 1: 41,42).

More than a prophet is how the Lord Jesus spoke of John the Baptist. The prophets had all been like finger-posts pointing forward to the coming Messiah, and John too, had done the same. But there was an added dimension to John's ministry. Besides pointing forward to the coming one, John had the privilege of actually pointing Him out.

One day, as Jesus approached he said, "Behold the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world." And the following day he again pointed Him out, and said, "Behold the Lamb of God" (John 1: 29,36). On that first day John plainly stressed the work that Christ had come to do, to take away the sin of the whole *cosmos* world. On the next day his focus was on Christ's person, the Lamb of God. These two things, *the person and work of Christ*, constitute the core theme of scripture.

Andrew - Peter's brother

Among the many who heard John speak, were two of his own disciples, both of whom decided to follow Jesus. One was Andrew, Simon Peter's brother, and the second his unnamed companion. The unnamed person was probably John, the apostle of love who, with genuine humility and total self-effacement, never identified himself by name,

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either in his gospel or in his epistles. Only in the book of Revelation does he mention his name.

Andrew became a soul-winner right away. We read, "He first finds his own brother, Simon, and said unto him, we have found the Messiah, which is, being interpreted, the Christ. And he brought him to Jesus ... " (John 1 :41,42). After studying in detail the structure of this text, scholars tell us it implies that Andrew and John both went away that day to seek out their respective brothers. John's brother was James who later came to Christ, but Andrew found his brother first.

Personal Soul-winning

It would seem that this kind of ministry became Andrew's particular forte. Peter would become a kind of mass evangelist, bringing people to Christ in their thousands. But Andrew was a personal worker, a soul-winner who brought others to Christ, one by one. It was Andrew who brought the lad with the five barley loaves and the two small fishes, and here his first convert was his own brother. This is a great work and it does not require a college training or a licence from any church body. It is a work to which every Christian is called, and it properly begins at home.

The man from Gadara, who was so wonderfully restored to his right mind, wanted to become a foreign missionary, but the Lord told him "Go home to your friends, and tell them what great things the Lord has done for you, and has had compassion on you" (Mark 5 :19). When the scripture says of Andrew, 'He *first* finds *his own* brother' the term used suggests that he had decided, as a matter of priority, to begin his witness at home and among his own people.

Andrew, therefore, stands at the head of a long line of personal workers. They take quite literally the proverb which says, "He who wins souls is wise" (Prov.11 :30). They are sincere believers who shun the limelight, but their

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work will surely have the praise of God in that day. The prophet declared, "They that turn many to righteousness shall shine as the stars forever and ever" (Dan.12 :3). Writing to those whom he had won to Christ, Paul said, "What is our hope, or joy, or crown of rejoicing? Is it not even you in the presence of our Lord Jesus Christ at His coming? (1Thess.2 :19)

Two Methods

It is significant that after the Lord Jesus returned to heaven, and the Holy Spirit came, these were the two methods employed in the propagation of the gospel. (i) public preaching and (ii) personal witnessing. The public preaching, first of Peter, and later of Paul, are legendary.

But we must not overlook the fact that the persecuted believers went everywhere *preaching* the word. (Acts 8: 4) The term used here for *preaching* literally means, they gossiped the good news. In the market places, and in public places generally, they shared the gospel with others in an intimate and personal way.

We have tried to improve on these methods, but not with much success. Sometimes we rely almost entirely on the public ministry of gifted preachers. The balance of probability, however, is that we now live in a day when the paramount need is for believers to reassert the ministry of Andrew. We need to recover the one-to-one method of communicating the gospel. Ideally, we should try to harness these two methods of evangelism which were so blessed by the Spirit at the beginning.

We have found the Christ

Andrew's message was simple and to the point. What he said did two things; (i) it focussed everything on Christ,

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and (ii) it shared a personal experience. "We have found the Messiah, which is, by interpretation, the Christ" (John 1:41). Andrew witnessed to his brother out of his own recent experience of Christ. He had heard John speak, and he followed Jesus.

After having spent some time in Christ's presence, Andrew had come away enthralled with the discovery he had made. Exhilarated by his experience, he sought out Simon and shared with him what he knew. His enthusiasm was clearly infective, and Simon seems to have responded immediately. He decided that he too must come to Christ.

Andrew's method encapsulates the very essence of effective personal witnessing. In this type of work contentious argument is out of place. Our business is simply to speak of Him, out of the fulness of our own experience, and then to leave the issue with God.

A New Name

The first meeting between Simon and the Lord Jesus was a memorable encounter. Andrew's brother must have been startled by the fact that Jesus knew all about him; his past, his present and his future. He might even have suspected that Andrew had been talking privately to Jesus about him. For when Jesus saw him, He said, "Thou art Simon, the son of Jonah; thou shalt be called Cephas, which is, by interpretation, a stone" (John 1: 42). *Cephas* was Aramaic and means the same as *Peter* in Greek.

Cephas - a Stone

Peter, like Andrew the day before, was clearly drawn to the Saviour and, receiving by faith the word spoken to him, he became a new creature. This seems to be the significance of the new name. Names in Christ's mouth were not as they often are in ours, they meant something. "Thou shalt be called Cephas, which is, by interpretation, a stone." Later,

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Peter would use this same figure when writing to others, who had also become new creatures in Christ Jesus. Describing them first as new born babes in the family of God, he went on to speak of them as "as living stones ... built up a spiritual house." (See 1Pet.2 :2,5.)

The new name, when he heard it, must have profoundly impacted Peter's thinking. He was in the presence of one who opened up a whole new vista for his life. In the pursuit of the new objectives that would be set before him, he would be radically and fundamentally transformed. The impulsive and somewhat unstable Simon, would become a man of endurance and abiding strength, symbolised in the name. Cephas means *a stone*.

The transformation would not happen overnight but, little by little, the process begun in that first encounter would have its perfect work. It was like that with Jacob who was given the new name of Israel. (See Gen.32.) His subsequent history shows how the new Israel grew in ascendancy, while the old Jacob grew less and less. So it would be with Peter, and so it is with us, for this is always God's way.

The ultimate purpose for which we have been apprehended, is that we should be conformed to the image of Christ. This is not something we have already attained but it is the prize set before us. As we progress through the university of life, we find ourselves in one crisis after another, and often we are at our wit's end. In our distress we are cast upon the Lord, that we might prove His grace and power to strengthen. The measure in which we prove Him in the difficult times, that will be the measure in which we come to know Him, and that will also be the measure of our conformity to Him.

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Human Instruments

To his dying day Peter would never forget that first encounter with Christ, the circumstances of it would be etched forever upon his memory. From that time forward he would say, as Paul put it, to me to live is Christ. He would remember how God used very humble and human instruments to bring him to Christ. Moreover, he would soon learn that it was his business too, to win others to the Saviour.

We have noted the influence of Andrew in Simon Peter's conversion. But were there other influences as well? It is scarcely conceivable that Simon was unaware of John the Baptist's ministry, after all his brother was a disciple of the forerunner. When the Baptist stood up to preach, the people were compelled to listen. The occasion must have seemed like a prelude to the day of judgement, for John was no reed shaken by the wind.

John the Baptist spoke what he knew and testified what he had seen. And under the power of such preaching Simon must often have been pierced with the arrows of conviction. He must surely have been brought to realise, as he later confessed, that he was a sinful man. In this way Simon's heart would have been made ready to respond to his brother's witness, and to seek the Lord who had now drawn so amazingly near.

Discipleship

"Follow me, and I will make you fishers of men"
(Matt.4:19).

The baptism of Jesus signalled the inauguration of His mission to the messianic nation, the mission so long foretold by the Hebrew prophets. The Spirit of the Lord was upon Him, and He was anointed to preach the gospel to the poor, to heal the brokenhearted, to preach deliverance to the captives, recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty them that are bruised and to preach the acceptable year of the Lord. (See Isa.61: 1,2. & Luke 4: 18,19.)

The Apostolic Band

In doing these things He would have the help of a small band of faithful men; and the time had now come for these

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men to be brought together. Walking by the sea of Galilee, he saw the two brothers who were the fruit of John the Baptist's ministry. Peter and Andrew were fishermen, and Jesus found them casting a net into the sea. He called to them, "Follow me, and I will make you fishers of men. And they immediately left their nets, and followed Him" (Matt.4: 19,20).

Others were called that day as well, notably, James and John, who also were brothers and they too were fishermen. Jesus found them mending their nets, and when He called them they left the work they were doing, and followed Him. In saying that He would make them fishers of men, the Lord was using an idiom they could readily understand. To those called from the farming community He would say, "The fields are white unto harvest." In this way He related to people from every background.

These were the men who, with others, would accompany Him during the whole course of His labours. It probably took a while for them to disengage from their daily occupations, but before long that it is what happened, and so the first members of the apostolic band were enrolled. Numbering twelve in all, these men were chosen to be with Him, that He might send them forth. In time, they would herald His resurrection and, eventually, their ministry would lay the foundation of the still future church. (See Eph.2: 20.)

Follow Me

When the Lord Jesus called Peter and the others to follow Him, He could hardly have used a more appropriate or comprehensive term. In common parlance the verb *to follow* was used of soldiers following their officers, and of slaves following their masters. It was even used of competitors following the rules of the game. *Wm. Barclay*

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says of this word (*Gr. Akolouthein*), "It is a word with many uses, and many associations, and all of them add something to its meaning for the follower of Christ." (*New Testament Words* p.41)

We have to recognise that it took considerable courage for them to side with *the Nazarene*, and to remain loyal to Him through the difficult times. They would have to endure all the antagonism, and the ridicule, that would in due course be levelled against Him. And on His part, it was no small undertaking to bring such a diverse lot of unlearned and ignorant men together, with all their prejudices, not to speak of all the baggage they carried. These men were not the product of the rabbinical schools, they were just ordinary men, yet He would make them flaming evangelists and even pillars in the church. In a word, these men would turn the world upside down.

That day on the seashore He set before them a challenge that left no room for compromise. If they had a willing mind, and were prepared to follow Him, He would fit them for the task to which He called them. It was certainly no small demand that He was making of them, because to really follow Christ would mean setting aside their ambitions, and surrendering their wills to do His will. It might even involve the surrender of life itself.

The Suffering Church

He knew that before long many would pay the ultimate price for their loyalty to Him. Stephen, the first Christian martyr, would be stoned. James would be beheaded, and John would be exiled. And Simon Peter, as we have noted, would die by crucifixion. Moreover, these were only earnestnesses of the unspeakable atrocities that would be perpetrated against the devoted followers of Christ. Yet it must be said, they did not become followers of the Lord Jesus in a vacuum, for He faithfully and tenderly alerted them to the nature of the path they were choosing.

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He told His disciples, "In the world you shall have tribulation: but be of good cheer, I have overcome the world" (John 16: 33). And on the road to Golgotha, He said to the daughters of Jerusalem, "If they do these things in a green tree, what shall be done in a dry" (Luke 23: 31). This expression may have been no more than a familiar proverb of the time, but now it was spoken as a prophecy. By these words, and many others, the Lord Jesus sought to prepare His own for the afflictions that would assuredly come upon them.

The Last Word

Remarkably the Lord's first word to Simon Peter, at the beginning of His earthly ministry, was also His last word before He ascended to heaven. He told Peter the kind of death by which he would glorify God. "And when He had spoken this, He said to him, Follow me." And just then John, who was known as the disciple whom Jesus loved, came into sight, and seeing him, Peter said to Jesus, *Lord, and what shall this man do?* The Lord's reply was terse and pointed, "If I will that he tarry till I come, what is that to you? Follow thou me" (John 21: 19-22).

That was a sharp rebuke, made all the more pointed by the fact that Peter, at that time, had only recently been restored to fellowship after a very serious failure. He was told to follow Christ regardless of what others might do. Being a disciple of Christ would require his total commitment.

The import of this should not be lost on us, for we have a tendency to be too easily influenced in this area of our lives. Peter certainly took the rebuke to heart and in his final exhortation to his brethren, he said, "Beware lest you ... fall from your own steadfastness. But grow in grace, and

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in the knowledge of our Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ" (2Pet.3: 17,18).

Of course, many others devotedly followed the Saviour besides the twelve disciples. There were, for instance, the women who ministered unto Him of their substance. (See Luke 8: 3.) We also read of the multitudes who followed Him, but clearly they followed for different and often inadequate reasons. Some were curious and simply wanted to see the miracles that were being done. Others followed because of the loaves and fishes, in plain terms, they followed in the hope of some material benefit.

We even read of some who, like the rich young ruler, refused to follow. We are told of him that he went away sorrowful. When G.F.Watts was painting his famous picture '*The Great Refusal*' he said, "Now I am painting a man's back ... to explain ... *He went away sorrowful, for he had great possessions.* Fancy a man turning his back on Christ, rather than give away his goods! They say his back looks sorry ... it is what I meant his back to express."

Conversely, those who followed Christ, no matter how long and hard the road, have found joy and peace and blessing. Multitudes have testified to this across the centuries and, even today, multitudes will still stand up and join the chorus, for this *Potentate of time* is still calling men and women to follow Him. He still speaks, as of old, and says, "If any man will come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow me" (Matt.10: 24).

That day, by blue Galilee, Peter was among the first to be called, and the sense of call never left him. In his closing ministry he wrote to his brethren, who also had been called. He said, "As He who has called you is holy, so be ye holy in all manner of [life]" (1Pet.1: 15). And again, "For even hereunto were you called, because Christ also suffered for

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us, leaving us an example, that you should follow in His steps" (1Pet.2: 21).

The School of Christ

"Depart from me; for I am a sinful man, O Lord"
(Luke 5:8).

It has to be more than just a coincidence, that the greatest spiritual lessons Simon Peter learned during our Lord's earthly ministry, were taught him in the context of his occupation as a fisherman. Some will say that is purely coincidental, but it may well reveal a principle of God's dealings with His servants.

Peter heard the call to discipleship, when he was in the act of casting a net into the sea. And it was on the occasion of the great draught of fishes he learned that his real work henceforth, would be catching men and not fish. Later still, and following a fruitless night on the lake, he was brought to affirm, three times over, his love for Christ. The inference seems to be that it is in the pursuance of their secular employments, the Lord prepares His servants for the work of the kingdom.

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Striking Parallels

It is also worthy of note that when Peter was first called he was *casting a net* into the sea, and this is the very thing he became so proficient at in the spiritual realm. For example, hear him preach on the day of Pentecost when "there were added unto them about three thousand souls" (Acts 2 :41). Or see him a little later, when "many of them who heard the word believed; and the number of the men was about five thousand" (Acts 4 :4).

On the other hand, James and John were described by Paul as pillars in the early church. A pillar is there to give strength and support to the fabric of the building. And this seems to have been the primary contribution of James and John in those early days. (See Gal.2 :9.) But then, is not that the sort of thing they were doing in the secular realm when the Lord first called them? We are told that they were "in a boat with Zebedee, their father, *mending* [*i.e.* strengthening] their nets" (Matt. 4 :21).

The parallels between what they had been doing in the secular realm, and what they were called to do in the spiritual realm are quite impressive, to say the least. This very fact should be enough to constrain Christian parents to great thoughtfulness about the training of their offspring. While the Lord often takes up people with little formal education and uses them in His service, the fact remains that a good broad-based education is an undoubted asset to any servant of Christ.

Spiritual Education

And yet, spiritual things are not learned in the laboratory or in the lecture theatre. We must sit where Mary sat, at Jesus feet, and hear His word. The Lord will then bring us out into the cut and thrust of secular life, and into situations

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and difficulties we might prefer to avoid. But in that environment He will show us how the things we learned in the secret place, work out in everyday experience. And in those are the very circumstances He will advance our spiritual education.

The great draught of fishes

The miracle which we call *the great draught of fishes* illustrates this. A multitude of people were pressing on the Lord Jesus to hear Him speak the word of God. Anyone who has visited the area where this miracle took place will recognise at once that the terrain made it a very natural amphitheatre. They will also know that because the beach is so narrow, it was necessary to find some vantage point from which the Lord could address the pressing throng.

Using a boat for a pulpit was a simple and sensible thing to do. Of the two boats immediately available Jesus choose Simon's, and requested him to thrust out a little from the land. We can imagine the scene as Jesus sat down and taught the people out of the boat. We might even see Simon, sitting right beside Him and nodding his agreement with every word.

It may even be that Simon was applying what was said to this one, or that one, whom he espied in the crowd, but applying nothing to himself. And so when He had finished addressing the people, the Lord turned to Simon and said, "Launch out into the deep, and let down your nets for a draught" (Luke 5 :4).

At thy word, I will.

It was a sudden and quite unexpected turn of events. Teaching was the Lord's speciality and He certainly excelled at it, but fishing was Peter's domain. The sea was in his blood since childhood. He knew all about fish and

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fishing. If anyone wanted to quarrel about this business, Peter was not the one to argue with. He knew intuitively that there were no fish about at that point.

He knew this from experience as well, for he could say, "Master, we have toiled all the night, and have taken nothing." Normally that would have been the end of the matter, but an arrow of conviction suddenly reached its target, and Peter added, "Nevertheless, at thy word I will let down the net" (Luke 5 :5). Of course, Peter was expert at letting down the net, he had done this so many times. Every time he had done it, his aim was to catch fish and still more fish, to make more money and thus to increase the family business.

But on this occasion he had a different reason for letting down the net. He said, *At thy word, I will*. He was acting now on Jesus' word, and what an unexpected result! The catch was so great, the net broke. So they beckoned James and John, their partners in the other boat, that they should come and help. When they drew alongside, both boats were filled, so that they began to sink. It was obvious to Peter that this was no ordinary catch. At that precise moment, he knew he was not just in the presence of a great teacher, he was actually in the presence of the living God.

The Lord from heaven

In the beginning, the Creator had vested in the first man authority over the earth, and the seas, and all that was in them. He said to Adam, "Be fruitful, and multiply, and replenish the earth, and subdue it; and *have dominion over the fish of the sea* ... (Gen.1 :28). Man's authority, however, had been diminished because of his sin. But here was one who could control the very fish of the sea. He could even command them into Peter's net. This was indeed the last

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Adam, the second man, the Lord from heaven. (See 1Cor.15 :45-47.)

It may have been a grudging willingness that let down the net that day, but there was nothing grudging about the catch. The net broke, and even the ship would have sunk, so great was the number of the fish. Deeply affected by it all Peter fell down at Jesus' knees, and cried, *Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord.* Such a sense of conviction has always been the reaction of those who found themselves in the presence of God. Isaiah, in a quite similar circumstance cried out, "I am a man of unclean lips" (Isa.6 :5).

But the Lord did not depart from Simon that day, nor did Peter really want Him to depart. On the contrary, Jesus dealt with His chastened servant in wonderful compassion, and with great skill. Peter's conscience had been profoundly touched. And the Lord had something to say and what He said, would remain with Peter forever. He said, "Fear not; from henceforth thou shalt catch men" (Luke 5 :10).

They forsook all, and followed Him

Peter got the message; his future no longer lay in fishing for fish, but in fishing for men. The record concludes, "When they had brought their boats to land, they forsook all, and followed Him" (Luke 5 :11). Never again do we read of Peter fishing for fish, except for one isolated instance at the end of John's gospel. Instead, we read of his exertions in the field of evangelism, and of the thousands of souls he was instrumental in fishing for Christ.

Some expositors seem to think that this incident on the lake marked the real moment of Peter's conversion. But it is probably best to think of his conversion in terms of his

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coming to Christ, following the witness of Andrew. We have already highlighted the Christian life as a process, punctuated by a whole series of crises. What happened on this occasion was one of a series of spiritual crises in Peter's story.

His conversion, when Andrew brought him to Christ, was the first such crisis. *His call* to discipleship, when the Lord said, "Follow me," was another. And now on the lake we have yet another. We might characterise it as *his commission* for on this occasion he was detached from his trade to become an apostle of Christ. Later, we will come to *his confession* when, in response to the Lord's question at Caesarea Phillippi, Whom say you that I am? Simon Peter replied, "Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God" (Matt.16 :15,16).

There were other similar crises in Peter's life. But the experience on the lake, and the great draught of fishes, was one of the truly pivotal points in his spiritual development. Through it he learned Christ in a new way, and at the same time, he saw into the depths of his own heart. He also learned more clearly what was involved in being a disciple of Christ. Christ's will is expressed in His word, and all who would truly follow Him must first surrender their wills to Him. However feebly they apprehend it, they must learn to say, *At thy word, I will!*

Master and Multitude

Then Simon Peter answered him, "Lord, to whom shall we go? you have the words of eternal life" (John 6 :67,68).

Following the death of John the Baptist, Jesus withdrew to the comparative seclusion of the hills around Galilee. But this solitude was soon disturbed as great crowds gathered to hear Him. His characteristic consideration for other people's needs shone through when, after addressing the people, Jesus told the disciples to give them something to eat. This threw the disciples into a turmoil, but he said it to test them, for He knew what He would do.

Feeding the Five Thousand

Philip made a quick calculation and declared, two hundred pennyworth of bread is not sufficient for them, that every one may take a little. So much for the need! Then Andrew chipped in with an appraisal of their resources. There is a lad here, who has five barley loaves and two small fishes; but what are they among so many? On both counts the proposition was hopeless, and so their combined response was quite simple, let the people go and buy their own food. But Jesus would have none of it.

