

Peter

'Failure, Grace, and the Call to Follow Jesus'

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Matthew 16:13-20

I just want to spend some time thinking about three words: failure, grace and call. And I want to do that with one of the most fascinating people in the New Testament, and that is the Apostle Saint Peter. When we see Peter in art or stained glass, this morning I was trying to figure out where Peter was in the stained glass, but I couldn't actually find him. I don't know which one he is, because he often looks very calm in stained glass, very composed and almost kind of otherworldly. But when you read the Gospels, Peter is anything but distant and untouchable. I think that's partly why I can't find him in the stained glass, because I don't think he looks like what we see there.

Peter is one of the most human people in the whole of the New Testament. Peter is passionate, he's impulsive, and he is someone who speaks first and thinks afterwards. Peter gets things gloriously right, doesn't he, but then sometimes spectacularly wrong. He is deeply devoted to Jesus, and yet denies him. And that is why Peter's story matters so much to each one of us, because when we look closely at Peter, we begin to recognise something of ourselves in him. His enthusiasm, his courage, his confusion, his failure and ultimately his transformation. Peter's story is not simply the story of a great apostle who did wonderful things that we look upon in a window. Peter's story is the story of what Jesus can do with an ordinary human life. A life that is impaired, a life that sometimes gets it wrong, and a life that is learning what it means to follow. And when we walk through Peter's story, we discover something deeply hopeful: that God doesn't wait for perfect people. He calls people, he shapes them, restores them, and then fills them with his Spirit.

So, we start with who Peter was. Peter's story begins beside the water. Before he was Peter, he was simply Simon, a fisherman working on the Sea of Galilee with his brother Andrew, minding his own business. And fishing in the first century was hard work. It was long nights and aching muscles. It was heavy nets that had to be thrown and pulled in repeatedly, time after time. Boats had to be cleaned, fish had to be sorted and sold, and it was physically demanding and financially uncertain. Simon probably imagined that his life would follow quite a predictable pattern: fishing, family and survival. Simon was not a scholar. He was not part of the religious elite. He wasn't somebody people would expect to lead anything. He was just ordinary. And this really matters when we are thinking about who Peter is, because when Jesus begins his ministry, he doesn't go for the powerful, he goes to the fishermen. N.T. Wright once described Peter as "the spokesperson for the disciples whose personality was larger than life."

So here we have Simon, just going about his day, but then everything changes in Luke chapter 5, because Jesus steps into Simon's boat. Crowds are gathered along the shoreline, so Jesus asks Simon to push the boat out slightly so he can teach the people and so they can see him. And after he finishes speaking, Jesus turns to Simon and says something surprising: "Put out into deep water and let down the nets for a catch." And Simon replies with honesty: "Master, we've worked hard all night and haven't caught anything." In other words, we've already tried that. But then he adds something else: "But because you say so, I will let down the nets." How many of us would have done that? We would have probably just walked away and said, "I've already tried, leave it alone, I'm going home for some supper." And then suddenly the nets fill with fish, so many fish that the nets begin to tear, and other boats are called over to help, and the catch is overwhelming. And Simon's reaction is fascinating, because he falls at Jesus' knees and says, "Go away from me, Lord. I am a sinful man." It is the response of somebody who is suddenly aware that he is in holy presence. In that moment, Simon realises that Jesus is not simply just a teacher. He realises that he is encountering the power of God. But instead of sending Simon away, Jesus says something amazing: "Do not be afraid. From now on you will fish for people." And then Luke tells us they put their boats up on shore, left everything and followed him.

Just imagine that moment: leaving behind the nets, leaving behind everything that's familiar to you, leaving behind security, and stepping into a future that they couldn't yet understand. And this is the beginning of Peter's journey, not as a hero, but just as a follower. And this is important, because before Peter is anything else, he is someone who responds to Jesus' invitation. And the invitation is simply: follow me.

But do you notice something else that's important in this moment? Jesus calls Simon before Simon has proven anything. He calls him before Simon understands anything. He calls him before Simon becomes the bold apostle that we later see. Because **grace comes before qualification**. And it is often noted that Jesus deliberately gathers ordinary people around him, fishermen, tax collectors, because the kingdom of God grows through transformed lives. **God doesn't begin with impressive CVs, he begins with willing hearts**, and that truth still matters today. Because so many people quietly think, I'm not spiritual enough. I don't even know that much about the Bible. Or the classic: "not me, I've made too many mistakes."

