

Bible Studies about Peter

Study 4: Peter at the Transfiguration of Christ

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Background

The account of Peter at the transfiguration of Christ appears shortly after Peter's confession of Christ which we looked at in Study 2 in this series. As we saw in this earlier study, Christ's response to Peter was:

“Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father in heaven. And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it. I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.”¹

Immediately before the account of the transfiguration of Christ, Jesus predicts His death. This account is also important to look at in this context since it tells us:

“From that time on, Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and undergo great suffering at the hands of the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him, saying, “God forbid it, Lord! This must never happen to you.” But he turned and said to Peter, “Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me; for you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.”

Then Jesus told his disciples, “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it. For what will it profit them if they gain the whole world but forfeit their life? Or what will they give in return for their life?

“For the Son of Man is to come with his angels in the glory of his Father, and then he will repay everyone for what has been done. Truly I tell you, there are some standing here who will not taste death before they see the Son of Man coming in his kingdom.”²

The Message

Once again Peter demonstrates his impulsive devotion to Jesus – “God forbid it, Lord! This must never happen to you.” What a stark contrast the above two accounts present us with – in one, Jesus tells us that Peter is the “rock [he] will build [his] church”; and in the other Peter, is “a stumbling block” to Jesus. I wonder, how well does this echo our zeal and commitment to the Lord that can sometimes be a roller coaster ride, and how much it reveals to us something of the reality and humanity of Peter?

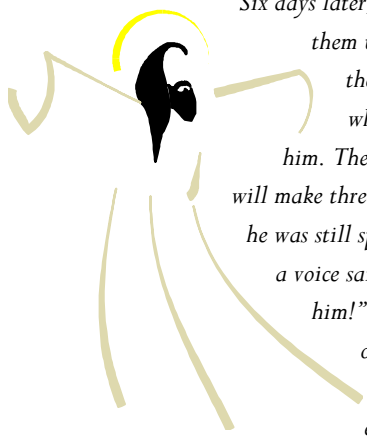
Peter is a very real and honest person who perhaps reminds us at times of ourselves, and how we can at times be holy, yet at other times in the ‘gutter of the world.’ In spite of all of this, the account gives us hope. From a position of criticism or admonition, Jesus having disciplined Peter then provides instruction which would be of such relevance to Peter in his later ministry, and is of such relevance to true Christians today. We should remember this biblical precedent in that admonition should always be followed by restoration born out of a repentant heart.

¹ Matthew 16:17-19

² Matthew 16:21-28

One of my friends once said that ‘Christianity is a bed of roses’, and my immediate thought was ‘How can he be saying this?’ In my early years as a Christian I heard many people who did not preach from the reality of God’s Word, suggesting in their message that if people gave their life to the Lord, their life afterwards would be free from hardship and challenge – and this is something that I just could not reconcile with what I read in Scripture. We have already read Jesus’ words in Matthew 16 where he says *“If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it”* I am pleased to say that my friend went on to say that at times we experience the most beautiful, and ‘fragrant’ experience in our walk with God – yet at other times we become all too aware of the rose thorns; when we come face to face with our failings, and sinfulness. This always reminds me of two things – Jesus’ response above relating to how we must take up our cross, and also the crown of thorns that Jesus was made to bear on the day that He *“For Christ also suffered for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, in order to bring you to God.”*³

It is generally understood that in the last verse of the second account above (Matthew 16: 28), Jesus is predicting the transfiguration:



“Six days later, Jesus took with him Peter and James and his brother John and led them up a high mountain, by themselves. And he was transfigured before them, and his face shone like the sun, and his clothes became dazzling white. Suddenly there appeared to them Moses and Elijah, talking with him. Then Peter said to Jesus, “Lord, it is good for us to be here; if you wish, I will make three dwellings here, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah.” While he was still speaking, suddenly a bright cloud overshadowed them, and from the cloud a voice said, “This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased; listen to him!” When the disciples heard this, they fell to the ground and were overcome by fear. But Jesus came and touched them, saying, “Get up and do not be afraid.” And when they looked up, they saw no one except Jesus himself alone.



*As they were coming down the mountain, Jesus ordered them, “Tell no one about the vision until after the Son of Man has been raised from the dead.”*⁴

In summary, the transfiguration was:

- a) A revelation and foretaste of the glory of the Son of God, a glory hidden now but to be fully revealed when He returns again (the second coming)
- b) A confirmation of the difficult teaching given to the disciples at Caesarea Philippi (Matthew 16:13-20) and
- c) A beneficial experience for the disciples, who were discouraged after having been reminded so recently of Jesus’ impending suffering and death (Matthew 16:21-28)

The transfiguration should also be viewed in light of our study on Peter’s concept of Christ (Study 2), particularly with reference to the concept of Jesus through prophecy.

There is so much more that could be said about the transfiguration of Christ, but this is looked at specifically in another study. Here we are looking at the transfiguration from Peter’s experience or perspective.

³ 1 Peter 3:18

⁴ Matthew 17:1-9

Once again, Peter is one of the three disciples who Jesus chose to accompany Him.

Peter's response betrays his failure to immediately grasp what is happening. Like on so many occasions, his heart is in the right place but as Jesus told him before "*you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.*" What was Peter's motivation for asking if shelters were required? He may have desired to erect new tents of meeting where God could again communicate with His people (see Exodus 29:42), or he may have been thinking of the booths used in the Feast of Tabernacles (Leviticus 23:42). Perhaps having heard Jesus foretell of His death, Peter simply wanted to prolong the experience of witnessing Jesus in His glorified state. Whatever his motives, they were misguided in trying to make the experience permanent and attempting to concentrate on all that was secondary. What was needed was the presence of Jesus alone and attention to His voice.

Peter also unquestioningly accepted that the two people with Jesus were Moses and Elijah, but the account in Mark's gospel also tells us that "*He did not know what to say, for they were terrified*"⁵ whereas Luke's gospel tell us that Peter's comments indicated that they were spoken without him "*knowing what he said.*"⁶

Questions

1. Are there times in our walk with God that we feel built up and exhilarated, as Peter would have done when Jesus told him that he was "*on this rock I will build my church*"; and yet other times when we get it so wrong as Peter when he is "*a stumbling block*" to Jesus? What do you think when you realise the very real humanity even of the disciples?
2. How do you feel when you are rebuked or disciplined in righteousness? Why do you think you feel that way? (The way of the world today seems to be that when people are rebuked or disciplined in righteousness, they may respond with anger and indignation. This does not allow the humbling that comes from submission of ourselves at the foot of the cross, and the change of heart and mind that comes from a realisation of the truth of the Lord)
3. Imagine how you would have reacted if you had been one of the disciples. What do you think your thoughts would have been if you had been there and witnessed this event shortly after the difficult teaching given by Jesus that we read of earlier? How do you think the experience would have shaped your concept of Christ and the depth of your faith?
4. What practical steps might we take to avoid being impulsive as Peter was, responding with wisdom and sensitivity?
5. What practical steps might we take to avoid a roller coaster ride of faith?
6. What do you think the three disciples thought when Jesus instructed them "*Tell no one about the vision until after the Son of Man has been raised from the dead*"?

⁵ Mark 9:6

⁶ Luke 9:33b