Now the men numbered about five thousand, and there were woman and children as well. And when they were seated in groups of fifty, Jesus then took the loaves and, giving thanks, He break them, and as He did so, He multiplied them, so that the entire multitude had enough and to spare. In addition, when the repast was over, they filled twelve baskets with the fragments that remained, probably a basket for each of the twelve disciples.

Signs of His Messiahship

Some of our Lord's miracles are recorded by one or two or even three of the evangelists, but this miracle is recorded by all four. And this must give it special significance. The fourth evangelist built his record around the seven miracles, or signs, that Jesus gave to the chosen people, to accredit His Messiahship. John places the feeding of the five thousand as the fourth or central sign, and he carefully noted that all who saw it said, "This is of a truth that prophet that should come into the world" (John 6 :14).

The impact of this miracle, both in terms of its extent and its circumstances, was powerful indeed, so much so, the people were ready to rise up, and take Jesus by force, and make Him their king. But He pre-empted their intention by withdrawing Himself yet again.

Walking on the water

That same night the disciples were crossing over the sea of Galilee when a fierce storm blew up. At the height of the tempest, Jesus suddenly appeared walking on the water. He called to the disciples saying, "It is I; be not afraid." Then they willingly received Him into the boat; and immediately the boat was at the land towards which they were sailing (John 6 :20,21).

The walking on the water was just as much a miracle, as the feeding of the five thousand. But it was different both in character and intent. It was performed for the benefit of the twelve, whereas the feeding of the five thousand was a public miracle, witnessed by thousands of people, and it gave rise to a lengthy discourse on the bread of life.

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The People's Questions

As might be expected, the next day the people sought to know more of Jesus. They had seen the disciples set off in their boat the previous evening, and they had noted that Jesus was not with them. So they searched, but they could not find Him. Suspecting that somehow He must have crossed the sea and joined the disciples they, too, crossed over and found Him in Capernaum.

Their renewed contact with Him initially took the form of a dialogue. They asked Him, "Rabbi, when did you come here?" His reply revealed a deep insight into their motives and included an exhortation to seek higher things. It was one thing to enjoy the provision He had made available to them; it was another to understand the message behind the miracle itself.

He told them, "You seek me, not because you saw the miracle, but because you did eat of the loaves, and were filled. Labour not for the meat that perishes, but for that meat which endures unto everlasting life, which the Son of man shall give unto you; for Him has God the Father sent." They certainly did enjoy the feast, but had they missed the point of it all?

Then they asked Him, "What shall we do, that we might work the works of God?" His response was direct, "This is the work of God, that you believe on Him whom God has sent." Here was a claim, clear and unambiguous. He was indeed claiming to be the very one they suspected Him to be. For after the feeding of the five thousand they had said, This is of a truth that prophet that should come into the world!

However, there was a further question, "What sign showest thou, then, that we may see and believe thee?" After all, the miracle they had just witnessed might simply have proved

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Him to be on a par with Moses, and nothing more! With this in their minds they added, "Our fathers did eat manna in the desert; as it is written, he [Moses] gave them bread from heaven to eat." (See John 6 :22-31.) In His extended reply to this question the Lord Jesus spelt out the credentials of His messiahship. His talk, which began in the open, seems to have ended in the synagogue at Capernaum.

The People's Response

After He had presented His claims, He saw many of the company draw back from following Him. First they said, *This is a hard saying. Who can hear it?* We read, "From that time many of His disciples went back, and walked no more with Him" (John 6 :66). This was a bitter blow, and Jesus was profoundly affected by it. Our Saviour was truly human, and for this reason He was not impervious to the vacillations of so many who professed to be His disciples.

A Confession of Faith

The Lord reacted to this defection by turning to the men He had gathered around Him. Challenging the twelve He asked them, "Will you also go away?" Simon Peter replied for the entire band, "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life. And we believe and are sure that you are the Christ, the Son of the living God" (John 6 :67-69). It was a magnificent confession of true and heartfelt faith. And it must have been intensely comforting to the Lord, especially in view of the background against which it was made.

That the crowds who surrounded the Lord Jesus with such apparent enthusiasm, and gladly ate of the food He provided, could so quickly turn away from Him, is a sad commentary on human nature. At the end of His earthly pilgrimage, in the very week of His death, the multitudes

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cried, "Hosanna, blessed in He that comes in the name of the Lord." But before the week was out the same crowd roared, "Crucify Him, we will not have this man to reign over us!" Is it any wonder that He did not commit Himself to them, because He knew all men, and ... He knew what was in man.

Our Portion in Christ

We will not speculate on the effect this defection had upon those who turned away from Christ. It was Peter's affirmation of faith that mattered to Him at the time, and that is what matters to us today. Two expressions stand out, (i) *you have* (ie. what Christ has), and (ii) *you are* (ie. who Christ is). Peter was mindful of the first of these expressions when he wrote, "According as His divine power has given unto us *all things that pertain unto life and godliness*, through the knowledge of Him who has called us to glory and virtue" (2Pet.1: 3). Could anything be more comprehensive than our portion in Christ?

The second expression presents Him as the single grand attraction of our hearts. "*You are* that Christ, the Son of the living God." The Lord Jesus is both our sufficient resource and our satisfying portion. The bottom line of all godly testimony through the ages is written in the Psalms, "I love the Lord" (Psa.116 :1).

Peter would later affirm his own deep love for the Saviour and, later still, he would write of his people's love in these terms, "Whom, having not seen, you love; in whom, though now you see Him not, yet believing, you rejoice with joy unspeakable and full of glory" (1Pet.1 :8).

Paul, too, declared his conviction on these matters when he wrote, "What things were gain to me, those I counted loss for Christ. Yea doubtless, and I count all things but loss for the excellency of the knowledge of Christ Jesus, my Lord"

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(Phil.3 :7,8). In the eleventh century, *Bernard of Clairvaux* beautifully expressed the same sentiments when he wrote,

*Jesus, Thou joy of loving hearts,
Thou fount of life, thou light of men,
From the best bliss that earth imparts,
We turn, unfilled, to thee again.*

The Storm on the Lake

"Peter walked on the water, to go to Jesus"
(Matt. 14: 29).

The feeding of the five thousand is recorded by all the evangelists and, apart from Luke, they also record the miracle of our Lord walking on the water. These two miracles are always reported in the same order, the one coming immediately after the other. It may be there is a dispensational picture in the way they are presented.

A dispensational picture?

First, we have the Lord making provision for a multitude of needy souls, a provision sufficient for all. We can see in this the purpose of His coming into the world, to provide a full and free salvation. Then He went up into a mountain privately, to pray. Does this speak of His present ministry on high? In the meantime, the disciples were in a boat, in

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the midst of the sea. Here we might glimpse the church, now in the midst of the nations.

All this is very interesting, but the narrative carries an important practical lesson as well. The boat was tossed with waves, for the wind was contrary. This raises a question that bothers us all from time to time, What are we to do, when we find ourselves in the middle of storm tossed seas? At this point the focus of the account turns to our good friend, Simon Peter.

The Storms of Life

There are two seas in the land of Israel, the sea of Galilee and the Dead sea. Galilee means *living*; so there is a Living sea as well as a Dead sea. It's not difficult, therefore, to relate the storms of Galilee, to the storms of life. The Galilee is a reflection of life as we encounter it, in the daily round and the common task. Of course, one storm differs from another storm, some are slight and do not last, while others are drawn out and become quite boisterous.

There is an inevitability about life's storms. It is said, there is a storm somewhere on Galilee every day, usually in late afternoon. Paul reminded his readers that the whole creation is a groaning mass, and that even we, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan within ourselves. And to Peter there seems to have been given a prior revelation of a fiery trial that would come upon his already persecuted people, to try them still more. The Lord Jesus told His disciples that in the world they would encounter tribulation. It's certainly not long before we discover that life isn't all plain sailing.

When we are chastened we should remember two things: (i) That a father's hand is upon us, and a father's hand will never cause his child a needless tear. And (ii) that a loving

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heart lies behind the chastening hand. "My son, despise not the chastening of the Lord, nor faint when you are rebuked of Him; for whom the Lord loves He chastens, and scourges every son whom He receives" (Hebs.12: 5,6).

God's love

We tend to hold a rather truncated view of our heavenly father's love. We seem to fear that our failings, and our distresses, will cause Him to love us less; whereas they will cause Him to manifest His love more kindly, if that is possible. It is always unwise to put ourselves in the way of adversity on the one hand, but we should not fear it on the other. If we are exercised in heart before Him, the Lord will surely minister spiritual good to us in the difficult times. And we should remember, it is not our love that holds Him, but His love that holds us.

Purpose in Adversity

There are many instances of this in the scriptures. David, the man after God's heart, looked back on a season of adversity, and said, "Before I was afflicted, I went astray, but now have I kept thy word." And again, "It is good for me that I had been afflicted, that I might learn thy statutes." And yet again, "I know, O Lord ... that thou in faithfulness hast afflicted me" (Psa.119: 67,71,75). Evidently David's pain was allowed of God, for purposes of correction. And David felt himself a better and stronger man for what he had suffered.

We also have a fine example of this in Joseph. He suffered severely at the hands of the brothers in Canaan. And he suffered again in Potiphar's house down in Egypt. Joseph suffered intense loneliness as well as the bitterness of betrayal. He must often have asked himself what it was all about, or if God had forgotten. But in the end, he bore this

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resounding testimony, he said to his brothers, "*You meant it for evil, but God overruled it for good!*"

The Presence of Jesus

But look again at the disciples on the lake. They were caught up in an unexpected and frightening storm. And it was the fourth watch, the darkest part, of the night. They were all in the same boat, and even as they toiled and rowed, hope was fading fast. Where was the Lord when all this was happening? Had He not promised, "When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and through the rivers, they shall not overflow you" (Isa.43: 2).

In fact, the master of ocean and earth and sky, was right there, but they failed to recognise Him. The Lord had every wave of their troubled sea beneath His feet for He came to them walking on the water. But in their volatile and agitated state old superstitions surfaced. When they saw Him they said, *It is a ghost*; and they cried out in fear. And their fears were only calmed when they heard His word, for He spoke peace to these anxious disciples, He said, "Be of good cheer; it is I; be not afraid" (Matt.14: 27).

In our own seasons of distress and grief this same question arises in our minds. Where was God when this or that happened? But the question only casts doubt on the integrity of His word. "For *He has said*, I will never leave thee, nor forsake thee. So that *we may boldly say*, The Lord is my helper, and I will not fear what man shall do unto me" (Hebs.13: 5,6). We must learn to trust in God, to lean upon His word, and wait patiently on Him, and He will surely make His presence felt.

Bid me come unto thee

When He heard the Saviour speak, Peter responded in a way, typical of the man. He said, "Lord, if it be thou, bid

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me come unto thee on the water. And Jesus said, Come!" Many have criticised our disciple for being so rash, but maybe we should commend him. Perhaps his earlier assertion had gripped him afresh, "Lord, to whom can we go, thou hast the words of eternal life!" In any case, it would appear, that Peter calculated like this; the best place in such a storm, is as near to the Lord as its possible to be.

The step Peter took in leaving the boat was a step of faith; and faith kept him above the winds and the waves of his boisterous sea. From the beginning the resources of faith have always been twofold; (i) The Lord Himself and, (ii) His Word. It follows, therefore, that the distinguishing marks of faith are *dependence on the Lord* and *obedience to His word*. We must *trust and obey*, for there's no other way to be happy in Jesus, but to *trust and obey*.

When Peter stepped from the boat, he did so in response to a specific word from the Lord. But now he must keep looking to the Lord. For while obedience to the divine word is vital, so also is dependence on the divine presence. It was just here that Peter failed. We must stress, it was not on the matter of obedience that he faltered, it was on the great matter of dependence. He actually did walk on the water, but when he got his eyes off the Lord, and on to the elements, then things began to go wrong.

Beginning to sink

"When he saw the wind boisterous, he was afraid." At that point he got an awful sinking feeling, a feeling that often afflicts us all, and for the same reason as it afflicted Peter. We so easily get our eyes off the Lord and on to our problems. But our peace lies in *Looking unto Jesus*, the author and finisher of faith. As we keep looking to Him, in dependence upon His grace and power, we are able to continue our course, and to run with perseverance the race set before us.

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Lord. save me

Finding himself beginning to sink, Peter cried out, "Lord, save me." Instantly, he felt around him and beneath him, the everlasting arms. More than that, his very failure of faith became the occasion for an unprecedented display of wonderful grace. We read, "Immediately Jesus stretched forth His hand, and caught him, and said unto him, O thou of little faith, why did you doubt? And when they were come into the boat, the wind ceased" (Matt.14: 31,32).

What about the others who stayed in the boat? We do not judge them, nor do we necessarily acclaim them. It would be easy to commend their cool headedness on that difficult and dangerous voyage. But one of the things that warms our hearts about Simon Peter is that while others might play it safe, he was always ready to take a bold step for the Lord's sake.

Of course, the others proved the Lord that day as well, but Simon proved Him in a much greater way. He may even have seen in that day, a further example of what he had seen in the great draught of fishes, for both miracles testify to the truth that where there is failure on our part, God's grace is greater still.

Peter's Confession

"Blessed art thou Simon, son of Jonas, for flesh and blood has not revealed it unto you ... "
(Matt. 16: 17).

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Following a further encounter with the Pharisees and the Sadducees, in which they again made plain their rejection of the Christ, the itinerary of the Lord Jesus and His disciples brought them to the region of Caesarea Philippi. It was here that Jesus disclosed, for the first time, the truth of the Church which, as we now know, is at the centre of God's purpose in this age.

Caesarea Philippi was originally called Paneas, after the pagan god *Pan*. It had been renamed by Herod Philip, the tetrarch of Ituraea, and a son of Herod the Great, after he had extended the place and greatly enhanced it. He named it after both Caesar and himself, hence its double name.

Today the place is just a small village, situated in northern Israel. It stands on one of the sources of the Jordan and has Hermon as a backdrop. All who visit the region agree it is an area of outstanding natural beauty. Its modern name is Banias, which carries overtones of its original pagan name. We must be careful not to confuse it with the Caesarea where Peter preached the gospel in the house of the Roman centurion called Cornelius.

Who is Jesus

It was here that the Lord questioned his disciples on what people were saying about Him. "Who do men say that I, the Son of man, am?" They told Him frankly that several opinions were being canvassed. "Some say that you are John the Baptist; some, Elijah; and others, Jeremiah, or one of the prophets. Then came the vital question. "But whom say you that I am" (Matt.16 :13-16).

This remains the crucial question to this day. When challenged about their attitude to Christ, many are content to hide behind other people's opinions. But salvation is a personal matter and no one will ever be saved by falling

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back on someone else's opinion, or even someone else's faith. The gospel demands nothing less than the exercise of personal faith in the Lord Jesus Christ.

The answer Peter gave at Caesarea Philippi was both candid and spontaneous, he replied, "You art the Christ, the Son of the living God." Doubtless, he spoke for the twelve, and he certainly answered well. His reply called forth from the Lord some amazing insights, not only into Peter's confession, but also into the nature of Christianity itself and the invincibility of the future church.

Christianity a Revelation

Responding to His servant the Lord Jesus said, "Blessed are you Simon, son of John, for flesh and blood has not revealed it unto you, but my Father, who is in heaven" (Matt.16 :17). This statement points up the fact that Christianity is not a deduction of logic. It is not a matter of conjecture or speculation, or even of philosophical argument.

The knowledge of Christ is not something that can be discovered in a test tube or in a laboratory. It is a matter of divine revelation. It is not like something we might find in the occult; there's nothing magical about it. Nor is Christianity simply a matter of adherence to a creed, or a set of dogmas. And there is more to it than merely believing a few verses of scripture.

Some people imagine that they are saved because they believe John chapter three and verse sixteen. But that is not even what John three and sixteen says. The verse says, "For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in *HIM* should not perish, but have everlasting life." Of course, the saved will believe John three and sixteen.

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Christianity is a communication of God to the soul of man. This communication may simply be an opening of the heart to the worth and work and word of the Saviour. In the book of *Acts*, Luke tells of a certain woman, called Lydia, whose heart the Lord opened, that she attended to the things that were spoken by Paul. (See *Acts* 16 :14.)

Christianity is Christ

Christianity is a gracious working of the Holy Spirit, opening our hearts to receive the knowledge of Christ, that we might be saved. This is usually accomplished through the preaching of the gospel. This essential fact is the probable reason for the charge that followed Peter's confession. "Then charged He His disciples that they should tell no man that He was Jesus, the Christ" (*Matt.* 16 :20). Men will not be won to Christ by force of argument, but by the operation of the Spirit of God. Our task is to lead them to Christ, and then to withdraw leaving them alone in His presence.

It was through the ministry of the Lord Jesus Himself that these men had received this all-important revelation from the Father. It was revealed to them that the Son of Man was, in fact, the Son of the living God. John, the evangelist wrote, "The word was God ... and the Word was made [became] flesh and dwelt among us and we beheld His glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth" (*John* 1 :1,14). *Josiah Conder* put the whole church in his debt when he wrote,

*Thou art the everlasting word,
The Father's only Son,
God, manifestly seen and heard,
And heavens beloved One.
Worthy, O Lamb of God, art Thou,
That every knee to Thee should bow.*

The Church

A further interesting disclosure was made in the Lord's response to Peter's confession. He went on to say, "You are Peter, and upon this rock *I will build my church*, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it" (Matt.16 :18). This is the first direct intimation of the church in scripture. It is important to note that the Lord speaks of it here in the future tense, *I will build my church*. What is now simply introduced is later fully developed, especially in the epistles of Paul.

Israel

To think of the Church being in the Old Testament, is to confuse the two elect companies before us in scripture. From Abraham forward, the purpose of God in the earth was connected with national Israel. But upon her rejection of Messiah, Israel was set aside, and a new company was introduced, this new company is known as the Church. When the present arrangement comes to a close, a remnant of Israel will be restored to the Lord, and regathered to the land of promise. At that time, the repeatedly predicted Messianic kingdom will be established in the earth. All these things will be accomplished by the second advent of our Lord Jesus Christ.

The Church

Paul wrote extensively of the Church. He claimed it was a revelation made known principally through him. He spoke of it as "the mystery which had been hidden from ages and generations, but is now made manifest to His saints" (Col.1 :26). And again, "the mystery, which in other ages was not made known to the sons of men, as it is now revealed unto His holy apostles and prophets by the Spirit: that the Gentiles should be fellow heirs, and of the same body, and partakers of His promise in Christ by the gospel" (Eph.3 :5,6).

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In the Lord's word to Peter, *I will build my church*, we have the concept of the Church in germ form. The purpose of God in this New Testament age is to call out a people for His name. (See Acts 15 :14.) This purpose is achieved through the preaching of the gospel to every creature. All who believe the gospel, in this age, be they Jews or Gentiles, are brought to a knowledge of Christ, and are incorporated into the Church, which is His body. In Him, there is neither Jew nor Gentile, we are all one in Christ Jesus.

On this Rock

Probably the first part of this statement about the Church, has been debated more than any other scripture. '*You are Peter and upon this rock I will build my church.*' The traditional Roman position takes the statement to mean that Peter is the foundation on which the church is built, but Protestantism emphatically denies this, arguing instead that the two words used here need to be distinguished.

The Protestant position is that because the word translated *Peter* simply means *a stone*, it follows that *the rock* can only refer to *Christ*. And this agrees with Paul's later assertion, "Other foundation can no man lay than that which is laid, which is Jesus Christ" (1Cor.3 :11).

It may be best, however, to see the foundation in terms of Peter's confession! But what did Peter confess? *Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God*. Here is the grand foundation of the church: Jesus, the Christ, the Son of the living God. *Samuel Stone's* beautiful hymn written more than a century ago expresses this truth so well:

*The Church's one foundation
Is Jesus Christ her Lord;
She is His new creation
By water and the word:*

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*From heaven He came and sought her
To be His holy bride;
With His own blood He bought her,
And for her life He died.*

This seems to have been Peter's own understanding of what was said at Caesarea Philippi. He later wrote of Christ and His people, "To whom, coming as unto *a living stone*, disallowed indeed of men but chosen of God, and precious, you also, as living stones, are [being] built up a spiritual house, a holy priesthood, to offer up spiritual sacrifices, acceptable to God by Jesus Christ" (1Per.2 :4,5). The Church is being built today, and it rests on the sure foundation which is Jesus Christ, the Son of the living God.

Get behind me Satan

The end of this incident brings us to one of the great troughs in Peter's experience. We move at once from the sublime to the ridiculous. Peter's great confession seems to have marked a milestone, after which, the Lord began to make the disciples increasingly aware of what lay ahead. "From that time forth Jesus began to show unto His disciples, how He must go unto Jerusalem, and suffer many things from the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and be raised again the third day" (Matt.16 :21).

Having firmly settled in their minds the truth of who He is, He must now bring these men to understand what He had come to do. They must be established equally in both *the person* and *the work of Christ*. For the first time they were made aware of the stark truth that suffering and a violent death lay ahead. This so focussed their minds that it is difficult to know if the reference to a resurrection on the third day, really registered with them at all.

