



“Whom Say Ye That I Am?”

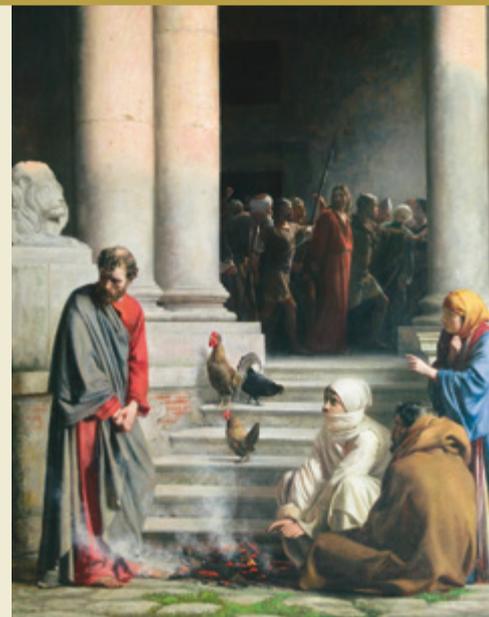
PETER’S WITNESS OF CHRIST

By Terry B. Ball

Professor of Religious Education, Brigham Young University

The Apostle Peter is beloved by believers—perhaps because he seems so authentic and approachable to us. We can empathize with him. We admire his courage as he forsook all, “straightway” leaving his nets as the Master beckoned, “Follow me, and I will make you fishers of men” (Matthew 4:18–20). We understand his confusion over the meaning and message of parables (see Matthew 15:15–16). We feel the desperation in his cry, “Lord, save me,” as his feet and faith faltered on the turbulent waters that night on the Sea of Galilee (Matthew 14:22–33). We appreciate his awe at the Transfiguration (see Matthew 17:1–13). We weep with him for the shame of his thrice-made denial (see Matthew 26:69–75), grieve with him at Gethsemane (see Matthew 26:36–46), and join in his joy and wonder at the empty tomb (see John 20:1–10).

Perhaps the Gospel writers wanted us to make this personal connection with Peter. In their accounts they appear to purposely preserve more of his experiences and conversations with Jesus than with any of the other original Twelve.¹ Many of us assume that so much attention is given to Peter in the Gospels because he became the spokesman and chief among the Apostles. But perhaps Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John also speak so often and intimately of Peter’s association with Christ because they hoped that as we come to love and understand Peter, we will be more ready and able to accept his special witness of Christ—a testimony that he seems to have been carefully prepared to bear.



As we come to love and understand the Apostle Peter, we will be more ready and able to accept his special witness of Christ.

Peter's Preparation

As Peter accompanied Jesus through His mortal ministry, the Apostle's witness and testimony that the Master was the Messiah seems to have been acquired through the intellectual, practical, and revelatory experiences afforded him. That is to say, his testimony, like ours today, came through his head, his hands, and his heart.

Peter knew that Jesus of Nazareth was more than a mere man, for he saw Him give sight to the blind, cleanse the leper, cause the lame to walk, and raise the dead (see Matthew 11:4–5; see also John 2:11; 10:25; 20:30–31). His logical affirmation that Jesus was the Christ was bolstered by what he learned as he acted upon the Master's directions. He cast his net as the Savior directed and gathered a great multitude of fishes (see Luke 5:1–9; John 21:5–7). When the Savior bid him “come,” he walked on water (see Matthew 14:22–33). And as he passed the meager loaves and fishes to the multitude as the Savior instructed, the miracle of multiplication happened under his very hands (see John 6:1–14).

Those witnesses to his head and his hands would have significantly supplemented the most powerful witness provided Peter—the witness revealed to his heart. As Jesus asked His disciples, “Whom do men say that I the Son of man am?” they rehearsed the common conclusions of their contemporaries. The Savior then personalized

the question, asking, “But whom say ye that I am?” (see Matthew 16:13–15). Without hesitation, Peter said:

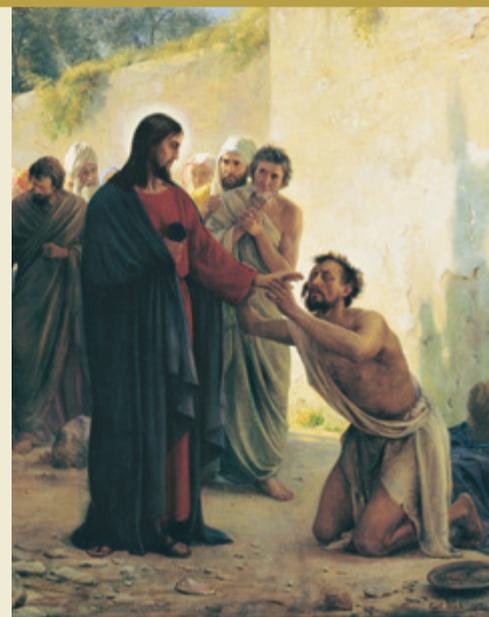
“Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God.