But Peter reminds us that God's call does not depend on perfection, because it begins with grace.

I remember a moment in my own life when I first began sensing that God might be calling me to ministry, and my reaction was surprisingly similar to Peter's. It wasn't excitement at first, I will tell you that. It was something closer, probably, to fear. Because when you sense God calling you towards something, it often shines a light on your insecurities. You start thinking of all the reasons that you are not the right person for this, all the things that you don't know, all the ways that you might fail. And I remember praying something like this: "Lord, surely, surely you've got the wrong person."

But Peter reminds us that Jesus often calls people before they feel ready. And perhaps that's intentional, because if we felt fully ready, we might assume the calling depended on our ability rather than God's grace. Somebody once said to me, "Emma, God calls you as you are because you are you, and then he will equip you with what you need."

So very early in this story about Peter, something remarkable happens: Jesus gives Simon a new name. Jesus says in John chapter 1, "You are Simon, son of John. You will be called Cephas." Cephas means rock, and in Greek that name becomes Peter. And later Jesus expands on this in Matthew when, after Peter has declared that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, he says, "You are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church."

Now, if you read the Gospels carefully, Peter doesn't always seem particularly rock-like, does he? He's bold and passionate, but he's also impulsive and he's unstable. He interrupts Jesus, he misunderstands things, and he makes mistakes. And yet Jesus gives him a name that speaks not only about who he is, but about what he will become. One scholar writes about Peter: **"Peter is a disciple whose devotion is real but whose understanding is still being formed."** I really love that. I'm going to say that again: Peter is a disciple whose devotion is real, but whose understanding is still being formed. In other words, he loves Jesus but he doesn't fully understand Jesus yet. And that will become really important in Peter's story.

It is also noted that name changes in Scripture often signal a new identity given by God. We've heard about this a few times: Abram becomes Abraham, Jacob becomes Israel, Saul becomes Paul, and here, Simon becomes Peter. Because God sometimes names the future before we grow into it. He knows what's going on. And perhaps some of us need to hear that today, that God knows the future before we even know it. Because sometimes the person we think we are is not the person that God sees.

We see that Peter becomes part of Jesus' inner circle, alongside James and John. He sees extraordinary things. He sees healing. He sees teaching. He sees Jesus transfigured in glory. But one of the most famous stories about Peter appears in Matthew. The disciples are in a boat on a lake during a storm. The wind is strong, the waves are rough, and suddenly they see Jesus walking on the water. And then Peter says, "Lord, if it is you, tell me to come to you on the water." And Jesus simply says, "Come." One word. And then Peter steps out of the boat. For a moment, he walks on the water, but then he notices the wind and he notices the waves, and he starts to panic and suddenly begins to sink. And he cries out, "Lord, save me!" And Jesus immediately reaches out his hand and catches him.

Now, what I love about this story is that Peter was the only one who was willing to step out. Yes, he sank, but he also experienced something that the others didn't. And faith often looks like that: stepping out, feeling uncertain, sometimes sinking, and discovering that Jesus is still there, ready to catch us.

But Peter's most painful moment comes on the night that Jesus is arrested. Earlier that evening, Peter had boldly said, "Lord, I am ready to go with you to prison and to death." But Jesus gently tells him, "Before the rooster crows today, you will deny three times that you know me." Later that night, Peter sits in the courtyard of the high priest. A servant girl looks closely at him. "You were with him," she says. But Peter denies it. Another person recognises him. And again, he denies it. Three times he denies Jesus. And then the rooster crows. And then Luke tells us something incredibly moving: the Lord turned and looked straight at Peter. Just pause on that for a moment. The Lord turned and looked straight at Peter. Across the courtyard, their eyes meet. And Peter suddenly remembers everything that Jesus has just said to him. And he goes outside and he weeps bitterly. One scholar describes this scene as one of the most emotionally charged moments in the Gospel narrative, because in that moment Peter feels everything all at once: fear, shame, love and failure. And perhaps many of us understand that, what it's like to feel that. Moments when we realise that we've fallen short. Moments when we wish that we could just rewind time. Moments when we think, gosh, I think I might have gone a bit too far there. It's like looking at Jesus across the courtyard.