That they were shocked by what was told them is quite clear. But what shocked them most? Was it that their leader

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would suffer so many things and be killed? Or, was it that these things would happen in Jerusalem, the holy city? Maybe it was the unthinkable suggestion that He could suffer such a fate at the hands of the elders, their very own chief priests and the scribes of their own people.

Whatever it was, it was all too much for our disciple. Peter took Jesus aside and began to rebuke Him, *Be it far from you, Lord; this shall not be unto you*. But he must have been wholly unprepared for the Lord's reaction. "He turned and said to Peter, Get you behind me Satan. You are an offence unto me; you savour not the things that are of God, but those that are of men" (Matt.16 :23).

If Peter got the first part of that memorable discussion right, he certainly got this part wrong. But even then we have to ask, was the Lord justified in using such strong language to one who had so recently made such an insightful confession about His person? To make sense of it all we must recognise that Peter was thinking in purely human terms. To the Jewish mind, a Messiah who would suffer like this, and be killed, was plainly out of the question.

But Peter would have seen things very differently if his thinking been grounded in the scriptures. After their first sin and before their expulsion, from the garden of Eden, Adam and Eve heard God say to the serpent, "He [the promised redeemer] shall bruise thy head, and thou [the serpent] shall bruise his heel" (Gen.3: 15). Over the centuries, Satan's repeated attempts to frustrate the purpose behind the cross had failed, and now the time of his judgement was drawing near. And because he feared the cross, Satan was clearly using Peter to tempt the Lord.

In saying what He did, therefore, the Lord Jesus was looking beyond Peter. His searing rebuke was levelled not so much at Peter, but at Satan. He recognised a further

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attack from the very foe He had overcome in the wilderness. Before long He would finally destroy this great adversary, and He would make an open show of him in His resurrection on the third day.

Happily, Peter came to a deeper understanding of the work of the cross. Of all the New Testament writers it was Peter who set forth most clearly, that the cross was not an afterthought with God. It was not simply introduced because God had been caught unawares by the creature's sin. The cross was central to the great plan of redemption. In his first epistle, an epistle of just five chapters, Peter refers to the sufferings of Christ no fewer than seven times.

It was Peter who wrote of the prophets, "Searching what, or what manner of time the Spirit of Christ who was in them did signify, when [He] testified beforehand the sufferings of Christ, and the glory that should follow" (1Pet.1 :11). He also wrote of Christ, as the Lamb without blemish and without spot, "Who verily was foreordained before the foundation of the world, but was manifest in these last times for you" (1Pet.2 :20).

And yet, the incident at Caesarea Philippi has a salutary lesson for us all. How quickly the gold had become dim! How soon the *stone* of such promise had become a rock of offence! The ever timely message of the whole episode is encapsulated in Paul's cautionary words, "Let him that thinks he stands, take heed lest he fall" (1Cor.10 :12).

On the Holy Mount

"We were eye-witnesses of His majesty"
(2Pet. 1 :16).

Every pilgrim to the Holy Land will know that there is an alternative to practically all the sacred sights. Which of the shepherds fields is actually featured in the biblical account? And which of the roads to Emmaus did the risen Lord actually travel with His two dispondent disciples? There are even two Calvary's and there are two empty tombs.

We know that the transfiguration took place on a high mountain, but what mountain was it? Some say it was *Hermon* and some *Tabor*, and there are strong arguments for both. Others say it was neither of these, it was a mountain in upper Galilee, not far from Capernaum, called *Jebel Jermuk*. (See *Hendriksen on Matthew* p.665.)

There is probably a hidden reason for this uncertainty. Christianity does not consist in the veneration of sacred sites, but in the person of Christ Himself. In Him alone the living God stands revealed. The important thing is what actually took place on *the Holy Mount*, and not what particular mountain it may have been. Luke tells us, "As He [Jesus] prayed, the fashion of His countenance was altered, and His raiment was white and glistening" (Luke 9 :29).

Peter, James and John

The Lord Jesus took with Him just three of the disciples when He went up into the mount. He did this too when He went to raise the daughter of Jarius from the dead, and again, when He went a little further into Gethsemane on

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the night of His betrayal. The interesting thing is that He always took the same three, namely Peter, James and John.

Many have speculated about this, and have asked why did He not go alone? And why did He always take the same three disciples? We have no answer to the second question: as for the first, it was probably just the need to have witnesses. All these events were deeply significant and it was necessary to have those with Him who could testify to what they had seen and heard. It is written, "In the mouth of two or three witnesses, shall every word be established."

What they saw and heard on this unique occasion made a lasting impression upon them, they never forgot it. Writing of what he saw, Peter said, "We were eye-witnesses of His majesty." And of what he heard, "There came such a voice to Him from the excellent glory, This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased" (2Pet.1 :16,17). A glorified Christ became the theme of apostolic witness, and our witness today is just the same.

The Transfiguration

The transfiguration of Christ must have had some immediate significance for the three disciples who were present. We know that the subject of conversation on the Holy Mount was the decease [or *the exodus*] the Lord Jesus was soon to accomplish at Jerusalem. Moses and Elijah represent the law and the prophets, and together they sum up the entire Old Testament story. Clearly, the superlative theme of past ages was the cross of Christ.

Did Moses talk of the Saviour's death in terms of Israel's Exodus from Egypt, that he had commanded a thousand and a half years earlier? Did Elijah speak of it in terms of the great sacrifice he had offered on Mount Carmel? Elijah's sacrifice resulted in fire falling from heaven, and

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Christ sacrifice cleared the way for the Holy Spirit to fall on the waiting disciples at Pentecost.

We cannot be specific, but the three selected disciples must have learned on the Holy Mount, things about the Lord's death that they needed to learn. Only six days earlier, Peter had been severely rebuked, when he refused to accept the necessity of Jesus' dying and rising again. And now, a whole week later, it would appear he still had not grasped the force of that rebuke.

The death of Christ, when it came, would be no accident. It would serve a higher purpose, and it would eventually be seen as central to God's redemptive plan. The book of Acts describes a time of intense persecution when these disciples, and others with them, reassured themselves in this knowledge: "Against thy holy child, Jesus ... Herod, and Pontius Pilate ... and the people of Israel, were gathered together, to do whatever thy hand and thy counsel determined before to be done" (Acts 4 :27,28).

The Coming Kingdom

Evidently, Peter came to see in that *Holy Mount* experience, overtones for the more distant future as well. He certainly made known his own participation in it, in that context, linking the experience with "The power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ" (2Pet.1 :16-18). On the Holy Mount there was a brief outshining of the glory that is Christ's today, the very same glory that will be publicly revealed when He comes again and every eye shall see Him.

This connection would seem to be confirmed by the Lord's prediction immediately prior to his going up into the mount. But I tell you of a truth, "There are some standing here, who shall not taste of death, till they see the kingdom

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of God" (Luke 9 :27). Matthew put it like this, "The Son of man shall come in the glory of His Father ... verily I say unto you, There are some standing here, who shall not taste of death, till they see the Son of man coming in His kingdom" (Matt.16 :28).

The very terms of this prediction, "*The Son of man coming in His kingdom*," accord with Daniel's vision of the end time. "I saw in the night visions, one like the Son of man came with the clouds of heaven ... and there was given unto Him dominion, and glory, and a kingdom, that all prople, nation, and languages, should serve Him; His dominion is an everlasting dominion, which shall not pass away, and His kingdom that which shall not be destroyed" (Dan.7 :13,14).

Since this prediction, with slight variations, introduces all three reports of the transfiguration, the experience of the three disciples on the Holy Mount seems to have been its fulfilment. In the transfiguration of the Lord Jesus, the disciples were given a brief foreview of the glory of the coming kingdom, even though it's manifestation in the earth must await Christ's second advent. And this is probably the reason why the Lord instructed the three to "Tell the vision to no man, until the Son of man is raised again from the dead."

Representative People

If we look at the detail of the transfiguration we can discern the essential elements of the future Messianic kingdom. We can see the glorified Christ, who stood supreme; His face shining like the sun, and His raiment white as the light. Could it be that the three disciples, might represent those who will be alive on the earth at the time, and who will be brought into the blessing of the kingdom?

Then there were those who appeared with Christ in glory. Moses got there through death, and Elijah without passing

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through death. Can we see in those two a representation of the whole church at the coming of the Lord: the dead in Christ, represented in Moses, and those who are alive and remain, represented in Elijah? (See 1Thess. 4 :13-18.) We know that when Christ, who is our life shall appear, we shall also appear with Him in glory.

Like so many things in scripture, the kingdom is brought to our notice in several senses. Besides its *millenial* or *messianic* aspect, which we refer to above, we should always be mindful of it's *moral* dimension as well. We, who are the Lord's, espouse the values of a kingdom that is not of this world. For this reason our manner of living differs from others, we march to a different drumbeat. Our basic axiom is to seek first the kingdom of God, and His righteousness.

Peter's Intervention

We are not suprised to read that Peter intervened on this sacred occasion. His foolish words and his lack of spiritual understanding, would dare to keep the Lord back from the ministry that was awaiting Him at the foot of the mount; not to mention the indignity of detaining Moses and Elijah, in temporary booths on a hillside in Galilee, when their true place was in heaven.

Peter said, "Lord, it is good for us to be hear; if you will, let us make here three [booths]; one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah" (Matt.17 :4). One evangelist adds, *he knew not what to say*, and the comment of another is, *he knew not what he had said*. Whatever confusion was in Peter's mind at the time, it was clear to the others that he had spoken on the impulse of the moment. It is also clear that he misjudged his timing. For there is a time to speak, and there is a time to be silent.

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A Voice from the Excellent Glory

Even while Peter was speaking, a bright cloud overshadowed them; and from the cloud they heard a voice saying, "This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased; hear ye Him" (Matt.17 :5). The cloud was probably the Shekinah, the glory cloud that rested over the mercy-seat in the tabernacle and guided the people through the wilderness. The same cloud filled the temple of Solomon on the occasion of it's dedication.

On hearing the voice from heaven the three disciples were filled with dread, and fell on their faces. But Jesus came and touched them, saying, arise, and be not afraid. When they looked up, they saw no man save Jesus only. The whole scene is a wonderful testimony to the solitariness of the Lord Jesus Christ. His person is unique, and His authority is sacred. *'Hear ye Him'* is the abiding message that still comes to us, down through the ages, from the holy mount.

The message is spelt out in some detail in the epistle to the Hebrews. "For this man was counted worthy of more glory than Moses, inasmuch as he who has built the house has more honour than the house ... Moses was faithful in all his house *as a servant* ... but Christ *as a son* over His own house ... " (Hebs. 3 :3-6) The voice from the excellent glory rules out any thought of placing any of God's servants, however honoured they may be, on a par with the Son of God.

Centrality of the Cross

The transfiguration came at a time when the Lord Jesus had begun to prepare the disciples for His approaching death. He had told them how He must go to Jerusalem, and suffer many things from the elders and chief priests and scribes,

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and be killed, and be raised again the third day. But, as we have noted, it is doubtful if the idea of His rising again had really registered with them. Now, six days later, He brought them up to this high mountain that they might see His death from an altogether different perspective.

In the brief outshining of His coming glory on the holy mount, they saw that His death would not be an end, it would rather be a means to an end. The coming kingdom was dependent on it. And then, in the conversation of Moses and Elijah they were made aware that the whole course of history was really moving towards that supreme climax. Hence we speak of the centrality of the cross.

Hear Him

They also learned what their immediate reaction should be to this disclosure of the Saviour's impending death, and of His rising again. He had spoken to them in forthright terms and, whatever their very natural instincts might be, they must take Him at His word, they must *Hear Him*. They must allow His word to dwell in their hearts; it would divide between soul and spirit.

After the transfiguration, while they were still in Galilee and before they returned to Capernaum, the Lord Jesus spoke to them again about His death. Using precisely the same language as before, He said, "The Son of man shall be betrayed into the hands of men, and they shall kill Him, and the third day He shall be raised again" (Matt.17 :22,23). The report intimates that '*they were exceeding sorry.*' But it is worthy of note that immediately after these things, "He [Jesus] steadfastly set His face to go to Jerusalem" (Luke 9 :51).

Significantly, on the morning of the actual resurrection, when the disciples came to the sepulcher and found not the Lord's body, "They remembered His words" (Luke 24 :8). The context would suggest that the words they remembered

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were the words He had spoken about this time. On the other hand, the two on the Emmaus road, who doubted His resurrection, were rebuked because they had not remembered His words.

The Tribute Money

"Of whom do the kings of the earth take custom or tribute?" (Matt.17 :25).

At this point, Peter was on a sharp learning curve. Following the transfiguration, the Lord and the three disciples, came down from the mount and rejoined the others. They were immediately confronted by a man who, came and knelt before the Lord, and said "Lord, have mercy on my son; for he is [epileptic] ... I brought him to your disciples and they could not cure him" (Matt. 17 :14-16).

Why could not we ... ?

In fact, it was a question of demon possession, and it called forth a notable miracle which left the young man perfectly well. But in the disciples' minds a significant question remained, and so they asked the Master privately, "Why could not we cast out the demon?" After all, He had commissioned them to heal the sick, and to cast out unclean

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spirits. And they had actually done this on other occasions (See Mark 6: 13.), but why could they not do it in this instance?

The Lord's response was to give them a lesson on faith. He told them quite frankly that their failure was due to their unbelief. Then He went on to say, "If you have faith as a grain of mustard seed, you shall say to this mountain, Move from here to yonder place, and it shall move; and nothing shall be impossible unto you" (Matt. 17 :20). Peter and his fellow-disciples needed to learn this lesson. And we too, need to recover for our generation the vital principle of a living and active faith in God.

In Capernaum

Shortly after this the apostolic band returned to Capernaum, where the collectors of tribute money called on Peter. They wanted to know, Does your master pay tribute? Peter ought to have consulted with the Lord, but he responded without thinking, for he was taken unawares. However, that was not the end of the matter. For when Peter went into the house, to his complete surprise the Lord immediately asked him, "Of whom do the kings of the earth take custom or tribute? Of their own sons or of strangers?" When he replied, *Of strangers*, the Lord quickly added, "Then are the sons free."

Paying Tax

This incident is not to be confused with another when the Pharisees attempted to embarrass the Lord on the question of paying taxes, They asked Him, "Is it lawful to give tribute to Caesar, or not?" Perceiving their duplicity, and knowing it was a trick question, He said, "Show me the money ... whose is this image and superscription ... render to Caesar the things which are Caesar's; and to God, the things which are God's" (Matt. 22 :15-22).

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Their question had been about paying tax, as we pay income tax, to the secular power. But at Capernaum the question was different. The tribute money was a temple tax. It had its origin in the half shekel, or atonement money, that Moses had established, every Israelite should pay. (See Exodus 30.) In its original the ordinance was connected with the important question of who was, and who was not, a true Israelite. Over the years the significance of the payment had been lost, but the payments were still levied as a source of revenue for the maintenance of the temple and its services.

A Grave Mistake

In answering his interrogator as he did, Peter made a great mistake. He had heard Jesus speak of the temple as *My Father's house* and he had also heard Him speak of Himself as being greater than the temple. And he had personally confessed Jesus as the Christ, the Son of the living God. But now he seems to have even forgotten the voice from the excellent glory which said, "This is my beloved Son." In speaking as he did, Peter reduced the Lord, however unwittingly, to the level of a stranger.

Having received on the holy mount, a marvellous object-lesson on the meaning of Christ's death, Peter was now about to have a further lesson on a related subject. Namely, that the death of the cross derives its value from the identity of the person who died. True faith will always rest on these two everlasting verities, (i) *Who Christ is* and, (ii) *what Christ has done*. The person and work of Christ are the two pillars Satan has ever sought to undermine.

In the inscrutable way the Lord has of bringing good out of evil, He told Peter to go down to the sea, not this time with a net, but with a hook. The first catch would be a fish with

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a coin, *a stater*, in its mouth. Peter was to take this money and pay the tribute for them both. What wonderful lessons the Lord had taught Peter on the lake he knew so well. In the great draught of fishes (See Luke 5.), Peter had seen the glory of Christ in the vast numbers of fish caught, now he would see His glory in the catch of a single fish.

Many attempts have been made to discredit this miracle. It has been argued that it's not uncommon to find in Galilee a certain species of fish carrying an object, such as a pebble, in its mouth. But even if should this be so, it misses the whole point of the miracle. The Lord told Peter (i) it would be the first fish caught (ii) it would have in its mouth a piece of money, and (iii) the money would be sufficient to pay the tax for both of them.

How did Jesus know what was in Peter's mind as he entered the house that day? And how could He possibly have known that the first fish Peter would hook would have money in its mouth, and specifically, enough money to pay the temple tax for two people? As he reflected on these things, Peter surely concluded that Jesus could only be who He claimed to be! His omniscience demonstrated that He was indeed the Son of the living God. He knew the fish that were in the sea, and He knew what a particular fish would have in its mouth.

Lest we should Offend

Peter's rash statement in response to what may have been a perfectly innocent inquiry, could easily give rise to misunderstanding. Jesus had no requirement to pay this tax for the reason already given; He was the Son, over God's house. In addition, it was accepted that a religious leader or teacher, such as a rabbi, was automatically exempted from it. Since the Lord Jesus was recognised as a rabbi, He could claim the privileges of a rabbi. (See John 1 :38,49., 3 :2,26., 6 :25.) But the question might have arisen, Would

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the non-payment of this tax be used as an occasion against Him to hinder His ministry?

Here, in the matter of the tribute money, we have a fine example of how our Lord reacted to circumstances where no matter of conscience was involved. Instead of digging in His heels and demanding His rights, as a rabbi might have done, He told Peter, "lest we should offend them, go thou to the sea ... thou shalt find a piece of money; that take, and give unto them for me and thee" (Matt. 17: 27).

Paul's later counsel in these matters is stated clearly enough. "Give no offense, neither to the Jews, nor to the [Greeks], nor to the church of God; even as I please all men in all things, not seeking my own profit, but the profit of many, that they might be saved" (1Cor. 10 :32,33). This followed with a rather pointed exhortation, Paul said, "Be ye followers [immitators] of me, even as I also am of Christ" (1Cor. 11: 1). Did the apostle have in mind, as a case history, our Lord's gracious reaction to Peter's rash reply, when he was asked about the tribute money?

Forgiveness

***"Lord, how often shall my brother sin against me,
and I forgive him?" (Matt. 18 :21).***

The question of forgiving and of forgiveness has many variants, from those who demand their pound of flesh, to those who would dole out forgiveness, until it becomes a quite meaningless exercise. Peter seemed to have accepted the need to forgive; his problem was, how many times? The background to Peter's quandary was our Lord's teaching on the subject.

As little children

Jesus had been addressing the issue of greatness in the kingdom of heaven. He had taken a little child and set him in the midst and said, "Except you be converted and become as little children, ye shall not enter into the kingdom of heaven." We might deduct from this that, in a peculiar sense, a little child is nearer to the kingdom ideal than an adult. (Matt.18 :1-4).

Pride

The special thing about little children is their lack of pretence; they are utterly without pride. Pride has ever been, and still is, the decisive obstacle in the way of people being converted. Conversion requires us to humble ourselves, to acknowledge ourselves needy sinners in God's sight. Genuinely to do this is never easy, except perhaps, for little children.

Moreover, when we are converted, this same pride, if it is not judged, will spoil us for greatness in the kingdom. So the Lord went further and asserted, "Whosoever, therefore, shall humble himself as this little child, the same is greatest

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in the kingdom of heaven." Peter eventually came to appreciate the force of this word for he wrote, "God resists the proud and gives grace to the humble. Humble yourselves, therefore, in the sight of God, that He may exalt you in due time" (1Pet.5 :5,6).

After stressing the importance of receiving a little child in His name, the Lord went on to pronounce a most terrible judgement on anyone who should *offend one of these little ones that believe in me*. He said, "It were better for him that a millstone were hanged about his neck, and that he were drowned in the depth of the sea" (Matt.18 :6).

Discipline

These pronouncements were followed by the parable of the lost sheep. It illustrated just how passionately Jesus felt about the importance of the child. Elsewhere, He used this parable in a different context (See Luke 15 :3-7.), but here the parable warned of offences being committed against little children.

One sheep out of a hundred was lost, and the shepherd, not willing to lose it, went and searched until he found it. Even so, Jesus said, it is not the will of your Father, who is in heaven, that one of these little ones should perish. This naturally led to an intensely interesting discourse on the subject of forgiveness. A loving heart, like the heart of the shepherd in the parable, is always ready to go the second mile. And this readiness is always a vital ingredient if brethren are to walk together in unity.

A private affair

The Lord then postulated a case by way of illustration. If a brother in trespassing against another, causes a breach of fellowship, what should be done? In the first place our immediate reaction should be to treat the matter as a private affair. The Lord's teaching clearly lays down that

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the offended party has a duty to seek a meeting with the offender. "Go and tell him his fault between you and him alone; if he hears you, then you have gained your brother" (Matt.18 :15).

Together, both parties should endeavour to reach a solution to their problem. They should sit down in a spirit of goodwill and mutual self-examination. This implies a prior readiness to forgive on the part of the offended person. Rather than seeking his own vindication, the first objective of the aggrieved person should always be to win the erring brother.