“And Jesus answered and said unto him, Blessed art thou, Simon Bar-jona: for flesh and blood hath not revealed it unto thee, but my Father which is in heaven” (Matthew 16:16–17).

Peter's preparation to be a special witness of Christ included several somewhat private experiences with Jesus.² Such personalized counsel and direction often came when he approached the Savior with questions or whenever Christ perceived he needed further training.³

Peter was also perhaps the most reprimanded of all Christ's disciples.⁴ Remarkably, Peter chose not to be offended but rather continued following the Master, daily adding to his witness and learning of Him.⁵

The Galilean fisherman's preparation culminated in what he witnessed following the Crucifixion. Upon hearing of the empty tomb, Peter rushed to see for himself and left “wondering in himself at that which was come to pass” (Luke 24:1–12; see also John 20:1–9). Luke records that sometime that same day, the resurrected Savior appeared privately to Peter, though we know little of that event (see Luke 24:34; 1 Corinthians 15:3–7). Later that evening, the risen Lord appeared to the Apostles and some other disciples, inviting them to feel the wounds in His



Peter knew that Jesus of Nazareth was more than a mere man, for he saw Him give sight to the blind, cleanse the leper, cause the lame to walk, and raise the dead.

body. He then opened their understanding of how His Resurrection fulfilled the prophecies written in the law of Moses and the scriptures, declaring, “Ye are witnesses of these things” (see Luke 24:36–48; see also Mark 16:14; John 20:19–23). The 11 disciples later traveled to Galilee, as the Savior had instructed them, and there on “a mountain where Jesus had appointed them,” He assured them,

“All power is given unto me in heaven and in earth” (see Matthew 28:7, 10, 16–20).

Through it all, Peter’s head, hands, and heart were further tutored to be a witness of the resurrected Christ, for he saw the risen Lord with his eyes, heard Him with his ears, felt Him with his hands, and surely felt again the Spirit’s confirmation in his heart.

Peter’s Commission

Just as it took time, teaching, and experience for Peter to fully understand the atoning mission of the Messiah, comprehending his own mission as a special witness of Christ was a gradual process.

“Simon, son of Jonas, lovest thou me more than these?”

It seems the full realization of what was to be required of him came to Peter as the Lord taught him on the shores of the Sea of Galilee. Having twice felt the wounds of Crucifixion on the resurrected body of the Master but apparently still wondering what to do with himself, Peter announced, “I go a fishing” (John 21:3). Now that Jesus was no longer with them, Peter seemed resigned to returning to his old life and livelihood. His brethren followed.

