

*THE
LIFE
OF
PETER*

MOLDED *in the*
MASTER'S HANDS

DEREK W.H.
THOMAS

“Peter often gets a bad rap in evangelical circles. He denied Christ three times. Paul publicly rebuked him. But Jesus loved him and named him *Rocky*—loyal, steadfast, the leader of the early church, and willing to die for Christ (which he ultimately did). Read this wonderfully encouraging portrait of Peter (there aren’t many of them in print!), and let it challenge you to be bold for Christ.”

—DR. WILLIAM B. BARCLEY
Senior Pastor, Sovereign Grace Presbyterian Church
Adjunct Professor, Reformed Theological Seminary
Charlotte, N.C.

“Readers familiar with Dr. Thomas’ work will open this book and smile—here is the familiar pastoral touch, compact but penetrating exposition, and trademark application we have come to relish from his pen, applied to the life of Peter. If you struggle, if you fail, if you wonder if the good news is really good, let this work give you fresh hope from Peter’s example. Far from simply recounting the facts and failures of Peter’s life, Dr. Thomas gives us a page-turning biography of the Apostle with whom we identify so easily, but with details and insights we overlook so frequently.”

—DR. GABRIEL N.E. FLUHRER
Senior Pastor, First Presbyterian Church
Chattanooga, Tenn.

“It is easy to identify with Simon Peter, and many of us do. He is a rock that crumbled and yet under God opened the kingdom of God to the nations. His flaws and failures are obvious, and yet they cannot overshadow the transforming power of Christ in his life. Peter’s story gives us hope, and no one retells it better than Derek Thomas. Here, in chapter after chapter, he helps us to ‘shadow’ Peter. As we do so, we learn the ways of the Master alongside Peter. More than that, our love for the Master grows as we witness the constancy and strength of His love and prayers. In page after page, Dr. Thomas introduces us to the Savior who is the same in our ‘today’ as He was ‘yesterday’ in His life-reshaping ministry to Simon Peter. Perhaps not every Christian book needs to be enjoyable to be helpful, but this one is both!”

—DR. SINCLAIR B. FERGUSON
Chancellor’s Professor of Systematic Theology,
Reformed Theological Seminary
Teaching Fellow, Ligonier Ministries

“The life of Peter was tumultuous, with highs and lows, triumphs and defeats, reminding us of our own victories and defeats. Derek Thomas, who is well known for his powerful preaching, guides us through Peter’s life in this wonderful book. As readers we are convicted, comforted, and challenged by the life of Peter as recorded in the Word of God.”

—DR. THOMAS R. SCHREINER

James Buchanan Harrison Professor of New Testament Interpretation
The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary
Louisville, Ky.

The Life of Peter

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Molded in the Master's Hands

DEREK W.H. THOMAS



LIGONIER MINISTRIES

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Dedicated to

Rev. Dr. Leslie Holmes

Pastor, Theologian, Fellow Presbyter, Friend

“There is a friend who sticks closer than a brother.”

Proverbs 18:24

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Finally, I want to thank one more person for the encouragement he provided me over the last few years. This book would not have been written without his brotherly love and support. Dr. Leslie Holmes hails from Belfast, Northern Ireland, where I first met him more than four decades ago. This book is dedicated to you, dear brother. Thank you for being “a friend who sticks closer than a brother” (Prov. 18:24).

Introduction

Peter has been overshadowed by Paul. As just one example, open the New Testament. In terms of location, Peter's two epistles in the canon of Scripture are eclipsed by the many letters of Paul.

But it was to Peter, not Paul, that Jesus made the promise that the New Testament church would be built, in human terms, on his contribution. Playing on the similar Greek words for "Peter" and "rock," Jesus told him, "You are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it" (Matt. 16:18). That statement alone sets Peter apart from all the other Apostles.

Peter, along with his brother Andrew, was the first disciple Jesus called. Whereas we know very little about some of the disciples, Peter appears prominently throughout the Gospels. Peter's life is told, warts and all. The highs and lows (and there are two significant and troubling lows) make his life something of a roller-coaster ride.

He was a fisherman in Galilee, along with his brother and the Sons of Thunder, James and John. Though they never went to anything like a modern university, their synagogue studies, deeply rooted in the study of the Old Testament, made them well schooled in Scripture and the fundamentals of a basic education.

Peter's personality was dynamic. He was enthusiastic, erratic, and excitable, and he often spoke before he thought. He loved Jesus the moment he saw Him, and he was capable of great loyalty. But he was also headstrong and sometimes questioned his Master, though always out of love. One gets the impression (reading Acts, for example) that Paul could do no wrong. Paul was probably difficult to work for and with. His was a type A personality that didn't suffer fools gladly. But Peter was different—very different.

Paintings of Peter abound. The one by Peter Paul Rubens (1577–1640),

painted roughly during the time of the Synod of Dort in 1618, shows Peter as an older man, in his sixties, shortly before his death. Looking off to the right, he is wearing a golden cloak. He looks to be a large man, portly, with gray hair, thinning on top, and a full gray-and-white beard. His eyes are looking upward, and his face is lean and chiseled. His hands are large, and in his right hand he holds two large keys, one gold and one silver. It is a stunning portrait, an artist's impression of what Peter might have looked like. But the painting evokes a man of resolve *and* tenderness. A kind and gentle person, someone you could easily talk to.