Two or three witnesses

If, however, the offender will not hear, then the aggrieved person must go again, this time taking witnesses with him. This is important because failure at this second stage, will lead to a third stage in the inquiry. And that third stage will require every word to be established in the mouth of two or three witnesses. If the second approach to the offending brother is inconclusive, and he will not hear the witnesses then, and only then, should the matter be brought before the Church.

The Church Universal and Local

The Church is obviously viewed here in its local aspect. Earlier, at Ceasarea Phillippi, when the Lord Jesus had said, *I will build my Church*, He was speaking of the Church in its universal aspect. The Church Universal is the body of Christ, it is the aggregate of all saved souls in every part of the world, throughout this age. The *Universal Church* is expressed locally in what we call *Local Churches*. These are fellowships of believers who meet in Christ's name, and under His authority.

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In our Lord's teaching, the local Church is the highest ecclesiastical authority on earth. This must be so, for He taught that if an offending brother will not hear the Church, since there is no further court of appeal, he is to be treated as a heathen man [i.e. *a foreigner*], and a tax-collector. He is not despising those people, not in the least, but since they were outside the commonwealth of Israel, the offending brother is now to be treated by the Church as an outsider. He has refused every form of discipline, and by his intransigence he has ruled himself out of the local Church's fellowship.

Church Government

In all this the Lord seems to be laying down markers for the government of the Church, that would soon come into being. Problems would present themselves; difficulties between members would arise. And such things should not be ignored, they should be dealt with according to the principles laid down here. The further guidance given in the Church epistles about these matters, only amplifies this basic teaching. Nothing supersedes or contradicts what the Lord has laid down in this passage.

Presently, a situation would arise in Corinth that would be the very negation of these principles. At that time some believers were seeking a resolution of their difficulties before the civil courts. Stern indeed was Paul's rebuke, "Dare any of you, having a matter against another, go to law before the unjust, and not before the saints? Do you not know that the saints shall judge the world? And if the world shall be judged by you, are you unworthy to judge the smallest matters" (1Cor. 6 :1,2).

Willingness to Forgive

On the human level, therefore, dealing with an offending brother or sister should be carried through in these three

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stages. But they presuppose two things: (i) that the offence is genuine and (ii) that the offended person is ready to forgive. A willingness to forgive, however, should not be confused with forgiveness itself. How often someone has said "I will forgive, but I will not forget."

True forgiveness always takes its character from the forgiveness of God. He never overlooks sin, yet He is always willing to forgive the sinner and to cancel the wrong. It has been well said that we are never more like God than when we forgive one another. Let us beware of an unforgiving spirit for it will imprison us in the past.

On the other hand, the living God, while abundantly ready to forgive, does not dole out cheap forgiveness. When Peter preached forgiveness to the Jews at Pentecost, he made it contingent upon their repentance. He said, "Repent, and be baptised, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ *for the remission of sins*, and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit" (Acts 2 :38). The question of forgiveness can hardly arise, therefore, where there is not a prior recognition or acknowledgment of sin.

The great value of the first stage, in any possible reconciliation, is that it allows the parties to keep their differences to themselves. But if stage two must be activated, then an important question arises. Who are the two or three, brought along as witnesses? Ideally, these must surely be the elders of the local Church.

The Elders of the Church

A properly organised Church will have recognised elders, men who are deemed suitable to handle the affairs of the Church. Their authority will not be an absolute authority, they will not be *as lords over God's heritage*. They will be examples to the believers, and their authority will be derived from the Church's expressed confidence in them.

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Where it is appropriate, they will take the Church into their confidence, and they will always endeavour to carry the members with them in their decisions.

The elders will be mature and spiritually minded men Men who are filled with the Holy Spirit, and wisdom. Their primary qualification will not be a platform ability, although that may be an asset, their main quality will be wisdom. They must be capable of handling discreetly, difficult situations as they arise. Paul wrote to the Church at Corinth, "Is it so, that there is not a wise man among you?" (1Cor.6: 5)

We are all too painfully aware of the damage that can be done, when unsuitable men try to cope with delicate situations. They may be good men in many respects but because they are not skilled in inter-personal relationships they are completely out of their depth in such situations. Alas, the proverbial bull in a china shop, sometimes has its counterpart in local church affairs.

Having said that, for an offending brother to reject the counsel of godly elders would be unwise. The proper course for all must be to heed the injunction which says, "Obey them that have the rule over you, and submit yourselves; for they watch for your souls, as they that must give account, that they might do it with joy, and not with grief; for that is unprofitable for you" (Hebs.13 :17).

The best kind of discipline

The first and best kind of discipline, of course, is self-discipline because it will preclude the need for any other kind of discipline. "If we would judge ourselves, we should not be judged" (1Cor.11 :31). But where the need arises, the second level of discipline will always play an important role. The third kind is Church discipline, to be invoked only as a matter of last resort. Sadly, it sometimes comes to

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that, and challenging decisions have to be made, for where evil is tolerated among His people the Lord's testimony will be adversely affected.

It will be painful at times for Church members to discipline a fellowmember. It might be someone with whom they have taken sweet council; someone with whom they have walked to the house of God. There will be much prayer, and the exercise of much grace, and great care will be taken in the degree of discipline that is applied. But when every effort to effect some sort of reconciliation has failed, then events must be allowed to take their proper course according to the scripture before us.

This is essential for the health of the Church. Failure here will discourage other members, and it will also have a negative effect on any who are thinking of joining the fellowship. More than that, since the Church is not ours, but God's, it is important that nothing is allowed that will impinge on His honour. For all these reasons the principles here laid down by the Lord Jesus should not be lightly set aside. For us to do such a thing would be to think lightly of Him.

The Righteous Judge

The solemnity of these matters is underlined by the special promise given by the Lord at this point. "Where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I *in the midst* of them" (Matt.18 :20). What this means is probably best understood in the light of John's vision on Patmos. "I saw seven golden lampstands, and *in the midst* of the seven lampstands one like the Son of man ... and His eyes were like a flame of fire; and His feet like fine brass, as if they burned in a furnace; and His voice like the sound of many waters" (Rev.1 :12-16).

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The Lord is always judging, and even now He stands among His people as the righteous judge. It is, therefore, a most solemn thing to reject the judgement of the Church because, where it is exercised according to scripture, it is the judgement of the Lord Himself. In this context, the Lord restated the authority He had already bestowed at Caesarea Philippi, "Verily I say unto you, Whatsoever you shall bind on earth shall be bound in heaven; and whatsoever you shall loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven" (Matt.18 :18).

The force of this teaching is further sharpened by the fact that there is a fourth kind of discipline, besides the three we have noted on the human level. The fourth is a divine discipline. Was there an evil at Corinth, that the Church had failed to judge? Paul's reference is certainly challenging. He said, "For this cause many are weak and sickly among you, and many sleep. For if we would judge ourselves, we should not be judged. But when we are judged, we are chastened of the Lord, that we should not be condemned with the world" (1Cor.11 :30-32).

How many times ?

But Peter interrupted the Lord at this point. He had a question and he would ask it in a way that would demonstrate his own generosity of spirit. "Then came Peter to Him, and said, How often shall my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? Until seven times?" Peter could hardly have been prepared for the reply he received. Jesus said unto him, "I say not unto you, Until seven times; but, until seventy times seven" (Matt.18 :21,22). The arithmetic was more than Peter could have imagined.

Jesus took two perfect numbers: ten, the number of moral perfection, (there are ten commandments in the moral law) and seven, the number of spiritual perfection (we read of the seven spirits of God). He multiplied them, and then He

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went further and multiplied the result by Peter's figure. Peter should forgive, not for a mere seven times, but for seventy times seven or four hundred and ninety times.

The Unjust Steward

It was clearly necessary to clarify in Peter's thinking, the nature of true forgiveness. The Lord did this by telling another parable, the parable of the unjust Steward. (See Matt.18 :23-35.) A certain king, on checking his business affairs, discovered that one of his stewards owed a sum of money that in today's terms would amount to the gross wealth of some nations. Yet the steward had nothing with which to repay his debt. So the king commanded, that he be sold, and his wife and children and all that he had, and the debt repaid.

Realising the hopelessness of his position, the steward cast himself on the king's mercy. And it worked: for moved with compassion, the king loosed him, and cancelled his debt. But the forgiven steward went out and found a fellowservant, who owed him an amount which was a mere pittance, in comparison with the debt he had owed to the king. The parable tells us that he took his fellowservant by the throat, and said, Pay me what you owe. The fellowservant pleaded with him, as he himself had pleaded with the king. But the plea was in vain, and the unjust steward cast him into prison, until he should pay the debt.

When the other servants saw what was done their sense of fair play began to surface, and they went and told the king. The king, in turn, read the riot act to the unjust steward. "Should not you have had compassion on your fellowservant, even as I had compassion on you" (Matt.18 :33). The enraged king then delivered him to the inquisitors, till he should pay all that was due. The message of the parable is crystalised in it's final words. "So likewise

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shall my heavenly Father do also unto you, if you, from your hearts, forgive not every one his brother his trespasses" (Matt.18 :35).

Simon Peter had to learn, and we too must learn, that the arithmetic of forgiveness is quite irrelevant. It doesn't really matter how many times! What does matter is the quality of our forgiveness. It should be a forgiveness that takes its character from God's forgiveness. It should be an expression of a spirit within us, that reflects the very Spirit of God who has forgiven us all trespasses.

The Feet-washing

Peter said unto Him, "You will never wash my feet" (John 13 :8).

Three of our Lord's major addresses have been preserved for us in the gospel narratives. Matthew recorded the *Sermon on the Mount* and the *Olivet discourse*. (See Matt. chs.5 & 24.) The third address, which we call the *Upper Room discourse*, is recorded by John in the fourth gospel. This address began in a somewhat dramatic fashion. Washing the disciples' feet was a deeply significant act as well as being a sublime display of Jesus' love.

Broadly speaking the total discourse covers five chapters of John's gospel (*chapters 13 to 17 inclusive*). But upon closer

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examination it's clear that the first two chapters tell what was said in the Upper Room itself, while the next two are about what the Lord continued to say after they had left the room. The final chapter, of course, is the record of His prayer for His own, and is often referred to as the High Priestly prayer.

All three addresses are forward looking, each having its own particular emphasis. The third address looked forward specifically to the present age, which has now been extended to almost two thousand years. The parameters of the age are spelt out clearly enough. Jesus said, "*If I go away ... I will come again*" (John 14 :3). The present age, the age of the Saviour's absence, will reach its climax in His return. This is also the age of the Spirit, for the Lord promised in the upper room, that while He was absent the Spirit would abide with His people forever. (See John 14 :16-18.)

Of all the Lord's earthly ministry, therefore, the Upper Room address has a special bearing on believers today. Its relevance probably becomes even more acute as the end of the age approaches. The three cardinal virtues; faith, hope and love are expounded here and applied. We are told to be fruit-bearing branches in the vine, whose fruit will reflect honour on our heavenly husbandman. We are alerted to the tribulation that must surely be encountered in the world. And here too, we are taught to pray in the name of the Lord Jesus, and to walk in dependence upon the indwelling Holy Spirit.

The Upper Room

The scene is cast on the eve of the last passover. We call it the *last*, because it was the passover at which the death of Christ, anticipated in every previous passover, would take place. The disciples had asked the Lord about where they

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should eat the passover. And He appointed two of them, saying, "Go into the city, and there shall meet you a man bearing a pitcher of water; follow him. And wherever he shall go in, say to the owner of the house, the Master says, Where is the guest room, where I shall eat the passover with my disciples? And he will show you *a large upper room*, furnished and prepared; there make ready for us" (Mark 14 :13-15).

John does not record everything that happened in the Upper Room on that memorable night, for instance, he does not mention the institution of the Lord's Supper. But he does recount incidents and statements, that are not referred to in the other gospels. In doing so, he unveils fascinating details of those last precious hours spent by the Lord Jesus in the company of His disciples, just before death. He knew the pressures that would be upon them, and He sought to reassure them. He said, "Let not your hearts be troubled ... " And He promised them, "I will not leave you as orphans in the world" (John 14 :18). With these and many other words He sought to comfort their hearts.

Washing the Disciples Feet

His first act of service that night, washing the disciples feet, must have etched itself upon the memory of everyone present. How incongruous, the Master taking the place of a servant, to perform the most menial of servile tasks. The historian emphasises this by telling us that Jesus took this place in the full consciousness of who He was, of where He had come from, and of where He was going. "Jesus knowing that the Father had given all things into His hands, and that He was come from God, and went to God, laid aside His garments ... " (John 13 :3).

The feet-washing was an enacted parable. It was full of meaning at the time, and it remains deeply significant for

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us today. Its basic message is signally important. When a child of God falls into sin, this does not mean that he has to be saved all over again. The principle of regeneration is not cancelled, the child is still a child. But the sin itself must be dealt with, and the feet-washing shows how this can be done.

We will not comprehend the true meaning of this enacted parable, unless we must view the feet-washing from three distinct perspectives. We must see it from (i) the Lord's perspective; (ii) the disciple's perspective; and (iii) the perspective of Simon Peter.

(i) *The Lord's perspective*

The Lord Jesus did not come into the world to judge, but to save. "This is a faithful saying, and worthy of all acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners" (1Tim.1 :15). By the same token, He did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many. (See Matt.20 :28.) His purpose in coming is summed up in those two words, to *serve* and to *give*. This servant character shone forth in everything he had done and now, as the last passover approached, it was further revealed in a quite extraordinary way.

The Figure

Rising from supper, the Lord Jesus laid aside His garments and took a towel and girded Himself. He then poured water into a basin and began to wash the disciples' feet, and to wipe them with the towel. There was deliberation in every detail. The parallels between this and Paul's portrayal of our Lord's self-humbling are so pronounced, we must consider the act of feet-washing to be a figure of the marvellous condescension of the Son of God. (See Phil. 2 :5-8.)

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Paul began with the Lord Jesus being in the form of God, and the upper room record begins with Him knowing that He was come from God, and went to God. Paul went on to assert that He made Himself of no reputation, and took upon Him the form of a servant. This surely recalls how He laid aside His garments and girded Himself with a towel in the upper room . Moreover, all was done with a definite purpose in view. In one case, it was to wash the disciple's feet and in the other, it was to give His life, a sacrifice for sin.

The Pattern

The whole scene taught an exceedingly important, if self-evident, lesson. We read, "So after He had washed their feet, and had taken His garments, and was seated again, He said unto them, Know ye what I have done to you? You call me Master and Lord; and you say well; for so I am. If I then, your Lord and Master, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. For *I have given you an example, that you should do as I have done to you*" (John 13 :12-15).

Could anything have been more calculated to check the ambitious spirit that prevailed among the disciples at this time. Another writer tells us, "There was also a strife among them, which of them should be accounted the greatest" (Luke 22 :24). His response to their self-seeking was to kneel before them and wash their feet. Did anything more need to be said? Here was a deed that spoke louder than any words could speak.

It is a truism that everything God is looking for in the lives of His people, has been objectively set forth in Christ. Our eyes are ever to be on Him, noting His example, that we might more perfectly immitate Him. To run with patience the race set before us, always looking unto Jesus, the Author and Finisher of faith. Simon Peter never forgot this,

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for instance, when he wrote to Christian servants about their duties, he pointed them to Christ, who, he said, "Left us an example that we should follow in His steps" (1Pet.2 :21).

(ii) *The Disciple's perspective*

It is fairly obvious, however, that this does not exhaust the meaning of the Lord's action when He washed the disciple's feet. It was an Eastern tradition and the imagery behind it was of a man who had been to the public baths, where he had bathed, or as we might say, *he had been washed all over*. But on his way home along a dusty road, his feet were soiled. To be entirely clean, *or clean every whit*, the man who had been *washed all over*, simply had to wash his feet. Jesus put it like this, "He that is washed [bathed] needs not save to wash his feet, but is *clean every whit*" (John 13 :10).

Two Cleansings

There were two cleansings, therefore, before the Lord's mind, in the upper room. And, in the text, two different words are used for *washing*. Christendom seems never to have grasped this. Some have made the feet-washing an additional ordinance, while others have linked it with baptism and some have even ignored it altogether.

While it is demonstrably true that many have failed to distinguish between the two washings, the apostles Peter and John, and later Paul, were all careful to stress the importance of this washing in water. Paul wrote, " ... Christ also loved the church, and gave Himself for it, that He might sanctify and cleanse it with *the washing of water by the word*" (Eph.5 :25,26).

In his first epistle, the apostle John set the two cleansings side by side. He said, "The blood of Jesus Christ, His Son, cleanseth us from all sin" (1John1 :7). This answers to *the*

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all over cleansing which the believer experiences at the point of conversion. But John also saw the provision that is made for those defilements believers contract as they walk through this world. And so he went on, "If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness" (1John1 :9). This is what Paul called *the washing of water by the word*, and it corresponds to *the feet-washing* in the upper room.

Faithful to Forgive

This latter cleansing is conditioned upon our confession. "*If we confess ... He is faithful and just to forgive ...* " As the word of God is brought to bear upon heart and conscience by the Holy Spirit, defilements are revealed from which we need to be cleansed. Confession means that we recognise these things for what they are, that we judge them in ourselves, and that we turn from them, claiming the promise, *He is faithful and just to forgive*. The effect, like the effect of water on defiled feet, is to purge the believer from a defiled conscience.

All this shows the importance of the word of God in regulating the Christian's daily life. We must read it regularly and meditate on it; we must allow it to dwell in us richly. It has been well said, sin will keep us from *the word* and equally *the word* will keep us from sin. The message given to Joshua at the entrance to Canaan is pertinent to every believer. "This book of the law shall not depart out of your mouth, but you shall meditate therein day and night ... then you shall make your way prosperous, and then you shall have good success" (Joshua 1 :8).

Cleansing by the blood of Christ is a once for all cleansing. It never needs to be repeated. The efficacy of the precious blood is of abiding value. In virtue of that blood we are accepted before God and maintained before Him in

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perpetuity. To speak of a fresh cleansing in the blood is really, if unintentionally, to cast doubt upon the enduring power of Jesus' blood, and this is something true believers will never deliberately do. Jesus' blood avails for us for ever, and shall never lose its power.

The washing in water, on the other hand, signifies an on-going practical cleansing from the defilements of the way. This will produce in us the moral suitability that is necessary for fellowship with the Lord Jesus who is now with the Father. Over against that, a neglect of this cleansing will result in a tolerance of sin that can only compromise our testimony as His representatives in the world. This is the underlying and spiritual meaning of *the feet-washing* in the upper room.

(iii) *Simon Peter's perspective*

At the time, however, Simon Peter did not grasp the significance of what was taking place. And when his turn came, he protested, *Lord, dost thou wash my feet? Thou shalt never wash my feet.* At Peter's objection, Jesus told him, *If I wash you not, you have no part with me.* But Peter was all at sea, and his failure to understand either of the two washings, was revealed when he exclaimed, "Lord, not my feet only, but also my hands and my head" (See John 13 :6-9.)

At that point the Lord insisted, "What I do you know not now, but you shall know hereafter." It was only after the Holy Spirit had come and revealed the things of Christ to the disciples, that this prediction was actually fulfilled. It seems that until then Peter did not grasp the meaning of the feet-washing, that it was more than simply a lesson in humility.

Many years later, Peter may have been reflecting on what had happened on this occasion. For he wrote to the saints of his day, "Seeing that you have *purified your souls in*

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obeying the truth through the Spirit unto unfeigned love of the brethren, see that you love one another with a pure heart fervently" (1Pet.1 :22).

He then went on to emphasise the importance in the experience of every believer of *the word of God, which lives and abides forever*. He showed the sort of things it will reveal, things from which we need to be cleansed. He said, "Lay aside all malice, and all guile, and hypocrisies, and envies, and all evil speakings, as newborn babes, desire the sincere milk of the word, that you may grow by it" (1Pet.2 :1,2).

Part with me

We rejoice in the knowledge that every Christian is *in Christ*, indeed, that is what the term *Christian* signifies, and once *in Him* we are *in Him* forever. But Peter had to learn that sharing *with Christ* in His present ministry, both within the veil and in the world, was something else. This would require a moral correspondence to Christ's person. Apart from every other consideration, we have proved that the world will accept nothing less than this, for the world demands to see in everyone who names Christ's name, a moral likeness to Christ's person.

Before leaving this matter we must note that the foot-washing was intended to be an exercise believers can engage in towards each other. With all lowliness of mind and in fellowship with the Lord, and we are to serve one another in this way. Not, we might add, in the physical sense, but by the ministry of God's word we are wash each others feet.

We do this when we seek the recovery of a brother or sister who may have been overtaken in a fault or who may have been compromised by some defiling influence. (See Galatians 6 :1.) Jesus said, "If I, your Lord and Master,

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have washed your feet, *you also ought to wash one another's feet*. For I have given you an example, that you should do as I have done to you" (John 13 :14,15).

The Denial

***"This night, before the cock crows,
thou shalt deny me thrice" (Matt. 26 :34).***

Of all the low points in Simon Peter's story, the lowest must have been when he denied his Lord. There always was the possibility that his traits of character would lead Peter to some such break down. But it must be said in his favour that when the failure took place, he quickly regretted what he had done, and very soon he was weeping tears of genuine repentance.