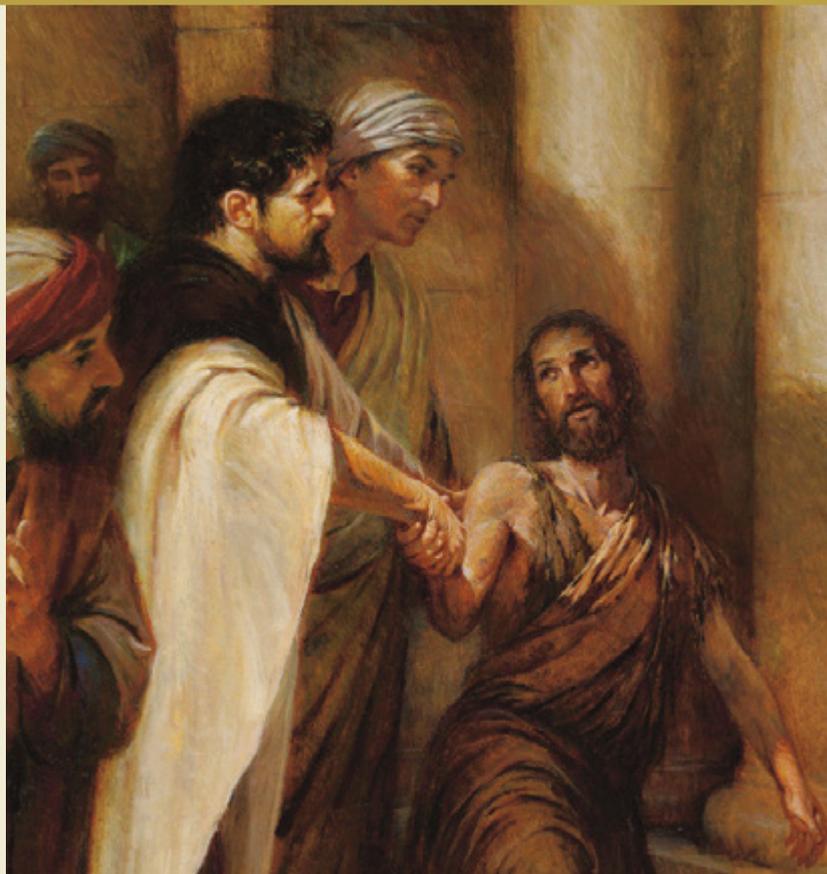
Toiling through the night, they caught nothing. Nearing the shore, likely exhausted and discouraged, they saw someone standing there whom they did not recognize, bidding them to cast their nets again. Perhaps recalling an earlier occasion when obeying similar advice had yielded a great catch, they complied, this time without protest or question (see Luke 5:1–9; John 21:3–6). As they drew in their nets teeming once again with a multitude of fish, John exclaimed to Peter, “It is the Lord” (John 21:7). Too anxious to wait for the boat to reach the shore, Peter “cast himself into the sea” to reach the Master sooner (John 21:7). When the others arrived, they found a meal of fish and bread awaiting them (see John 21:9).

Following the meal, Jesus turned to Peter and, most likely pointing to the very fish Peter had

chosen to pursue, asked of His Apostle, “Simon, son of Jonas, lovest thou me more than these?” (John 21:15). Surely Peter thought this question strange. Of course he loved the Savior more than fish—or fishing. Perhaps there was a touch of incredulity in his answer, “Yea, Lord; thou knowest that I love thee,” to which Christ responded, “Feed my lambs” (John 21:15). Again the Savior put the question to Peter, and Peter again avowed his love for Christ, and Christ again commanded, “Feed my sheep” (John 21:16). Peter was grieved as Jesus asked a third time for the disciple to affirm his love. We can feel the pathos and passion in Peter’s third witness, “Lord, thou knowest all things; thou knowest that I love thee” (John 21:17). Once again Jesus commanded, “Feed my sheep” (John 21:17).⁶ If he truly loved the Lord, then Peter was no longer to be a fisherman, but rather a shepherd, caring for the Master’s flock.⁷ Peter’s actions and ministry from that time forward affirm that he at last understood his commission and mission to be a special servant and witness of Christ.

Peter’s Witness

Following that day in Galilee, Peter went forth to fulfill his commission from Christ with remarkable faith, courage, and rigor. As a leading Apostle, he stepped forward in his calling to preside over the Church. While being occupied with the many duties of this office, Peter did not neglect his responsibility to always be a witness of Christ, including to the multitudes gathered at the outpouring of the Holy Ghost on the day of Pentecost (see Acts 2:1–41), at the temple on Solomon’s porch following a miraculous healing (see Acts 3:6–7, 19–26), when he was arrested and brought before the Jewish leaders (see Acts 4:1–31; see also Acts 5:18–20), in his preaching to the Saints (see Acts 15:6–11), and in his epistles.



Peter fulfilled his commission from Christ with remarkable faith, including telling a lame man at the temple, “In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth rise up and walk.”

In his epistles he reflects on his personal witness of Christ’s sufferings and expresses his hope to be “a partaker of the glory that shall be revealed” (1 Peter 5:1). Towards the end he resolutely acknowledges that he too must “shortly . . . put off this my tabernacle, even as our Lord Jesus Christ hath shewed me” (2 Peter 1:14).

In making this solemn observation, perhaps Peter was reflecting on the words Jesus spoke to him so many years earlier on the shores of Galilee. There, after commanding Peter to feed His sheep, the Savior declared, “When thou wast young, thou girdedst thyself, and walkedst whither thou wouldest: but when thou shalt be old, thou shalt stretch forth thy hands, and another shall gird thee, and carry thee whither thou wouldest not” (John 21:18). As John explained, “This spake [Jesus], signifying by what death [Peter] should glorify God. And when he had spoken this, he saith unto [Peter], Follow

me” (John 21:19). Surely in his old age as he contemplated death, Peter could find peace and joy in knowing that he had indeed followed Christ in life and was ready to follow Him in death.