But here is the truth of the Gospel: failure is never the end of the story with Jesus. In Mark, we hear that the women are told to go and tell the disciples and Peter, and I think that is really significant. Because after the resurrection, Jesus meets Peter again along with the other disciples beside the lake. Jesus tells them again to throw their nets out onto the other side, just as he had told Peter the first time, and then they realise that it's him. We hear of Peter throwing himself into the water and running to him while the others stayed in the boat. You can picture the excitement, can't you, of him lashing through the water to get to him, not quite believing that it's him. I can't believe you're here. And then they all do something very normal: they share breakfast.

And then after that breakfast, Jesus asks Peter a question, but interestingly he uses his real name, which I think shows an intimacy between them. "Simon, son of John, do you love me?" he says. Three times Jesus asks, and three times Peter answers, "Yes, Lord." And each time Jesus responds, "Feed my sheep." Three denials, three answers and three restorations. One of my favourite theologians, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who I had a love-hate relationship with at college, once wrote that grace does not simply wipe away our past, it restores us so that we can step again into the life God calls us to live. And I think that is exactly what happened there on that lakeside, just after breakfast. Because Jesus does not discard Peter. He doesn't humiliate him. Jesus is not ignoring Peter's failures though; he is restoring him through them. He is recognising the failures, and he is restoring him. And then he entrusts him with responsibility. And that is grace, isn't it? **Because grace doesn't pretend that failure never happened. Grace transforms what failure can't destroy.**

And this is where Peter's story stops being just history and starts becoming something more personal. Because many of us know what it's like to fail. Not always dramatically, sometimes quietly, sometimes internally. There have been moments in my life when I've been very aware of my own limitations, of how much I can take and how much I can't, about my mistakes, my sense that I've fallen short of something that I thought I should be, not knowing who I am or where I'm going or what I'm meant to be doing, when the noise becomes too much around me. Only a few weeks ago, at Lee Abbey, I sat at the foot of the cross on the grass that they told us not to sit on because of the ticks, and I sat and cried and cried out, "Surely, Jesus, you cannot use someone like me." But as the week went on, Jesus spoke to me in the most wonderfully healing way. Not because I had everything sorted, but because grace was already at work. And I think Peter would understand that, because Peter didn't become a leader because he never failed. **He became a leader because Jesus met him in his failure**, and then called him again.

And then we come to Acts chapter 2, the day of Pentecost. The Holy Spirit fills the disciples, and suddenly we see a transformed Peter, who now stands up publicly and begins to preach. Gone is the Peter who denied Jesus because he was frightened. There we see bold Peter. The man who once denied Jesus before a servant girl now proclaims Christ boldly before thousands of people. A fisherman who denied Jesus preaches the first sermon. And who says that ordinary people are not called?

Acts tells us that around 3,000 people responded that day, all because a fisherman got up and preached.

So what changed? The difference was the Holy Spirit. The Spirit transforms fearful people into courageous witnesses. The Spirit takes ordinary people and fills them with extraordinary power. And the same Spirit that empowered Peter is the same Spirit that still works in the church today. Later in life, Peter writes letters to Christians who are facing suffering. In 1 Peter, he writes, "You are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation." Peter now understands grace in a way that he could never have understood it before. He knows what it means to fail and he knows what it means to be restored. And tradition tells us that during the persecution of Nero, Peter was executed in Rome. The fisherman who once trembled with fear died with courage.

So, as I come to an end, I want to come back to this title: Failure, Grace and Call. Because Peter's life holds all three. Failure, because he denies Jesus. Grace, because Jesus restores him. And calling, because Jesus sends him again. And that final part is so important, because the call of Jesus never ends with failure. It always comes with "follow me." Not after you've fixed yourself. Not after you've proved yourself. But now, just as you are.

And perhaps that's why Peter's story matters so much. Because the church was never built on people who had it all together, or the colour of the walls or the colour of the chairs. It was built on people who were called by Jesus, met by grace and sent to follow him. And that same call still comes today. So perhaps the question Jesus asks Peter is the question he asks us today: do you love me? Do you love me? Do you love me? And if the answer is yes, then the call is the same. Simply follow me.

Amen.



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