The Lord's Supper

Before Jesus and His disciples left the Upper Room that night, the Lord's Supper had been instituted. It was intended as a memorial of thanksgiving. When we observe it aright we do so as believer-priests, offering sacrifices of praise to God. But it is more than just a memorial; it is a constantly recurring tryst between the Lord and His people. In the breaking of bread, we remember His love for us and, in turn, we gladly affirm our love and loyalty to Him, our Saviour and our Lord.

The night in which He was betrayed

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Paul's reference to the institution of the supper reads, "For I have received from the Lord that which also I delivered unto you, that the Lord Jesus, *the same night in which He was betrayed*, took bread ... " (1Cor.11 :23-25). That was a momentous night, it was memorable because of the many significant things had taken place.

For instance, Paul might have said, the same night in which He washed the disciples feet, or the same night in which He prayed His great High-Priestly prayer, but instead he said, *the same night in which He was betrayed*. Since betrayal is the very antithesis of loyalty, was the apostle calling attention to the supper as an affirmation of the Christian's loyalty to his Lord?

If so, viewed against such a background Peter's denial was a dark episode indeed. And yet that very background served to throw into bold relief the loving concern the Lord had for His failing servant. He understood Peter's weaknesses better than any other and better even than Peter understood them himself. And when they surfaced He had often ministered the needed correction and instruction. He knew too, what was in Peter's heart, and He knew that although Satan might gain a momentary advantage over him, the reality of Peter's love was never doubt.

Gethemane Road

It was the last evening of the Saviour's earthly life and leaving the upper room, the little party crossed the Kedron Valley and entered the garden of Gethemane which lay at the foot of the Mount of Olives. It was a favoured place and the Lord often withdrew there to pray. The disciples knew it well, as did the traitor, for we read, "Judas also, who betrayed Him, knew the place; for Jesus often resorted there with His disciples" (John 18 :2).

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As they walked the Lord had many things to say to them. Of special relevance was His advance warning of what that very night would hold for them. "And Jesus said unto them, All ye shall be offended because of me this night; for it is written, I will smite the shepherd, and the sheep shall be scattered. But after I am risen I will go before you into Galilee." As might be expected their reaction was one of total astonishment. Not for the first time, Simon Peter was their spokesman, and he fiercely asserted his personal resolve, "Although all shall be offended, yet will not I" (Mark 14 :27-29).

Out of Step

But this was just the first in a whole catalogue of errors on Peter's part that night. Peter was boasting when he should have been weighing up the word Jesus had spoken. A short time later, in the garden, he was sleeping when he should have been praying. And later still, when they came to arrest the Lord, Peter drew his sword and cut off the ear of the High Priest's servant; now he was resisting when he should have been yielding. Clearly, all along the line Peter was out of step with His Master on that momentous night.

Peter's Descent

This is where the descent began into what we have called the deepest low of Peter's career. The Feet-washing in the upper room had emphasised, however symbolically, the importance of *the Word* to every believer. Earlier, Peter had confessed in Christ's presence, "Thou hast the words of eternal life." And earlier still he had witnessed the power of Jesus' word in the great draught of fish.

And now he heard a word direct from the Saviour's lips, but he was not minded to heed it. The Saviour even condescended to repeat that word and to amplify it, and to specify its particular relevance to Peter personally. He said,

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"Verily I say unto you, This day, even in this night, before the cock crows twice, you shall deny me thrice" (Mark 14:30). But Peter still maintained an ambivalent attitude to Christ's word.

He would not, as we might say, turn the word in the Lord's mouth, but with even greater vehemence, and a wholly unwarranted display of self-confidence, he would proclaim his own resolve. "If I should die with thee, I will not deny thee in any way." It has to be said that the rest of the company concurred with Peter, but such is the frailty of flesh before the night was out, "They all forsook Him and fled" (Mark 14:50).

It may be we tend to be too severe in our judgement of Peter. For when he said, *Although all shall be offended, yet will not I*, he clearly meant every word. It would be unfair of us to question his sincerity. Had we been in his position we might have said the same thing. Moreover, when we are tested, and Peter was severely tested that night, the outcome does not always cover us with glory. The salutary warning given to the believers at Corinth, and highlighted so often in Simon Peter, is this, "let him who thinks he stands take heed lest he fall" (1Cor.10:12).

Two Weaknesses

(i) *Attitude to the Word*

Nevertheless, two things stand out as being at the core of Peter's fall. The first was his attitude to the Lord's word. The word was plain enough, "*All of you shall be offended because of me.*" And the word was urgent, " ... *this night, before the cock crow ...* " It was also pointedly definite, "... *you shall deny me three times ...* " But Peter would not receive it.

If one thing in the sacred history is more clear than another, it is this, that a neglect of God's word is the prime cause of

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failure in His people. Our first parents lost paradise because they trusted their own judgement, even when it was plainly contrary to the word God had given them. At Kadesh Barnea, the people who had been delivered from Egyptian bondage missed Canaan, because they demanded that their own men should spy out the land to see if what God had said about it was true.

What Peter had been taught in the Upper Room, and on the occasion of the great draught of fishes, he had to learn all over again in the arena of bitter experience. But learn it he did, for when we turn to his writings, he speaks of what he had seen and heard on the holy mount, the mount of transfiguration, and then he went on, "We have *a more sure word of prophecy*, unto which you do well that you take heed, as unto a light that shines in a dark place" (2Pet.1 :19).

(ii) Attitude to his brethren

The other thing was Peter's attitude to his brethren. He adopted a somewhat superior air and said, "Though all shall be offended because of you, yet will I never be offended." He could conceive of the rest being offended, but he was personally above such a thing. That very night Peter foundered on these two pitfalls, his self-sufficiency and his pride.

It would have been altogether more appropriate had Peter evinced the self-effacement and humility of others such as Abraham, who said, "I have taken upon me to speak unto the Lord, who am but dust and ashes" (Gen.18 :27). Or Gideon, who, when the angel said to him, "*the Lord is with thee, thou mighty man of valour*," replied, "Behold, my family is poor in Manasseh, and I am the least in my father's house" (Jud.6 :12). Peter had heard the Lord say, Blessed are the poor in spirit ... and blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth. But all that seems to have been forgotten in the heat of this critical moment.

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Peter afar off

We often point out how Peter followed afar off, and how he sat down among the Lord's enemies, and warmed himself at their fire. But these things were only the symptoms of a much greater malaise. The outward and visible was merely a reflection of the inward. Peter must learn the hard way that in him, that is in his flesh, dwelt no good thing. The lesson for us all is that there is nothing in ourselves that can either save us or sustain us, when the testing times come. Distrusting ourselves we must learn to rely on the strength that God supplies through His eternal Son.

And so it came to pass, after the traitor had done his foul deed, and the Lord was led away to stand before Caiaphas, the high priest, Simon Peter followed afar off. While it is true that the others did not follow at all, there does seem to be significance in the fact that a distance had now come between Peter and his Lord. The first verse of the Psalter might have preserved him from what happened next, but even that was forgotten.

In the way of sinners

Peter unwisely stood in the way of sinners and even sat in the seat of the scornful. Before long a servant girl came along and challenged him saying, "You were with Jesus of Galilee." But he denied this before them all, exclaiming, I know not what you say. When he moved into the porch, another maid came by who also identified Peter. She said, "This fellow was also with Jesus of Nazareth." Again Peter denied his Lord, and said, I do not know the man. This time his denial was accompanied by an oath.

An hour later others noticed Peter's distinctive Galilean brogue and they began to challenge him, Surely you also

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are one of them; for your speech betrays you. For the third time, and amid cursing and swearing, Peter denied his Lord and said, I know not the man! In spite of all his recent protestations of loyalty, in such a short period, Peter had denied his Lord with oaths and curses no fewer than three times. And the heat of that moment had scarcely subsided when there was a cock crowing. We are told that Peter remembered the word of Jesus, and he went out and wept bitterly. (See Matt.26 :69-75.)

The Lord ... Looked upon Peter

Just at that moment, and before Peter went outside, he became conscious of someone looking directly at him, it was the Lord. We cannot say precisely how this came about, but the message conveyed by that look was unmistakable. We are sure there was nothing of reproach in it, nor was it a look that scornfully said, I told you so. It may be inference, but it's probably not far from the mark to say, by that look Peter heard his Lord saying once again, "But I have prayed for you."

At any rate, Peter seems to have instantly grasped what that look expressed. It signalled that the link between Jesus and himself was not broken. As a result, Peter's faith did not fail. Indeed, in a providential kind of way it may even have been strengthened. The Lord had been right about the failure; He would also be right about the recovery. That significant look, while it melted Peter, it gave him the assurance that he would yet strengthen his brethren.

Peter's Rising Again

***"When you are converted, strengthen
your brethren" (Luke 22 :32).***

The final word in the record of Peter's fall is not about his denials, it's about his tears. He went out and wept bitterly. Tears of repentance were freely shed and, happily, they marked the beginning of a process of recovery that would bring Peter back to his former place of leadership among the disciples.

We say a process, for we know that Peter's restoration involved several things, not least a private interview with the Lord following the resurrection. When the women came early to the tomb on the resurrection morning they were told, "Go your way, tell His disciples *and Peter*" (Mark 16 :7). Here was a clear acknowledgement that Peter was still a disciple. Later that same day, the two who came from Emmaus burst in upon the eleven, and exclaimed, "The Lord is risen indeed, *and has appeared unto Simon*." (Luke 24 :34). This information probably resulted from their earlier converse with the risen Lord.

Recovery

Clearly, in their private meeting Peter was fully restored to fellowship with Christ. What passed between them in that secret encounter is not revealed, we might speculate about tears, and even about silences that must have spoken louder than any words, but all is shrouded in mystery. And we are content that it should be so, for we too have had our secret dealings with the Lord. Things we could never share with others, we have been able to bring to His feet and leave them there.

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Only when he was alone with the Lord, could Peter have been as open and frank, as he surely must have been on this occasion. It was, therefore, entirely appropriate that this meeting took place before the Lord revealed Himself to the whole band of the disciples. The return of the backslider is a very personal matter, it is as personal as the conversion of a sinner. We have the language of a returning backslider in one of the psalms. "Have mercy upon *me*, O God ... Against thee, thee only, have I sinned ... Create in *me* a clean heart, and renew a right spirit within *me*." (See Psalm 51.)

The cock crowing

We will miss much, however, if we do not examine the background to Peter's recovery. It began with the circumstantial thing, the cock crowing. The Lord had said, "Before the cock crows, you will deny me thrice" (Matt.26 :75). The reference to the cock crowing had the effect of fixing the words of Jesus in Peter's mind. It was like an association of ideas. Another instance of this was when Pharaoh's butler had forgotten Joseph. And then one morning the king talked of his dreams, and everything came flooding back to the butler's mind. He told Pharaoh about his own dream and about Joseph and, in the end, God's purpose was realised.

While giving no hostages to superstition, we do recognise that the ordering of our circumstances is often God's way of directing our steps. Oftentimes we are told of an apparently chance happening that has led to the spiritual blessing of some soul. We don't believe in chance, but we do believe in God! Our God has established His throne in the heavens, and His kingdom rules over all. And who can doubt that God was behind the cock crowing that night somewhere in the vicinity of the high priest's house? *Dr. A T. Pierson* wrote,

Back of all that foes have plotted,

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*Or that friends have wisely planned,
Human schemes or works of demons,
Moves a hidden higher hand.*

The Word of Jesus

That particular cock crowing, meaningless to everybody else, was meaningful to Peter. We are told that immediately, *Peter remembered the word of Jesus*. This was the second factor in Peter's recovery. It was not a new word, it was the old word that he should have heeded. In our last chapter we pointed out that the neglect of *the Word* is the primary cause of failure among Christians. It was certainly so in Peter's case, and it will be no different in ours.

The word of God is given to preserve us from evil. The Psalmist declared, "Your word have I hid in my heart, that I might not sin against you" (Psa.119 :11). The word will keep us from sin while, conversely, sin will keep us from the word! But if we should fall into sin, then the word will be our laver of cleansing as was illustrated in the foot-washing in the upper room. Again the Psalmist said, "Wherewithal shall a young man cleanse his way? By taking heed thereto according to your word" (Psa.119 :9).

The Advocacy of Christ

The specific word that Peter neglected, spoke of the advocacy of Christ. The Lord had said, "Simon, Simon, behold, Satan has desired to have you [all], that he may sift you as wheat; but *I have prayed for you* [each], that your faith fail not. And when you are converted, strengthen your brethren" (Luke 22 :31,32). While the danger was universal, the intercession was personal. This ought to have been a great comfort to Peter, as it should also be to us. But alas, Peter completely forgot it at the very point when it would have been most helpful for him to remember it.

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When believers sin, Satan, the great Accuser, stands ready to accuse them before the throne of God. This, in turn, calls into action the advocacy of the Lord Jesus in their behalf. He pleads the merits of His sacrifice as the complete satisfaction for the believer's guilt. The apostle John wrote, "My little children, these things write I unto you, that you sin not. And if any man sin, we have an Advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous; and He is the propitiation [satisfaction] for our sins, and not for ours only, but also for the sins of the whole world" (1John 2 :1,2).

Besides having an Advocate in heaven, we also have an Advocate on earth in the person of the indwelling Holy Spirit. The pattern of their joint operation is something like this. When failure takes place the heavenly Advocate covers it's guilt with His precious blood, and then, in response to that heavenly advocacy the indwelling Spirit applies the word to the heart and conscience. This leads to confession and repentance, which issues in turn, in forgiveness and cleansing, and a renewal of fellowship. (See 1John 1 :9.)

A Final Tribute

All these things entered into Peter's recovery. But his failure had been public and so it was necessary that his restoration should be public as well. The process of restoration began immediately, as we have already noted, with the tears Peter shed when he went out and wept bitterly. It was perfected in his private meeting with the Lord. But it reached its public expression after breakfast one morning as a little group of seven disciples sat around the fire.

Where sin is recognised and confessed, assuming this is done out of an honest heart before God, its iniquity is immediately forgiven. And if the sin was known only to

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the sinner and to God then the matter should rest there. But if the matter was an open failure that reflected on the public testimony, then open confession is called for. Frank and humble confession, making no excuses, and backed by the evidence of a sincere repentance will pave the way for public restoration.

How this came about in the case of Simon Peter is summarised in the postscript to the fourth gospel. John wrote his gospel after Peter had already gone home to heaven. He concluded his treatise proper like this, "These things are written, that you might believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; and that believing you might have life through His name" (John 20 :31). But then he was moved to add a footnote, a final chapter, that is sometimes called a postscript to the fourth gospel.

Besides being disciples, Peter and John were evidently close friends. Together they were seen going up to the Temple at the hour of prayer, and their astonishing boldness in the presence of the Jewish Sanhedrin, was a marvel to all. We are told, "they took knowledge of them, that they had been with Jesus" (Acts 4 :13). And now, it seems John added this final chapter as a memorial to his long time friend. He told how Peter's restoration had been brought out into the open, finally laying to rest any lingering doubts there may have been in the minds of the other disciples.

On the Lake

While they were still in Galilee, whence they had come on the Lord's instructions, Peter proposed a fishing expedition. It was a proposal that met with ready acceptance. There were seven disciples in the company that pushed out from the shore that night. Five of them are named, they are all well known, the other two remain anonymous, but we know that they were also disciples.

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Without me - Nothing!

There is nothing in the record to suggest that the night was other than propitious for fishing. Moreover, they had an abundance of expertise on board their craft. Yet in spite of that we are told, "That night they caught nothing" (John 21 :3). The end result of all their toil was nothing. The thing to note is that their plans had all been carried through independently of the Lord.

In the morning, as they drew to land a lone figure stood on the shore, it was someone they should have recognised. He called out, "Children, have you any food?" They could only reply with a frustrated negative. But when they obeyed His instruction, and cast the net on the right side of the boat, they had such a catch they were unable to draw the net to land for the multitude of fish.

John, who refers to himself once again as the disciple whom Jesus loved, turned to Peter and said, *It's the Lord*, but Peter must have realised this already. He could hardly have missed the parallels between what was happening now and that earlier miraculous catch when, at the Lord's word, he let down a net. The immediate effect was to introduce a spiritual dimension into that night's fruitless toil.

In the Upper Room, the Lord had impressed on these very men their need for a spirit of dependence upon Him in all things. He had said, "Without me you can do nothing" (John 15 :5). It seems, however, that in the spiritual life everything must be learned in an experiential way. Success in the business of fishing, in it's gospel sense, requires that the Lord is working with us. Our endeavours must be at His guidance, for fish are only caught when the net is cast at His direction, on the right side of the boat.

Come and Dine

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Coming onshore they found a fire, and fish laid on it, and bread. Jesus invited the disciples to join Him for breakfast and to bring of the fish they had caught. None of them asked any questions for they knew it was the Lord. He had appeared to them on two previous occasions and this was now the third time for Him to do so since His resurrection. They, of all people, could not have doubted that their crucified Lord had risen from the dead.

Lovest thou me ?

Breakfast over, the Lord Jesus turned to Peter, He said, *Simon, son of Jonah, lovest thou me more than these?* The expression *more than these* has raised a good deal of debate. Was it a reference to the fishing tackle and the boats lying nearby. Did Christ really come first, even before those things that had once been Peter's life?

Perhaps it is best to take the expression *more than these* as a reference to the other disciples. Before his great lapse of faith, Peter had boasted that although the other disciples might be offended in their Lord, he would not. The time had now come for him to acknowledge how wrong he had been to adopt that air of superiority over the rest of the apostolic band.

Of all the graces, love is said to be the greatest. "And now abideth, faith, hope, love, these three; but the greatest of these is love" (1Cor.13 :13). Real Christian love is God's love, shed abroad in our hearts by the Holy Spirit, reaching back in love towards God and out in love towards others. It's superlative quality is that in reaching out to others, it expects nothing in return.

The human heart cannot produce such love but it can experience it. And there are numerous exhortations given to believers to express it. The Psalmist wrote the bottom line of godly testimony through all the ages when he wrote,

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"I love the Lord" (Psa.116 :1). This was in line with the first commandment given by Moses, "You shall love the Lord, your God, with all your heart." And this is what Jesus sought from Peter, when He asked, *Do you love me more than these?*

Threefold Cord

Peter's reply was quite spontaneous, *Yes, Lord; you know that I love you*. Then came the word of commission, "Feed my lambs" (John 21 :15). The question was repeated two more times. This repetition of the question three times, while it grieved Peter, was deeply significant. Three times Peter had boasted of what he would do and of what he would not do. In the event, he denied his Lord not once or twice, but three times. The Lord's dealing with Peter, therefore, was not in the least superficial, for Peter's three denials found their full answer in the Lord's three times repeated question.

Without stopping to explore the point, we might note a distinction that will not be immediately evident to the reader of the English Bible. The Greek language uses several words which are translated into English by the one word *love*. This means that the word *love* in English has a wide range of uses. In the Lord's dialogue with Peter, however, two different words were used. The question addressed to Peter used the word *agape* which is the word for Christian love. But when Peter responded he used the word *phileo*, which basically denotes a friendship, an inclination or an emotion.

Peter's third response added something to the others. He said, "Lord, *you know all things*; you know that I love you" (John 21 :17). In saying this Peter may have been recognising the Lord's omniscience. Was he saying in effect, Lord, you know I love you, it might take

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omniscience to find that love in this poor heart of mine, but you know it's there just the same? His thinking certainly appears to have been along these lines.

All this allowed the other disciples to see the reality of Peter's restoration. In addition to both the interrogation and the response being repeated three times, Peter was given a renewed commission and this too was repeated three times. He said, Feed my lambs, and again, Feed my sheep. John may have had Peter in mind when he wrote in his first epistle, "My little children, let us not love in word, nor in tongue, but in deed and in truth" (1John 3 :18). Certainly Peter's devotion to Christ would henceforth be expressed in unremitting service to Christ's people.

Before the interview ended, the Lord Jesus disclosed to Peter the sufferings, and even the death, that his fidelity would involve. "When you were young, you girded yourself, and walked where you would; but when you will be old, you will stretch forth your hands, and another will gird you, and carry you where you would not" (John 21 :18).

Following this amazing preview of his servant's future, Jesus repeated to Peter his initial call to discipleship, He said, *Follow me*. This gracious renewal of Peter's original call set the seal to his restoration. It validated the reality of his repentance. And it prepared the way for Peter to regain his former place of leadership among the disciples.

Simon Peter - the Preacher

"A witness of the sufferings of Christ, and also a partaker of the glory that shall be revealed" (1Pet.5 :1).

(i) Opening the door of faith to the Jews

The book of *Acts* is the last of the specifically historical books of the New Testament. Like the third gospel, it too was written by Luke. It signals a watershed in God's dealings with men for it covers the period of transition when Judaism was being phased out, and Christianity was being phased in. The period covered is often referred to as the apostolic era.

Luke's purpose in writing his *Gospel* was to record what Jesus *began to do and to teach*, until the day when He was taken up into heaven. But in the book of *Acts*, his purpose was to chronicle what Jesus continued *to do and to teach* by His Spirit, through the ministry of the apostles. Peter is prominent in the first twelve chapters of *The Acts*, in fact, he features in almost every chapter. But after that, and to the end of the book, Paul takes over as the prominent apostle.