We wish more of Peter’s activities and writings were preserved in the New Testament. What has been preserved is a treasure and endears us to this faithful fisherman. The record, small as it is, shows us how Peter was carefully and personally prepared by Christ to be a special witness of Him. As we read the account, we can discover our faith and understanding of Christ growing along with Peter’s. That growth can give us hope and perspective in our personal journeys to faith. As we watch what Christ expected of Peter become clear to him and then see the courage and dedication with which he labored to fulfill his commission from the Savior, we are led to ponder “What does Christ expect of me?” and “Am I doing enough?” As we study Peter’s witness of Christ, we find ourselves anxious to echo his words, “We believe and are sure that thou art that Christ, the Son of the living God” (John 6:69). ■

NOTES

1. While the witness, experiences, and teachings of the Apostle Paul are more thoroughly chronicled in the New Testament than those of Peter, Paul was not one of the original Twelve and not mentioned in the four Gospels.
2. See Matthew 17:1–13; 26:36–46, 58; Mark 13:1–37; Luke 8:49–56; 9:28–36.
3. See Matthew 17:24–27; 18:2–35; 19:27–20:28; Luke 12:31–49; John 13:6–19.
4. See Matthew 14:31; 15:15–16; 26:33–34, 40; Mark 8:32–33; John 18:10–11.
5. Of Peter and the frequent reproofs he received from Christ, President Spencer W. Kimball (1895–1985) observed, “He reproofed Peter at times because he loved him, and Peter, being a great man, was able to grow from this reproof. There is a wonderful verse in the book of Proverbs all of us need to remember: ‘The ear that heareth the reproof of life abideth among the wise. He that refuseth instruction despiseth his own soul: but he that heareth reproof getteth understanding.’ (Proverbs 15:31–32.) It is a wise leader or a wise follower who can cope with the ‘reproof of life.’ Peter could do this because he knew that Jesus loved him, and thus Jesus was able to groom Peter for a very high place or responsibility in the kingdom” (“Jesus: The Perfect Leader,” *Ensign*, Aug. 1979, 5).
6. Some observe that by thrice allowing Peter to affirm his love for Him, Christ was giving Peter a chance to amend for his thrice-made denial that desperate night of the trial. See, for example, James E. Talmage, *Jesus the Christ*, 3rd ed. (1916), 693; Jeffrey R. Holland, “The First Great Commandment,” *Ensign*, Nov. 2012, 83–84. For a discussion of the denial and lessons to be learned from it, see Gordon B. Hinckley, “And Peter Went Out and Wept Bitterly,” *Ensign*, May 1979, 65–67; Neal A. Maxwell, “A Brother Offended,” *Ensign*, May 1982, 37–38. Other commentators, noting the subtle differences in the Greek of the text, suggest that the three questions were each asked to teach Peter different aspects and duties of his calling. Accordingly, the Savior twice asked Peter, “Lovest thou me?” using the Greek *agapao* for “love,” meaning a social or moral kind of love, often thought of as godly or unconditional love and elsewhere translated as “charity” (e.g., 1 Corinthians 13:1–4; 2 Peter 1:7; Revelation 2:19). The third time Jesus asked Peter, “Lovest thou me?” He used the term *phileo* for “love,” meaning friendship, affection, or brotherly love. Interestingly, in answer to each of the three questions, Peter affirmed his love using *phileo*. To the first affirmation of Peter’s love, Christ commanded him to “feed,” from the Greek *bosko*, meaning to pasture, graze, or nourish, His “lambs,” from the Greek *arnion*, meaning a young or baby sheep. To the second affirmation of Peter’s love, Christ commanded him to “feed,” from the Greek *poimaino*, meaning to tend or shepherd, His “sheep,” from the Greek *probaton*, meaning an adult sheep. In response to Peter’s third affirmation of love for Christ, he was to *bosko* His *probaton*. Thus, by asking the question three times in three ways, the Savior asked the disciple if he had both charity and brotherly love for Him, and in His subsequent commandments the Savior taught Peter that he was to not only nourish but also shepherd both the young and old of His flock.
7. For more discussion on this event and the principles that can be learned from it, see Robert D. Hales, “When Thou Art Converted, Strengthen Thy Brethren,” *Ensign*, May 1997, 80–83.

Peter could find peace and joy in knowing that he had indeed followed Christ in life and was ready to follow Him in death.