Theophilus

We know very little of the recipient of Luke's writings. In the gospel narrative he is addressed as *'the most excellent*

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Theophilus', but here in *The Acts* the title is dropped. Some have concluded from this that in the period between these two writings, Theophilus was stripped of his title by the Roman authorities because of his devotion to Christ. His name means 'a lover of God.' We can be quite sure that Theophilus had an absorbing interest in Christ, and in the things concerning the kingdom of God.

The Lord's post-resurrection ministry

In the opening verses of *The Acts* Luke emphasised Christ's post resurrection ministry, during the forty days between His rising from the dead, and His ascending into heaven. How many times He appeared to His own during that period is uncertain; but we know that the theme of His ministry was '*the kingdom of God*' (Acts 1 :3).

At the end of that period and just before His ascension to heaven, the risen Lord gave His disciples a final word of commission. He said, "You shall receive the power of the Holy [Spirit] coming upon you; and you shall be witnesses unto me both in Jerusalem, and in all Judea, and in Samaria, and unto the uttermost part of the earth" (Acts 1 :8).

Pentecost

A further ten days passed, and then, on the day of Pentecost, the Holy Spirit was sent forth. The coming of the Spirit created a public commotion, and gave rise to many questions. Strange things were taking place in Jerusalem. What was this rushing mighty wind, and what were these tongues of fire, that had appeared on people's heads?

Large numbers of people from widely different backgrounds were present in Jerusalem for the feast. Seeing these things and hearing the unlettered disciples speak the

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wonderful works of God in their several tongues and dialects, the people confessed their bewilderment and demanded to know what was happening. True, others simply dismissed what they had seen and heard, and with obvious scorn said, *These men are full of new wine*.

God's man for the hour was Simon Peter. Standing up with the others he delivered a powerful exposition of what God was doing in their midst. He boldly announced, "These are not drunk, as you suppose, seeing it is but the third hour of the day. But this is that which was spoken through the prophet, Joel ... " (Acts 2 :15,16). We know that Joel's prophecy will finally be fulfilled in a coming day, but what happened at Pentecost was the very same sort of thing as Joel had predicted.

Peter's two sermons

Although we hear Peter preaching many times in the beginning of this book, his first two sermons have a particular fascination for us. Just as the first two psalms are an introduction to the entire Psalter, so these two sermons introduce us to the new dispensation of the Spirit which began at Pentecost. Psalms one and two anticipate the two advents of Messiah, and Peter's two sermons focus on those two advents as well.

Although there were two sermons there was just one text. Peter's sermons derived their inspiration from what David had said in one of the Psalms. "The Lord said unto my Lord, Sit thou on my right hand, until I make thine enemies thy footstool" (Psa. 110 :1). Because the Lord Jesus Christ was David's Lord as well as being David's son, the reference here is to a conversation within the Godhead; the Father is speaking to the Son.

David could hardly have foreseen that an interval would lie between the two parts of this statement, and Peter could

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hardly have envisaged that this interval would stretch to nearly two thousand years as it has now done. The first sermon at Pentecost makes clear that the first part of this statement was fulfilled at the time of the first advent. The second sermon looked forward to the second advent when the second part will likewise be fulfilled.

Peter understood his ministry in terms of two things. He was (i) a witness of the sufferings of Christ, and (ii) a partaker of the glory that shall be revealed. (See 1Pet.5: 1.) And so his first sermon had as its theme the sufferings of Christ, its concentration was almost totally on the first advent. And then his second sermon looked forward to the glory that will be revealed at the time of the second advent. We could say, therefore, that taken together the two sermons precis Peter's preaching ministry.

The First Sermon

Peter began his first sermon by taking his hearers back to what they already knew about Jesus. "Ye men of Israel, hear these words: Jesus of Nazareth, a man approved of God among you by miracles and wonders and signs, which God did by Him in the midst of you, as you yourselves also know." He then recounted the events of Jesus death, and finally he pressed home the fact that He was now risen from the dead.

The Throne of David

Peter established the resurrection of Christ on the basis of a key prediction by David in one of the Psalms. And then he went on to say, "Men and brethren, let me speak freely to you of the patriarch, David ... being a prophet, and knowing that God had sworn with an oath to him, that ... He would raise up Christ to sit on his throne; he, seeing this before, spoke of the resurrection of Christ" (Acts 2 :29-31).

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On this basis, Peter argued the necessity and the fact of Christ's resurrection. At the time of His birth, the angel Gabriel had said to the virgin mother, "The Lord God shall give unto Him the throne of his father, David. And He shall reign over the house of Jacob forever" (Luke 1 :32,33). But only a living Christ could sit on David's throne, and for this reason, apart from many others, Christ must rise from the dead.

Emphasising the well-attested facts of David's death and burial, Peter pointed to his sepulchre which, he said, is with us to this day. True, the greater Son of David had died as well, but His tomb was now empty for He had risen again from the dead. In a coming day, and sitting upon David's throne, the risen Lord Jesus will reign over the whole house of Jacob.

Christ's Resurrection

The coming of the Spirit, besides enabling these disciples to become bold and forthright witnesses, was the proof that these things were true. At another feast, when Jesus was still among them, He had said, "If any man thirst, let him come unto me, and drink." By way of explanation, it was added that He spoke of the Spirit, whom they that believe on Him should receive; *for the Holy Spirit was not yet given, because Jesus was not yet glorified*. (See John 7 :37).

Before concluding this first sermon, Peter quoted from Psalm 110, making reference to something else David had said, "The Lord said unto my Lord, Sit thou on my right hand, until I make thy foes thy footstool." David recognised an interval between Christ's exaltation and His ultimate appearing in glory. That interval had now begun, and Christ was even now already seated at God's right hand.

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Peter's pungent and solemn reminders of how they had crucified the one whom God had sent, and how the Crucified was risen from the dead and was now seated at God's right hand, filled the hearers with a deep sense of conviction. They were pricked in their hearts, and said to Peter and the others, "Men and brethren, what shall we do?"

The Good News

At that point, Peter made his first use of the keys given to him by the Lord at Caesarea Philippi, he used them to open the door of faith to the Jews. He did so by proclaiming the good news of a ready pardon from an offended God. This pardon would come in the name of that same Jesus Christ, who died and rose again. Peter's message was forthright; it was with authority he said, "Repent and be baptised, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins, and you shall receive the gift of the Holy [Spirit]" (Acts 2 :38).

In the event, there was a marvellous response to the preaching. Of all who heard the message that day, about three thousand believed. These became the *nucleus* of the Church which, to this day, continues to grow unto a holy temple in the Lord. We are told of those that believed, "they continued steadfastly in the apostles' doctrine and fellowship, and in breaking of bread, and in prayers" (Acts 2 :42).

The Apostles Doctrine

We should not overlook the fact that the first members of the Christian church continued steadfastly in '*the doctrine*' of the apostles, as distinct from '*the acts*' of the apostles. (See Acts 2 :42.) The apostles doctrine is now preserved for us in written form, in the epistles of the New Testament.

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These epistles were written by the apostles, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit.

While all scripture is given by inspiration of God and is profitable. However, in this age the entire range of scripture, must always interpreted and applied, in the light of the New Testament epistles, especially the church epistles that were written by Paul. This requirement is indispensable if we are in any sense to *rightly divide the word of truth*.

Much misunderstanding has arisen at this point. Indeed, there is a decided resistance to this basic rule, in some quarters today. A failure to observe this important principle has resulted in many misguided attempts being made to reproduce in the church of the twenty-first century, those signs which rightly found their place in the apostolic period.

Peter's Second Sermon

The immediate occasion of Peter's second pentecostal sermon was the healing of the lame man who lay begging at the temple gate, called *Beautiful*. (See Acts 3:1-26.) If, as we have seen, the first sermon gathered around the events of the first advent, the second clearly centred on the second advent. The two sermons were based respectively on the two parts of David's statement to which we have already referred; (i) *Sit thou on my right hand*, and (ii) *Until I make thy foes thy footstool* (Psa.110: 1).

The first sermon, as we have seen, centred on the sufferings of Christ, His death and resurrection; but the second had as its theme, the glory that is yet to be revealed. More than that, the first sermon was addressed to the people on an individual basis, whereas the second seems to have been addressed to them corporately, *ie.* as a nation. Peter now seems to have had in mind the Abrahamic covenant, and

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how the nations will one day be blessed through the blessing of Israel. (See Acts 3 :25,26.)

The incredulous multitude listened as he pressed home their great sin in denying the Holy One, and desiring a murderer in His stead. The law provided no forgiveness for wilful sin. But even their great sin, Peter put down to the ignorance that was in them by nature, "Now, brethren, I know that through ignorance you did it, as did also your rulers" (Acts 3 :17). In doing this he brought their sin within the scope of God's pardoning grace.

He followed this with a most astonishing pronouncement. Had it not been so carefully recorded we would scarcely have believed it. If the people of Israel would repent and humble themselves, even at so late a stage, God would blot out their sins and actually send the Lord Jesus who had so recently ascended to heaven. (See Acts 3 :19,20.) What a striking instance this was of the longsuffering of God.

It was a quite extraordinary declaration. If Israel would even now turn to the Lord in true repentance, God would send Jesus, and those millennial conditions which had been foreseen by all the prophets since the world began would be realised. The miraculous healing of the lame man, therefore, was very significant for it became the occasion of this further offer of the kingdom to Israel.

What might have been

Outwardly, the nation at that time was represented by the Temple with its regular services, all of which were maintained with commendable zeal. But inwardly, the nation was like the lame man, spiritually powerless, unable to walk and to please God. Nothing less than a miracle could transform the lame man and enable him to stand up and walk, and to enter the temple with the apostles, walking and leaping and praising God.

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It was a notable miracle, indeed, and it serves as an illustration in two senses: in the first place, it pictures what would have been had the nation received Christ at His first advent. But He had been rejected. And to this further overture, the nation would soon give its answer in the martyrdom of Stephen. And so the miracle, in the second place, serves to illustrate what will be when the Saviour comes again.

Not until then will Israel, in true repentance, look upon Him whom they pierced. (See Zech.12 :10.) And that look of faith will give rise to a miracle of national regeneration; the nation (or at least a remnant of it) will be transformed to become like the lame man, now healed. When that happens, there will be a dramatic and national fulfilment of the prophecy which says, "The lame man shall leap as an hart, and the tongue of the dumb shall sing" (Isa.35 :6).

Persecution

But this was all too much for the leaders of the people. The apostolic witnesses were arrested and held in custody until the next day. They must have been greatly encouraged, however, by the quite sensational response to this second address. "Many of them who heard the word believed; and the number of the men was about five thousand" (Acts 4 :4).

The next day the Jews' Sanhedrin gathered in Jerusalem and the apostles were summoned to appear before the august tribunal. Once again, Peter was God's man for the hour. Filled with the Holy Spirit, he addressed the Sanhedrin and made a bold defence of what had taken place. He charged the rulers with the Saviour's death and boldly proclaimed once more that He had risen from the dead. Furthermore, he underscored that it was by the power

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of the risen Lord Jesus the lame man now stood before them whole.

The Jewish leaders might have tolerated what they were told up to this point, they might even have turned a deaf ear. But when the apostles went on to assert that this Jesus was not just *a* Saviour, but that He was the *only* Saviour, they were filled with indignation. Yet Peter insisted, "Neither is there salvation in any other, for there is no other name under heaven given among men, whereby we must be saved" (Acts 4 :12).

This was plainly too much for these religious leaders, but what could they do? They saw the boldness of Peter and John and knew there was something quite extraordinary about them. They also saw the once lame man, standing before them, and they simply could not deny such a public miracle. The best they could hope for was a degree of damage limitation.

After conferring among themselves, they called the apostles back into the council chamber and threatened them. They commanded them not to preach or teach any more in the name of Jesus. But the disciples could not accept this stricture. They told the Sanhedrin, "Whether it is right in the sight of God to hearken unto you more than unto God, judge ye. For we cannot but speak the things we have seen and heard" (Acts 4 :19,20). The rulers hands were tied because they feared the people, and so they again threatened the apostles and then let them go.

Being let go they immediately went back to their own company and convened a praise meeting. The first battle had been fought and a signal victory had been won. Very far from being intimidated by their experience, the disciples prayed and said, "Lord, behold their threatenings; and grant unto your servants, that with all boldness they may speak your word" (Acts 4 :29). And when they had prayed the

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place was shaken where they were assembled, and they were all filled with the Holy [Spirit]. Herein lay the secret of their triumph, they were a Spirit-filled people.

Simon Peter - the Preacher

*"... what was I, that I could withstand God?"
(Acts 11 :17).*

(ii) Opening the door of faith to the Gentiles

About ten years had passed since the events detailed in our last chapter. During those years several significant things had taken place, but the only concessions that had been made to the concept of an all-Jewish church centred in Jerusalem, were the evangelistic labours in Samaria of a man called Philip.

That there was an exceptional bond among those first believers is beyond doubt. They were of one heart and one mind and great grace was upon them. They even held their material possessions for the common good. In fact, it is recorded that they had all things common. They shared a common purse.

It was a time of intense persecution and the love of Christ, which was the common bond between them, moved them of their own voluntary will, to realise what they could from

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the sale of their houses and lands. They then brought the money and laid it at the apostles feet so that distribution could be made to any who were in need. In the van of all this benevolence stood a Cypriot Jew, of the tribe of Levi, called Barnabas. His name means *consolation*, and he clearly lived up to the meaning of his name.

Ananias and Sapphira

Ananias and his wife, Sapphira, ostensibly did what Barnabas had done. But Peter discerned, first in the case of Ananias, and then of Sapphira, that a serious deception was being perpetrated. This couple conspired to sell a possession, and bring part of the money and lay it at the apostles feet, pretending that it was the entire amount.

"Why did Satan fill your heart to lie to the Holy [Spirit]? demanded Peter. He had scarcely finished speaking when Ananias fell down dead. Only three hours later, and ignorant of the lot that had befallen her husband, Sapphira came in and there was a repetition in her case of what had already befallen her husband. They had conspired together to deceive the church, and to lie to the Holy [Spirit], and before the day was out they both shared the same grave.

The net result of their untimely deaths was that the integrity of the primitive church was preserved. Great fear came upon all, and of the rest no man dared join himself to them. Moreover, conspicuous blessing was upon the testimony, and multitudes, both men and women, were added to the Lord.

More Persecution

The High Priest and his cohorts were hopelessly perplexed. They again summoned the disciples and cast them into prison. But an angel opened the prison doors and brought them forth. They were actually witnessing in the temple when they were eventually apprehended. The High Priest reprimanded them saying, "Did not we strictly command

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you that you should not teach in this name? And, behold, you have filled Jerusalem with your doctrine, and intend to bring this man's blood upon us" (Acts 5 :28).

But this only served as a further opportunity for Peter to witness again to the gospel message. At that, the rulers of the people were profoundly incensed and considered slaying them. It was then that a wise man named Gamaliel intervened. Counselling caution, he said, "If this work be of men it will come to nothing, but if it be of God, you cannot overthrow it." They listened to this counsel and, after once more beating the disciples, they let them go.

Murmuring

But the peace of the church was soon to be disturbed from within. As has so often happened since, this came about not through any difference in doctrine but because of a difference, real or perceived, among the members. "There arose a murmuring of the Grecians against the Hebrews, because their widows were neglected in the daily ministration" (Acts 6 :1). The latter were native to Jerusalem, whereas the former, desiring both to die and be buried in the Holy City, had moved to live there.

The devotion of the Hellenist, or Grecian, widows was great, but a suspicion arose that the home-born widows were faring better from the common purse. The dispute itself, however important to those involved, (and there were serious pressures on them all at that time) was hardly rocket science. And yet it was the trigger that set in train a whole series of events, that issued eventually in the gospel reaching out beyond Judaism to the whole Gentile world. It is a quite amazing example of how God can overrule all things for His glory.

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In the first place the dispute forced the apostles to identify their priorities. They called the disciples together and said, "It is not fitting that we should leave the word of God, and serve tables ... we will give ourselves continually to prayer, and to the ministry of the word" (Acts 6 :2-4). Nowadays, and in our modern scale of values, the church does not regard these things as once she did. And the reasons for this are at the heart of her present powerlessness.

Organisation in the Church

A second thing that arose from that early dispute was the question of organisation. Striking a balance in this area has always been a challenge. Our organisation is most certainly off-beam where no room is left for a leading of the Spirit among us. But the necessity for a certain amount of organisation was recognised by the apostles. The action they took, it should be noted, owed nothing to the perceived authority of any one of their number, on the contrary, the twelve acted in consort.

Seven Men of Honest Report

Calling the believers together they said, "Look among you for seven men of honest report, full of the Holy [Spirit] and of wisdom, whom we may appoint over this business" (Acts 6 :3). The essential procedure was quite simple: the church nominated seven suitable men who were duly appointed by the apostles to this work.

The wisdom behind the whole exercise can be seen in the fact that all who were chosen were Hellinists, with the possible exception of the last, who was a Gentile proselyte from Antioch. Most notable among the appointees was Stephen, who did great wonders and miracles among the people. But these things did not qualify him for this ministry; his qualifications were moral and spiritual. Stephen was a man full of faith and of the Holy [Spirit].

The First Martyr

These things now led on to what became a watershed in the experience of the early church. Up to this point the gospel had been confined to Jerusalem and Judea. But a great wave of persecution was about to sweep over the church. It would result in a scattering of the believers although, for the present, the apostles would remain at Jerusalem. We are told, "They that were scattered abroad went everywhere preaching the word" (Acts 8 :4).

This new persecution began when the opposition turned its attention on Stephen. Certain members of the synagogue of the Libertines set themselves to oppose him. They disputed with him and even hired false witnesses against him. They accused him falsely of speaking blasphemous words against Moses, and against God. Others said, This man speaks against this holy place and the law. But when they brought Stephen before the council, we are told, that they all saw his face, as it had been the face of an angel.

When he was challenged by the High Priest about the charges, Stephen delivered a marvellous exposition of God's dealings with Israel, beginning with the call of Abraham. He called attention to Israel's persistent unbelief which culminated in the rejection of her Messiah. But they would have none of it. They were furious, and gnashed their teeth at him and, casting him out of the city; they took up stones, and stoned him.

Throughout this ordeal Stephen maintained a remarkable composure. He looked up steadfastly into heaven, and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing on the right hand of God. His death had many parallels with the Saviour's death. As the stones were raining down he prayed, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit. And he kneeled down, and cried with a

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loud voice, Lord, lay not this sin to their charge. And when he had said this, he fell asleep" (Acts 7 :59,60).

Saul of Tarsus

In recording these things, Luke was careful to note that those responsible for Stephen's death, laid their coats at the feet of a young man called Saul. Saul of Tarsus, while he consented to what had taken place, must have been profoundly impressed by what he had seen and heard. Nevertheless, he continued to make havoc of the church; he had many arrested, both men and women, and committed to prison.

In his zeal against all things Christian, Saul went to the High Priest and obtained letters authorising him to go to Damascus and if he found any believers there, to bring them back to Jerusalem in bonds. But as he approached Damascus the Lord met him and to the astonishment of all, Saul himself became a believer. He even preached Christ in the synagogues, and he confounded the Jews at Damascus, proving that this is very Christ. (See Acts 9 :20-22).

The Apostle to the Gentiles

From the beginning, the Lord let it be known that Saul had been chosen for a quite specific purpose. He told Ananias to visit him. "Go your way; for he is a chosen vessel unto me, to bear my name before the Gentiles, and kings, and the children of Israel." The future apostle to the Gentiles had been converted.

Philip in Samaria

At about the same time mighty developments were taking place elsewhere. We will not stop with the details of Philip's evangelistic labours in Samaria, save to point out that the Lord was with him in mighty power. The people

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with one accord gave heed to the message he preached and there was great joy in the city. When news of this reached Jerusalem, the apostles sent Peter and John to Samaria.

This was important in view of the deep-seated division between the Samaritans and the Jews. There must not be allowed to develop a Samaritan church in Samaria that might rival the Jewish Church at Jerusalem. When the two apostles arrived, they prayed for the new believers of Samaria that they too might receive the Holy [Spirit]. Then they laid hands on them and they received the Spirit.

Simon the sorcerer, observing all this, assumed the apostles were in league with some magical power, so he offered money that he might be able to do as they did. But he was soon disabused and told that his heart was not right in the sight of God. Peter told him, "Your money perish with you, because you thought that the gift of God could be purchased with money" (Acts 8 :20).

An Ethiopian of great authority

From the midst of what we would call revival scenes in Samaria, the Lord called Philip down to the desert that lay on the way to Gaza where certain man would pass by. In the event, he turned out to be an Ethiopian of great authority under Queen Candace. He was entrusted with the charge of the Queen's treasure and was returning from Jerusalem, where he had been to worship.

Philip found him reading the prophecy of Isaiah as he rode along in his chariot. He was reading that part where the prophet points forward to Christ and says, "He was led as a sheep to the slaughter; and as a lamb dumb before his shearer, so opened he not his mouth ... His life is taken from the earth" (Acts 8 :32). We recognise the passage today as Isaiah chapter fifty-three.

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Since the Ethiopian did not understand these things, Philip began at the same scripture and told him about Jesus. Passing a place along the way where there was water, the Ethiopian asked Philip, "What does hinder me to be baptised?" Philip told him, "If you believe with all your heart you may." The happy result was that he believed and was baptised. And then he went on his way rejoicing, bearing to the dark continent the good news about Jesus.

Peter the Evangelist

At Lydda

While these things were happening, Peter too, was busy in the work of the gospel. In the course of his labours he came to Lydda (*the Old Testament, Lod*) and [the vale of] Sharon. At Lydda he found a man who had been bed-ridden for eight years. By a mighty miracle, performed in the name of Jesus Christ, the paralytic was healed, and many people turned to the Lord.

At Joppa

Nearby, at Joppa, the sea-port of Jerusalem, a much loved disciple named Dorcas, had just died. They sent for Peter who, when he came, kneeled down and prayed: a further miracle took place, and when Peter called the believers he was able to present Dorcas to them alive from the dead. Again, many people believed in the Lord. After this Peter remained at Joppa for a while, lodging in the house of Simon, the tanner.

The knowledge of all that had taken place on the road south to Gaza, and on the road north to Damascus, as well as the triumph of the gospel among the Samaritans, probably prepared Peter in some measure for what was now about to happen. Unknown to him, further along the coast at Caesarea, Cornelius, a Roman Centurion of the Italian band, was seeking God in earnest prayer.

Cornelius

Although he was Roman and of noble birth, Cornelius had a good report among the Jews. He also maintained regular religious exercises in his household and was known for his generosity to the poor. Above all these things he was a fervent seeker after the true God. One day, about three o'clock in the afternoon, an angel appeared to him in a vision and said, Cornelius! Startled, Cornelius looked up and said, "What is it Lord?"

Cornelius sends for Peter

He was assured that God had heard his prayers and had seen his good deeds. And now he was to send to Joppa and invite Simon Peter to come down. Peter would tell him what he must do. The angel gave Cornelius very precise instructions as to where Peter would be found. And without delay, he called three men, two household servants and a devout soldier, and sent them to Joppa to find Peter.

Of course, the angel could have gone further and told Cornelius all that Peter might tell him, but that is not God's way. "For God has chosen the foolish things of the world to confound the wise; and God has chosen the weak things of the world to confound the things that are mighty" (1Cor.1: 27). It is also significant that Cornelius was not directed to send, say, for Philip. Why send for Peter?

The Unity of the Church

We must remember that at Caesarea Phillipi the Lord had entrusted the keys of the kingdom to Peter. We have seen how at Jerusalem on the day of Pentecost, Peter had used those keys to open the door of faith to the Jews. The time had now come for him to do the same for the Gentiles.

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The Holy Spirit had been given both to believing Jews at Jerusalem, and to those who had believed in Samaria. The same gift would now be given to believing Gentiles. There would not be a Jewish church, a Samaritan church and now a Gentile church. There would be one church, composed of all true believers in Christ. In that church racial and religious barriers would be done away. And all who believe would be one in Christ, they would be one body in the Lord.

Writing some years later to the church at Corinth, Paul emphasised this principle. He said, "By one Spirit [were] we all baptised into one body, whether we be Jews or Gentiles, whether we be bond or free; and have all been made to drink into one Spirit" (1Cor.12 :13). The cross has broken down the middle wall of partition.

Peter's Vision

In a most remarkable way the Lord graciously prepared Peter to receive the three emissaries from Cornelius, who would arrive at his door the following day. At about noon on that day, while a meal was being prepared, Peter went up to the housetop to pray, and there he fell into a trance. He saw heaven open and what looked like a great sheet let down to the earth. In it were all manner of beasts, both domestic and wild. There were creeping things, and fowls of the air, and the sheet was knit at the four corners.

Then a voice was heard saying, "Rise, Peter; kill and eat." Aghast, Peter drew back and said, "Not so, Lord; for I have never eaten anything that is common or unclean" (Acts 10 :14). This happened three times, and then the vessel was withdrawn. Just as he was trying to work out what this was all about, a knock came to the door. But before he could get downstairs, the Spirit of God told him, "Three men seek

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you ... go with them, doubting nothing; for I have sent them."

How marvellous are God's ways, they are past finding out. The apostle to the Gentiles had been converted on the Damascus Road. And he had then gone into Arabia and thence back to Tarsus. This left the coast clear for Simon Peter to turn the key that would open up the way for the gospel to be carried to the whole Gentile world.

But the experience on the rooftop at Joppa was a prior necessity. Peter was a Jew, we might even say, a bigoted Jew. He adhered strictly to the kosher laws that divided sharply between clean and unclean meats. Because the Gentiles made no such distinction, they were regarded as ceremonially unclean. Keeping himself apart, therefore, Peter had never sat down at a Gentile table.

The Dispensation of the Church

But at Joppa the Lord showed him that a new day had dawned: He was now making no difference between Jew and Gentile. "The same Lord over all, was rich unto all who call upon Him." The dispensation of the church had begun. Peter saw this in the great sheet containing all manner of beasts. The fact that the sheet was knit at the four corners, might also have taught Peter that God's purpose in the earth was no longer national, and Jewish, it was universal. The gospel was for the whole world.

In the house of Cornelius

We know from his opening remarks, when he stood up before Cornelius and his people, that Peter had got the message. He said, "Of a truth I perceive that God is no respecter of persons; but in every nation he that fears Him, and works righteousness, is accepted with Him" (Acts 10

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:34,35). He then went on to proclaim the gospel, for the very first time, to a wholly Gentile congregation.

He preached in language that was clear and direct. He pointed his hearers to the Lord Jesus and declared, "To Him give all the prophets witness, that through His name whosoever believeth in Him shall receive remission of sins." And while he was still speaking, the Holy Spirit fell on the assembled company. Even Peter's companions, who had come with him, were astonished at what had taken place.

The question of baptism arose, but it was really academic. They reasoned, "Can any man forbid water, that these should not be baptised, who have received the Holy Spirit as well as we?" Peter then commanded them to be baptised in the name of the Lord, and after that he was invited to stay with them for a little while.

It was a truly exceptional day. Peter had come to see God in a wholly new way. The vast territory of the Gentile world, which had been considered out of bounds, was now seen as part of the great harvest field. That Peter's Jewishness and its attendant prejudice had been overcome was made plain when he got back to Jerusalem. His fellow apostles were sceptical, but Peter simply rehearsed what had taken place and said, "Who was I, that I could withstand God?"

In Trials Often

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***"The Lord knows how to deliver the godly ... and
to reserve the unjust ... to be punished"
(2Pet.2 :9).***

The Circumcision

We will pass over Peter's encounter with the other apostles after he had been to the house of Cornelius. Save to say that there had formed within the church at Jerusalem a party whose aim was to impose, the Jewish rite of circumcision as a necessary condition of salvation and of membership in the church. Luke tells us that when Peter returned to Jerusalem, "they that were of the circumcision contended with him" (Acts 11 :2).

Before we sit in judgement on these people, we should remember that Israel had been chosen to be God's special people, they were a people divinely set apart. Moses had declared, "The Lord thy God has chosen you to be a special people unto Himself, above all people that are upon the face of the earth" (Deut.7 :6). It is quite understandable, therefore, that some had difficulty in coming to terms with the new situation.

Peter was plainly sensitive to how they felt and with great care he recounted what had taken place. He took them, step by step, through the events at Joppa and the unusual circumstances that led him to Caesarea. Most of all he told of his own astonishment when, as he began to speak, the Holy Spirit fell on the Gentiles. It was the same thing, he said, that happened to us at the beginning. "Then I remembered the word of the Lord ... and what was I, that I could withstand God?"

When the apostles heard Peter's report they immediately sensed that God was doing a new thing. They held their peace, and glorified God, saying, "Then has God also to the

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Gentiles granted repentance unto life." It was a happy result for the unity of the church, but it was not the end of the matter. About a year later, the same issue would come before the first council of the early church. (See Acts 15.)

The Jerusalem Council

The council was held at Jerusalem under the chairmanship of the apostle James. Its purpose was to rule on the question of circumcision, and the other matters that the Judaizing teachers were trying to impose on the believers. They had especially in their sights, believers from a non-Jewish background. Peter rehearsed to those assembled how God had visited the Gentiles to take out from them a people for His name.

The council's decision was to write to the churches, and to send their conclusions by the hand of chosen men. They wrote, "It seemed good to the Holy Spirit, and to us, to lay upon you no greater burden than these necessary things: that you abstain from things offered to idols, and from blood, and from things strangled, and from fornication; from which, if you keep yourselves, you shall do well" (Acts 15 :28,29).

Galatia

But the same issue arose again, in an even more acute form, at Galatia. We will not stop to consider at any length Peter's lapse on this issue. At Antioch he enjoyed the fellowship of the believers, but when certain brethren came from James, Peter withdrew and separated himself, fearing *them who were of the circumcision*. That was bad enough, but it had the knock-on effect of unsettling others, and even the beloved Barnabas was carried away by the hypocrisy.

The core of the issue was the answer to the basic question, "How is a man saved?" Is it by faith, or by law keeping, or by a combination of both? Scripture makes plain that we are saved by grace. "For by grace are you saved through

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faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; not of works, lest any man should boast" (Eph.2 :8,9). The fact is, if we add anything to faith in Christ, as a means of salvation, then grace is no more grace.

Paul was in Antioch at the time, and he withstood Peter to his face, and rightly so, for in this matter Peter and those who were associated with him were to blame. They were not walking according to the truth of the gospel. Taking a bold and vigorous stand for the truth, Paul declared, "We ... know that a man is not justified by the works of the law, but by the faith of Jesus Christ ... for by the works of the law shall no flesh be justified" (Gal.2 :16).

Happily, however vehement the disagreement between those two mighty apostles had been on that occasion, there was no permanent breach between them. Proof of this is found at the close of Peter's second epistle; after referring to Paul's writings, Peter spoke of him as "*Our beloved brother, Paul.*" As for the issue itself, it diminished in its intensity as the number of Gentile believers grew. Nevertheless, the principle still raises its head in various guises. Justification by faith alone is a truth that still needs to be defended.

And then to Prison

In between Peter's encounter with '*them of the circumcision,*' and the meeting of the council at Jerusalem, a matter of great moment took place. It was Easter and Herod, the king, began to assert his authority. He turned his wrath against the church and killed James, the brother of John, with the sword. Seeing that this pleased the Jews, He seized the opportunity to ingratiate himself further with them, by casting Peter into prison, intending to deal with him when the festival was over.

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Herod Agrippa

Known as Herod Agrippa, this king was the grandson of Herod the Great. He was appointed by the emperor Caligula, who gave him the title of king. He was sympathetic to the Jews, and he extended their city by building a wall on the north side of Jerusalem. He was also an observer of the law of Moses. But the believers soon discovered that he possessed the evil traits of his grandfather.

But God has weapons to which man has no answer. Before the chapter which records Peter's imprisonment concludes, we are told that Herod was eaten of worms, and died. Men had come from Tyre and Sidon, to seek the king's peace. Dressed in his royal robes and sitting upon his throne, Herod made a great speech. The people who heard his oration cried out, "It is the voice of a god and not of a man." He was savouring his proudest moment. Yet in that instant, the angel of the Lord smote him and he was carried back to his palace a dying man.

Peter Delivered

Was this the same angel that had delivered Peter from prison? Peter had been securely guarded. He was sleeping, chained to two soldiers. There were two other guards standing between him and the outside world. And there was the outer gate which was made of iron. Suddenly the angel appeared and told him to arise, and his chains fell from his hands. He was told to dress and follow the angel. Peter was completely bewildered when he found himself in one of the streets of the city, for the angel had now disappeared.

But when he considered his deliverance, he had no doubt about what had happened. He said, "I know of a surety that the Lord has sent His angel, and has delivered me out of the hand of Herod, and from all the expectation of the people of the Jews" (Acts 12 :11). After the first persecution Peter, and the others, went to their own company. And now Peter

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made his way to the house of Mary, the mother of John Mark, where many were gathered together praying.

The authorities might kill James and incarcerate Peter, but they were powerless against prayer. After his arrest, the church had given themselves to prayer on Peter's behalf. It was proper, therefore, that he should show himself to them on that Easter morning as one, to all intents and purposes, alive from the dead. It was also proper that he did not remain with them, but departed, and went to another place.

When his escape from prison was discovered, there would be a manhunt. The first place to be searched would be Mary's house. If Peter was found there, the whole company would be incriminated. It was in the sovereignty of God that Peter had been delivered from prison, but it was in his own responsibility that the safety of others should not be compromised.

Time for Reflection

What were Peter's thoughts at this time? Did he cast back in his mind to another Easter, fourteen years before. On the eve of Jesus death he had boldly asserted, "Lord, I am ready to go with you, both into prison, and to death" (Luke 22 :33). He could hardly have anticipated how that assertion would be put to the test. We should be careful about what we say to the Lord for we too might be put to the test.

On his deliverance from prison, Peter could hardly have failed to draw parallels with his experience at Joppa. There, the angel of the Lord had shown him the way forward, and now the angel had shown him the way out from Herod's prison. The sequel to both instances was the same. We are told, "The word of God grew and multiplied."

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Value of Prayer

The whole episode teaches us many lessons about prayer. It is clear that the church was not in the grip of some optimistic fervour. We know this by the fact that when Peter presented himself at the gate nobody was expecting him. And when Rhoda ran into the house, without first having the presence of mind to open the gate, and announced that Peter was outside, nobody believed her. Nor was the church in the throes of pessimism, else they would hardly have bothered to pray.

Clearly, they were a people possessed of faith, born of the conviction that God hears and answers prayer. Their prayer was corporate, it was the church that prayed. In all probability, Barnabas and Saul were among the number who prayed. We know that they were in Jerusalem at that time.

Their prayer was constant, for they prayed without ceasing. It was the feast of unleavened bread, a seven days feast, and they prayed right through. It was also persistent for they prayed on until Peter was delivered, and that did not happen until just a few hours before he was due to be executed.

End of an Era

Apart from the great council in Jerusalem, which was convened about seven years later, the events we have described brought to a close the first phase of the new dispensation. The Lord's final word to His disciples, before He ascended to heaven, pointed them towards the uttermost parts of the earth. Until now, however, they had remained at Jerusalem and the gospel had been largely restricted to Judaea.

But the martyrdom of Stephn, and the conversion of the Samaritans and of Saul of Tarsus, and particularly the visit of Peter to the house of Cornelius, meant that the whole

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situation was trembling on the brink of change. When we turn the page and come to Acts chapter thirteen we find that the centre of gravity has moved from Jerusalem to Antioch, in Syria.

Antioch was the place where the disciples were first called *Christians*. The verb translated *called* has the idea of being divinely called. *Christian* was not a nickname given to them by a hostile world. It was a divine designation that stands for all true believers to this day. There already was a church at Antioch, and from it Barnabas and Saul went on their missionary journeys, and to it they returned.

This change meant that the work of world evangelisation could now begin in earnest. We read of the church at Antioch, "As they ministered to the Lord, and fasted, the Holy [Spirit] said, Separate me Barnabas and Saul for the work unto which I have called them" (Acts 13 :2). The great ministry of missionary endeavour worldwide was under way and it continues to this day.

The new missionaries lifted up their eyes and looked upon the fields white, and ready to harvest. Their burden was to carry the gospel to the regions beyond. Initially, the pattern they adopted was simple: when they came to a city, they would first preach to the Jews and then to the Gentiles. But, gradually, the importance of this pattern diminished until the gospel was proclaimed to all without distinction.

This contrasted sharply with the earlier pattern when they who were scattered abroad after the death of Stephen, travelled as far as Phoenicia, and Cyprus, and Antioch, preaching the word to none but unto the Jews only. But after Acts thirteen this all changed, and even Paul, the apostle to the uncircumcision, took over the place of prominence that Peter had occupied, who was the apostle to the circumcision.

Peter as Shepherd

"Peter said unto Him, Lord; you know that I love you. He said unto him, Feed my sheep" (John 21 :16).

(1) His Writings

Peter evidently had visited the church in Babylon, and from there he wrote his first epistle. (See 1Peter 5 :13.) He seems to have been on a preaching itinerary at the time, along with John Mark. By ministering to the believers Peter was fulfilling his commission to feed the lambs of Christ's flock. And while in Babylon he probably saw a unique opportunity for evangelism. Babylon seemed a field white and ready to harvest.

Some have suggested that the Babylon referred to here was symbolic of Rome, but the five provinces in Asia Minor, and the order in which they are mentioned (See 1Peter 1 :1) Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia and Bithynia, suggest that Peter was in literal Babylon when he wrote this first epistle. We might also note in passing that people from some of those provinces were present at Jerusalem on the day of Pentecost. In all probability, it was through them that the gospel had spread throughout that whole region.

There were historical reasons for the large Jewish population in Babylon. At the end of the seventy years

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captivity, only a remnant of the exiles had returned to Jerusalem with Zerubabel, the rest had decided to remain in Babylon. Josephus, the Jewish historian, estimated that at this time, some thirty years after Christ, only one other city in the world had a greater Jewish population than Babylon.

We will not stop to discuss the long-running controversy between the two great branches of Christendom, Romanism and Protestantism, over Peter's visit to Rome, the imperial capital. The balance of opinion seems to be that it took place sometime before A.D. 68 which is the estimated date of his martyrdom. Peter would have been about seventy years old at the time. We can accept that his first epistle was written from literal Babylon, and still believe that his death took place at Rome.

The frequent references to Peter in the various accounts of the Lord's earthly ministry might have led us to expect a *gospel according to Peter*. Although it is commonly believed that Mark's gospel is very largely Peter's report, we search in vain for such a treatise. Instead, we have two marvellous letters that have come to us directly from Peter's pen.

The first thing that will impress any student of these letters is the transformation in the man himself. *The Peter of the Epistles* is so manifestly different from *the Peter of the Gospels*. The intervening years have had a chastening and mellowing effect. The Spirit of God has been at work in Peter's life, sanctifying and changing him, and conforming him to the image of his Lord. He beautifully expressed this renewed mind when he wrote, "Finally, be you all of one mind, having compassion one of another, love as brethren, be pitiful, be courteous" (1Peter 3 :8).

The impulsive and somewhat blustering attitude of the earlier years has gone and, in its place, there is a mildness

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and a meekness that was not there before. His renowned self-confidence has given way to a spirit of dependence upon another, someone stronger than himself. In the deepest meaning of the word, Peter was at last *converted*. And now in these letters he devotes himself to the business of strengthening his brethren. (See Luke 22 :31,32.)

Peter's Afflictions

We are left to conjecture what those intervening years had held for this apostle. After his famous release from prison (See Acts 12.), we read very little of him. But the passing years must have brought intense and protracted suffering and affliction. How else could the Peter we have known, have become such an able minister of the grace of God to the persecuted saints scattered throughout those five provinces that later became known as *Asia Minor*.

By his writings he bound up their wounds and poured in oil and wine. And besides helping them come to terms with what they had suffered, and were still suffering, he also prepared them for the fiery trial that he knew lay just around the corner. Moreover, succeeding generations of believing people have treasured these letters. One who pondered them deeply, described them as 'the tenderest and most consolatory words that have ever fallen on the ears of suffering saints.'

(2) The sufferings of Saints

Peter's First Epistle

Our purpose is to tell the story of Peter's life and not to write a commentary on his epistles. For this reason we will content ourselves with a brief line of thought, especially from the first epistle, that might help to point up the later

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ministry of our apostle. He saw his ministry in a twofold light. (i) A witness of the sufferings of Christ, and (ii) a partaker of the glory that shall be revealed. (See 1Pet. 5 :1.) He first identifies with the sufferings of the believers and then he helps them to see their sufferings in the context of the Saviour's sufferings.

Peter saw his readers as sojourners or strangers. A sojourner is one in temporary residence. He will abide where he is, but only for a time. This, of course, is true of every man, although not all recognise it. The masses of people live as though they will be here forever. The people of God, on the other hand, recognise that this world is not their home, they are simply passing through.

*I'm but a stranger here,
Heaven is my home.
Earth is a desert drear,
Heaven is my home.*

God's elect

Besides being sojourners, Peter's people were also scattered. Its not just that their dwellings were spread over a wide area, but that they were scattered as the result of persecution. Many of them may have been part of the scattering that occurred after the death of Stephen. (See Acts 8 :4.) And yet, although they were scattered throughout the five provinces, Peter saw them as part of a single corporate company, the company of God's elect.

Through a gracious ministry of the Holy Spirit, they had been led to obey the gospel of Christ, and in this way they were incorporated into the number of those whose names are written in heaven. Their present position was like that of the Israelites in Egypt when they had found shelter under the blood of the passover lamb.

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Among other things, Peter's people cherished a common hope. He called it a living hope because it centred in Christ who had died, but was now risen from the dead. The Christian's hope is Christ Himself, and its ultimate prospect is to be like Him at His coming again. They also kept before them the heavenly inheritance. "An inheritance incorruptible, and undefiled, and that will not fade away, reserved in heaven for you" (1Pet.1 :4).

The Trial of Faith

As we too wait for the Lord's return we are easily able to identify with Peter's readers whose lot was one intense pressure; of heaviness through manifold testings. Addressing himself urgently to their plight Peter told them, "The trial of your faith, [is] much more precious than of gold that perishes, though it be tried with fire" (1Peter 1 :7).

We tend to apply this scripture to the disagreeable downsides of life, and this is entirely proper. But Peter must have had something more specific in his mind. Political persecution was just about to begin in earnest at the time this epistle was written. Up until then, apart from Herod's martyrdom of James, and his imprisonment of Peter, it was the religious authorities that had harrassed the church.

Peter could remember how the first disciples had reacted to their persecution by the religious authorities at Jerusalem. In spite of the physical pain they endured, for they were beaten with stripes, "They rejoiced that they were counted worthy to suffer shame for His name" (Acts 5 :41). And now he saw the same fortitude in the patient suffering of these elect sojourners who were scattered throughout the provinces.

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This seems to confirm the view that the manifold trials were more than simple aches and pains. All of us, even those of us who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, are subject to the infirmities that afflict a groaning creation. We groan within ourselves. But a toothache, a headache or a backache are not the sort of things that provoke rejoicing. Yet Peter could commend his readers because they rejoiced even though for a season, they were in heaviness through manifold trials. (See 1Peter 1 :6.)

Manifold Temptations

To the western mind Peter's comfort seems a contradiction in terms. "*You greatly rejoice ... you are in heaviness through manifold trials*" (1Peter 1 :6). But these sufferers were rejoicing in the assurance that through God's overruling providence, their very trials were serving a higher purpose. God was at work: and like a goldsmith, He was refining the faith of His people against that day of glory when the Lord Jesus would come again.

For Righteousness Sake

Peter identifies several forms afflictions may take, and it is certain, they will not always come in the same way. In the second chapter he addresses a kind of suffering that is commonly endured to this day. Viewing believers in the dual context of society and industry, he recognises the temptations to which they will be exposed. But he exhorts them to maintain an open and honest life-style. It will be too bad if they suffer for their faults, but what if they should suffer because of their integrity and uprightness?

This is an issue that many have had to face. Materialism feeds the love of money, and the love of money is the root of all evil. The present organisation of society, especially U.K. society which we know best, seems to provide many opportunities for dishonesty. With the staggering abuse of

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financial benefits such as family credits, farming subsidies and business incentives, etc, etc. the scope for exploitation seems endless. Certainly the media is kept busy reporting the countless cases of fraud.

Persons trying to maintain an honest stance in such a climate, can quickly find themselves out on a limb. Do they go along with what they know to be doubtful, or do they stand aside? On a purely personal level, honesty is still the best policy, but for the believer there is an added dimension. For him to connect in his person an evil deed with that worthy name by which he is called, would be a violation of the third commandment and a repudiation of his Christian testimony.

Guided by the honour of God, the believer must endeavour to mind his own business, do his work honestly, and be a witness to all. At times this will mean being out of step with the prevailing culture, a stance may well incur the wrath of other people. But such a scenario is not new. Peter faced it in his day, and to all who were suffering such malice he said, "If when you do well and suffer for it, you take it patiently, this is acceptable with God" (1Pet. 2 :20).

Conscience

The important thing is to maintain a clear conscience. It is always praiseworthy when a man patiently endures trial, for the sake of a good conscience. (See 1Peter 2 :19 & 3 :16.) The word *conscience* literally means *joint-knowledge*. It's a faculty man acquired through the fall in Eden, for after the fall God said, "Behold, the man is become as one of us, to know good and evil" (Gen.3 :22). In simple terms this meant that man now had a knowledge of good without the power to do it, and a knowledge of evil without the power to resist it.

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This joint-knowledge is universal. Even in lands where the light of the gospel has not penetrated, there is still a recognition that certain things, such as stealing, are wrong. There is clear evidence of something innate that bears witness to humans, either accusing them or excusing them. Conscience, of course, can be stifled, we read of some whose conscience was seared as with a hot iron. (See 1Tim.4 :2.)

Conscience, of course, needs to be educated. The believers' conscience should always be exercised according to the light that shines from scripture. This may involve suffering wrongfully, to a greater or lesser degree, even so it is vital that we maintain a conscience void of offence, both before God and man.

Suffering as a Christian

Peter went on to say, "If a man suffer *as a Christian*, let him not be ashamed; but let him glorify God on this behalf" (1Pet.4 :16). This designation is used only three times in the New Testament. (See also Acts 11 :26, and 26 :28.) The very term implies that bearing the sacred name will likely incur opposition and even suffering. But no shame is attached to such suffering. On the contrary, the Spirit of glory and of God will rest on the sufferer.

We have already suggested that Peter's reference to a trial of faith probably referred to the early church's suffering at the hands of the Jewish authorities. But a time came when this persecuting role was taken over by the political power, the Roman Empire. Whether, by revelation or premonition, Peter seems to have anticipated this, and he forewarned the believers of what lay ahead. "Beloved, think it not strange concerning *the fiery trial that is to try you*, as though some strange thing happened unto you" (1Peter 4 :12).

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Writing some years later the risen Lord through His servant John, told His suffering people at Smyrna, "You shall have tribulation ten days" (Rev. 2 :10). Expositors are mostly agreed that this refers to the ten distinct persecutions of the Church, by the Roman Empire. Only when Constantine came to the throne of the Caesars, in A.D. 306, did those cruel oppressions come to an end.

The first persecution began in A.D. 64, about the time when Peter wrote his first epistle. The emperor Nero, perhaps the most depraved of all the emperors, ordered the city of Rome to be set on fire, and afterwards blamed the arson on the Christians. This became a pretext for the most revolting cruelties to be heaped on the heads of any who named the name of Christ. They were covered with the skins of wild beasts and torn by mad dogs, while others were covered with pitch, and set alight to serve as torches in Nero's gardens.

Peter's Death

Still others were crucified, the most notable being Peter himself. Accepting, as we have said, that his first epistle was written from literal Babylon, on the banks of the Euphrates; we can still believe that *his exodus* took place from Rome, on the banks of the Tiber. Paul and Peter both fell foul of Nero and, at about the same time, Paul was beheaded and Peter was crucified. But if their deaths were violent, they were also triumphant, and they continue to this day to inspire us all

The testimony of the early Church Fathers is that Peter was crucified with his head downward. This was at his own request because he reckoned himself unworthy to die exactly as his Lord had died. It certainly was a very precise fulfilment of the Lord's prediction about the death by which His servant would glorify God. (See John 21

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:18,19.) Some say that Peter's wife also died by his side. Only the death of Nero, which was as terrible as his life, gave the Christians some temporary respite from persecution.

Peter had encouraging words for the saints as they endured those persecutions. He said, "Rejoice, inasmuch as you are made partakers of Christ's sufferings, that, when His glory shall be revealed, you may be glad also with exceeding joy. If you be reproached for the name of Christ, happy are you; for the Spirit of glory and of God rests upon you; on their part He is evil spoken of, but on your part He is glorified" (1Peter 4 :13,14).

The Adversary

Behind all the suffering that was ever sustained by the Church stood the shadowy figure of the great enemy. "Your adversary, the devil, like a roaring lion walks about, seeking whom he may devour." Because of this, Peter's exhortation is as pertinent to us as it was to the sojourners of his own time. "Whom resist stedfast in the faith, knowing that the same afflictions are accomplished in your brethren that are in the world" (1Pet. 5 :8,9). This is a call to arms! Everyone who names Christ's name must stand in the line and do battle with the enemy.

Campbell Morgan (in *Searchlights from the Word*) says, "The outlook is on the whole conflict for the saints. It is seen as one, no soul is fighting alone. Each one is at once supporting, and supported by, all the rest. Therefore it follows that to cease to withstand is to weaken all the line of battle, and to create a vantage ground for the enemy; while to continue to stand is to strengthen that line, and to make it difficult for the foe to break through the plan of the great Captain of salvation. This means that in order to help me to withstand, all the saints are fighting ... we never fight alone."

Peter is emphatic that, in the end, the battle is not ours but the Lord's. Our foe may be powerful, but he is not all-powerful and he can be resisted. The Captain of our salvation, on the other hand, is almighty. He is the God of all grace. The outcome of the conflict therefore, is not in doubt, and after we have suffered awhile He will bring us to His eternal glory.

(3) The Sufferings of Christ

There is mystery about suffering that is quite inexplicable. We accept that when people abuse themselves they will suffer the recompense of their error, but why should the innocent suffer? Why should little children suffer from aids, even from their mother's womb? Of course, in a general sense it can all be traced back to the fall in Eden, but so often we have struggled to make sense of individual cases and they still leave us baffled.

Job suffered more than most. His would-be comforters gave him compelling reasons for his sufferings, and they were all wrong. The lesson for us is that we should be forward to offer those who are suffering an arm to lean on, and we should be backward in the extreme about hazarding explanations for other people's sufferings. In so many instances we can only say,

*Not till the loom is silent,
And the shuttles cease to fly,
Will God unroll the canvas
And explain the reason why,
The dark threads are as needful
In the weavers skilful hand,
As the threads of gold and silver
In the pattern He has planned.*

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By a strange paradox, however, the mystery of suffering is somewhat relieved when we think of the greatest mystery of all, the mystery of Calvary and our Saviour's sufferings. Malcolm Muggeridge used to tell a very touching story. At one of his meetings a little boy in a wheelchair tried incoherently to say something. The famous broadcaster left the platform and came down to the little fellow and putting an arm around him elicited the question, "If God loves me as you say He does, then why ... ?"

Muggeridge was silent for a few moments and then he said, "God has asked a hard thing of you. But remember He asked an even harder thing of His Son the Lord Jesus Christ. He asked Jesus to die for you, and maybe this is His way of making sure you would hear of His love and come to put your trust in Him." In every chapter of his first epistle, Peter calls attention to the sufferings of the saints. And more than any other writer in the New Testament, he calls attention to the sufferings of Christ.

Because of our tendency to dwell almost exclusively on Christ's atoning sufferings, we may fail to properly appreciate the things He suffered during His pathway here. A careful reading of this first epistle will indicate that when Peter spoke of the sufferings of Christ, he spoke of them as an inclusive whole, always viewing them in their wider context.

For example, he mentions how the Hebrew prophets, "Testified beforehand the sufferings of Christ, and the glory that should follow" (1Peter 1 :11). This was surely a comprehensive testimony to Christ's sufferings in their widest context. Isaiah, to name but one, not only witnessed to how the Lord Jesus was despised and rejected by men, but also to how He was afflicted by God.

When Peter describes himself, in the final chapter of this epistle, as a witness of the sufferings of Christ, the

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reference is not to be restricted to Christ's suffering on the cross? If so, it begs an interesting question. Was Peter present when Jesus suffered for our sins? It may be that he did stand somewhere in the shadows of Calvary, but there is no suggestion of this in any of the records. However, if we accept that he was referring to the sufferings of Christ in their wider context, then the claim is easily comprehended.

The determining reference in this connection seems to be in chapter four. "Beloved, think it not strange concerning the fiery trial which is to try you ... but rejoice, inasmuch as *you are partakers of Christ's sufferings* ... " (1Pet. 4 :12,13). Here Peter links the sufferings of *those who suffer as Christians*, with the sufferings of Christ. We can have no part in the atoning sufferings, those He endured apart and alone. But we can, and do, have fellowship with Him in His other sufferings.

Amazingly, Christ still suffers in His saints. The clearest indication of this was given at the time of Saul's conversion on the Damascus road. A voice from heaven was heard asking, "Saul, Saul, why persecutest thou me?" We know that Saul was persecuting the believers yet, in reality, He was persecuting the Saviour Himself. In all our afflictions, He too is afflicted.

*In every pang that rends our hearts,
The Man of sorrows has a part.*

And Peter insists on this when he associates the sufferings of his people with the Saviour's sufferings. This elevates the things we suffer, when we suffer as Christians, to a very high level indeed. We do not seek adversity, but when it comes, because of the faith of Christ, we will not shirk it either. In such a circumstance the Spirit of glory and of God will rest upon us, and we are assured that our pain will also be felt by our Master in heaven.

(4) The Glory to be Revealed

If in this life only we have hope in Christ, we are of all men most miserable. But there is the life to come. And having lifted the sufferings of those who suffer as Christians to a level that many had not imagined, Peter went on to show a further dimension to those sufferings. They will have their ultimate answer in the glory that is still to be revealed. "Rejoice, inasmuch as you are partakers of Christ's sufferings, that, *when His glory shall be revealed*, you may be glad also with exceeding joy" (1Peter 4 :12,13).

(5) Peter's Characterisations of Christians

In the first two chapters of his first epistle Peter characterises believers in the following four ways.

- (i) As Obedient Children (1: 13).
- (ii) As Newborn Babies (2: 2).
- (iii) As Living Stones (2: 5).
- (iv) As Strangers and Pilgrims (2: 11).

Three of these figures view believers in relation to their *state*, the exception, *as living stones*, takes up the question of our *standing*, for this reason we will deal with it first.

Living Stones

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The important distinction between standing and state must be recognised, if we are in any sense to rightly divide the word of truth. Our standing is *what we are before God in Christ*, while our state is *what we ought to be before men in ourselves*. The idea is that we should learn our standing, and then endeavour that by the power of the Spirit to bring our state into line with our standing.

The difference between standing and state was highlighted in the church at Corinth. In the second verse of his first letter, Paul describes the believers as "*sanctified in Christ Jesus, and called saints*." But in the eleventh verse he goes on to say, "It has been declared unto me of you, my brethren ... that *there are contentions among you*." The first statement shows those Corinthian Christians as to their standing: the second shows that their state came a long way short of their standing.

Stones in His House

Peter uses the figure of a house to illustrate our position *in Christ*. Because we are *in Him*, we are stones in that house of which He is the foundation. And because the foundation is *a living stone*, we are said to be living stones. We are partakers of His risen life. "You also, as [living] stones, are [being] built up a spiritual house" (1Peter 2: 5).

The building, obviously still in course of construction, is progressed through the preaching of the gospel. When anyone repents and believes the gospel that person becomes *in Christ*, and is incorporated as a living stone into the Church, His spiritual house. Pastors and teachers will then exercise a ministry of edification, and thus the whole edifice will grow to a holy temple in the Lord.

Members in His Body

Several other figures are used to set forth this same truth. For example, *in Christ* we are said to be members of His body. "For by one Spirit [were] we all baptised into one

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body, whether we be Jews or Gentiles, whether we be bond or free" (1Cor.12: 13). Again, being *in Christ* we are said to be sheep in His flock. He calls His own sheep by name and leads them forth. Each individual believer, as a sheep of His pasture, is entitled to say, "The Lord is my shepherd."

The marvellous thing about our standing *in Christ* is that it is permanent. Once in Him we are in Him forever, thus the eternal covenant stands. Our state will fluctuate, but our standing remains forever the same. Christ has pledged eternal life to His sheep, and he has decreed that none shall pluck us from His hand. (See John 10: 28.)

Obedient Children

Christlikeness

This figure will be familiar enough to anyone with a reasonable knowledge of scripture. As the physical realm children are normally expected to bear the family likeness, so in the spiritual. "As He who has called you is holy, so be you holy in all manner of [living]" (1Peter 1: 15). Holiness is likeness to the Holy One. Another term meaning the same thing, is Godliness, which means likeness to God. And since the God we worship is revealed in the Lord Jesus Christ, then Christlikeness is identical with Holiness and Godliness.

Holiness is set before us here in two senses. "It is written, Be [become] holy (*here the reference is to holiness in its relative sense*), for I am holy (*here the reference is to holiness in its absolute sense*)." God dwells in light that is inaccessible. With God there is neither changeableness nor shadow of turning. In His presence the angels declare Him to be thrice holy, "Holy, holy, holy, is the Lord of hosts" (Isa. 6 :3). But with us holiness is always a relative matter.

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A progressive matter

The intention, however, is that holiness will become a progressive matter. We are to grow in grace and in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ. Through an ever deeper knowledge of Christ we will grow more like Him, and thus we will increase in Holiness. Although we were just as much in Christ when we first trusted Him as we are now so many years later, we surely ought to be more like Him.

We must not assume that we have reached the summit of Christianity simply because we are saved, and enjoy conscious peace with God. In practical terms, we ought to be more completely the Lord's this year than we were last year. To be occupied with Christ in His word is always the essential pre-requisite for proper spiritual development.

People might say of a new baby, He is so like his father! Then when he grows into youth and young manhood, his father might even say, I can see myself in the things that boy does and in the very way he does them. Later, when in his prime, the boy himself might look in the mirror one day and say, I'm getting very like my father.

All three statements may be true but they represent different degrees of likeness. In a similar sort of way, some believers seem to be like Christ, but only in the sense that the infant in the pram is like his father. Others become like Christ in the sense that the youth is become like his father. All of us, however, should aim to be like Christ in the sense that the mature man is now said to be like his father.

Newborn Babes

But how is this conformity to Christ to be advanced. The next figure shows the way. The term *Babes* is applied to believers in two senses in the New Testament. Paul

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referred to the Christians at Corinth as *Babes in Christ*. He thought of them simply as babes who had remained babes. They had never grown. Can anything evoke more sympathy than the sight of a child whose mental or physical faculties have not properly developed? There is a counterpart to this in the spiritual realm, and the Corinthian believers were a case in point.

But Peter uses the term in its regular sense. He addresses the believers simply as new born ones. An integral part of the conversion experience is regeneration, being born of the Spirit. New birth marks the beginning of our spiritual journey. And just as parents will look for growth in their new baby, so the Lord looks for spiritual growth in the lives of all who have been born anew.

The basic principle of growth is found in every kind of living thing. In one of the parables our Lord spoke of this principle in the realm of agriculture. He said "The earth brings forth fruit ... first the blade, then the ear and after that the full corn in the ear" (Mark 4 :28). The apostle John, in his first epistle, shows stages in the spiritual development of believers. He wrote of them as little children, as young men and as fathers. (See 1John 2 :12-14).

Spiritual growth

Very largely, growth in any realm will come down to feeding. By the mysterious processes of our digestive systems the bread we eat is translated into blood, brain and bone. The blood then gives us energy, the brain gives us intelligence and the bone gives us strength. Similarly, as we feed our souls on the word of God, the Holy Spirit working within us is able to translate that spiritual food into spiritual energy, spiritual intelligence and spiritual strength.

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The measure of our spiritual growth is simply the measure of our likeness to Christ. God predestined His people for this very purpose, that they should be conformed to the image of His Son. We also know that when Jesus comes again we shall be like Him, and it follows, as day follows night, that every man who has this hope in him, purifies himself, even as He is pure. (See Rom.8 :28 & 1John 3 :3,4.)

*Be like Jesus, this my song;
In the home and in the throng.*

Strangers and Pilgrims

Where we are

This is a double characterisation. *Strangers*, reminds us of where we are and *pilgrims*, of where we are going. Where are we? From our birth we have been in the world, and since our conversion we have still been in the world, but we are in the world now in a wholly different sense. Then we were both *in* the world and *of* it, now, although we are in the world, we are no longer of it. We are in it as our place of abode but we are not of it's spirit or disposition, for the whole world lies in the wicked one.

*I'm but a stranger here - Heaven is my home.
Earth is a desert drear - Heaven is my home.
Danger and sorrow stand round me on every hand,
Heaven is my fatherland - Heaven is my home.*

We are in the world as salt and light, but we are not a part of the present world system. Our citizenship is now in heaven and there our treasure is. Our task is to labour that others too might be delivered as we have been delivered. Always remembering that "Christ gave Himself for our sins, that He might deliver us from this present evil world" (Gal.1 :4).

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This requires us to walk in separation from the world. Archimedes, who is still considered the most inventive mathematician of ancient Greece, said that if he had a platform apart from the world, he could lift the world. Our platform is Christ and by walking in separation unto Him, we are best able to serve our generation.

Where we are going

Since we are pursuing a pilgrimage, we are in the world simply as those who are passing through. Every passing day is bringing us nearer home. The order in which Peter sets these two characterisations together is full of meaning. We are strangers first and then pilgrims. The reality is that we will never be true pilgrims until we learn our strangership. Only then, will we grasp the reality that here we have no continuing city, but we seek one to come.

The true pilgrim's heart will always be in the country to which he is travelling. Paul, therefore, exhorts us as fellow-travellers to the heavenly land, "Seek those things which are above, where Christ sits on the right hand of God. Set your affection on things above, not on things on the earth" (Col. 3 :1,2).

Peter is also concerned about how we behave ourselves in the journey. We are urged us to be mindful of others, even though who may oppose us that, in the end, they might be compelled to glorify God on account of our good works. Very succinctly he exhorted, "Have your [manner of life] honest among the Gentiles" (1Peter 2 :12). This is a concern throughout all Peter's writings. He refers to the chaste [good or wholesome] manner of life of the Christian, and against that he sets the filthy manner of life of the wicked. We are to copy the former and assiduously eschew the latter.

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Important Negatives

In setting forth these characterisations of believers, our apostle calls our attention to several negative things. To use a metaphor from horticultural, he teaches us that if good fruits are to be cultivated, then bad weeds must be restrained. For instance, if we would increase in holiness then we must not conform to the patterns of the old life. "Not fashioning yourselves according to the former lusts" (1Pet.1 :14).

We must also guard against anything that would retard progress towards spiritual maturity. In this connection, Peter places emphasis on the sins of the spirit. Believers tend to be especially susceptible to these sorts of sins. "Wherefore, lay aside all malice, and all guile, and hypocrisies, and envies, and all evil speaking" (1Peter 2 :1). And finally, since the pilgrim character of the Christian is constantly under attack, we must resolutely "abstain from fleshly [desires] which war against the soul" (1Peter 2 :11).