In this book, we will examine Peter's life from the accounts of the Gospels and Acts. Occasionally, we will draw from his two epistles lessons that Peter may have learned during his life with Jesus and the early days of the church and pondered in the decades that followed. There are gaps: after Acts 15, we hear no more about Peter. An earlier rift seemed to have developed between Peter and Paul after a blistering episode in the church at Antioch that Paul all too vividly recounts in Galatians 2 and that Peter undoubtedly read. There are further references to Peter in 1 Corinthians, suggesting that he was in Corinth for a season. But then, nothing, until he reappears in Rome, where he and his wife (as well as Paul) are executed at the hands of Emperor Nero. None of these events in Rome are to be found in Scripture, but the historical tradition seems sound. There is a reference in 1 Peter 5:13 of Peter's writing from "Babylon," a euphemism suggesting that he was in Rome.

There are, of course, Roman Catholic claims about the primacy of Peter, insisting that he was the first pope in Rome and that God established an Apostolic succession as primacy over the church was passed from one pope to the next. But these claims were made after Peter was dead, and Scripture gives no hint of them.

I hope this brief account of Peter's life will prove helpful. Its first appearance was as a series of sermons delivered at First Presbyterian Church in Columbia, S.C. The second outing came by way of shortened, twenty-minute DVDs recorded for Ligonier Ministries. The third iteration is this book, expanded and changed to reflect the difference between the written and spoken word. Enjoy.

—Derek W.H. Thomas
Summer 2022

What Is Your Name?

Do you ever wonder what it would be like to meet Jesus in person? Every Christian does. All kinds of questions run through your head:

What does He look like?

How tall is He?

What does His voice sound like?

Peter knew the answers to these questions. Meeting Jesus was a life-changing moment for him.

Paintings of Peter show him as an older man, full-figured and slightly balding. There exists to this day, in the catacombs in Rome, a graffito with the name PETRUS in bold red. Rome is where Peter was crucified at the hands of Emperor Nero in AD 64. But Peter first encountered Jesus more than thirty years earlier. As we meet him for the first time in John's gospel (John 1:35–42), he was probably around thirty years old, roughly the same age as Jesus.

Peter and his brother Andrew, along with the two brothers James and John (elsewhere known as Boanerges, or Sons of Thunder, a nickname given to them by Jesus because of their committed preaching; Mark 3:17), had an established fishing business in Bethsaida, Galilee (John 1:44). Bethsaida had been raised to the status of a city by the infamous Philip the Tetrarch, who later married the equally infamous Salome, the one who asked for the head of John the Baptist on a plate.

Peter was a fisherman. Scholars often doubt that Peter could write the complex Greek of the epistle known as 2 Peter. But Bethsaida was a thoroughly

Hellenistic city. Peter would have been taught Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek, as well as possibly some Latin, in the established synagogue education system. Even today, lack of a formal education doesn't mean that someone is uneducated. I have known many who never went to college whose language skills and knowledge of Scripture were profound. My late mother left school at sixteen to care for her ailing father, but she could hold her own on literature and music. Just because Peter and some of the other disciples earned their living fishing the Sea of Galilee does not mean that they were poorly educated.

Peter's Aramaic name was *Simōn* and denoted the idea of "obedient." Transliterated into Greek, it became *Symeon*. Jesus called him "Peter" (initially at the time of his calling as a disciple [John 1:42] and later reaffirmed at Caesarea Philippi [Matt. 16:18]) because He either saw something in him or desired something from him. The name means "rock" or "stone." Its Aramaic equivalent was *Kephas* (its English cognate is *Cephas*). "Andrew," the name of Peter's brother, is an entirely Greek name, indicating some degree of Hellenization (Greek cultural influence) on the part of their parents.

But something had happened that had taken Andrew and Peter down south to Bethany, on the eastern side of the river Jordan. An extraordinary preacher had emerged by the name of John the Baptist. Huge crowds were going into the countryside to hear him preach and receive the baptism of repentance he offered.

Priests and Levites were sent from Jerusalem to inquire about his identity (John 1:19). Some wondered whether he might be the long-awaited Messiah, the One prophesied in the Scriptures who would deliver the people of Israel from their sins. But he was not (v. 20). Neither was he Elijah. Since the prophet Elijah had not died but instead been taken into heaven alive, a belief emerged among Second Temple Jews that he might return one day. An empty seat was kept for him in Jewish homes at the celebration of Passover.

John was none of these. Instead, he identified himself as the one depicted by the prophet Isaiah as "the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, 'Make straight the way of the Lord'" (John 1:23, quoting Isa. 40:3). Furthermore, John the Baptist pointed to another, One who stood among them, "the strap of whose sandal [he was] not worthy to untie" (John 1:27). He was referring to Jesus, who had also come down from Galilee to hear His cousin preaching in the wilderness.

John the Baptist was the forerunner, the one who prepared the way for

Jesus' ministry. He preached a message of repentance, calling Israel to turn from its sins, and offered a baptism of repentance in the Jordan River. On this occasion, Jesus was there and asking for baptism. After John identified Him as "the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!" (John 1:29), something extraordinary happened: the Spirit descended on Jesus in the form of a dove (v. 32). "And I have seen and have borne witness that this is the Son of God," John declared (v. 34). And elsewhere, we read that a voice was heard from heaven: "You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased" (Mark 1:11).

Why was it necessary for Jesus, the sinless Lamb of God, to receive a baptism of repentance? Why should He undergo this water ordeal of judgment? The answer is *substitution*. He was identifying Himself with our sin. Even the Baptist balked, protesting, "I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?" (Matt. 3:14). But it was for this reason that Jesus had come: to provide a way back from the wilderness to Eden. "For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God" (2 Cor. 5:21).

The long-awaited Messiah had come!

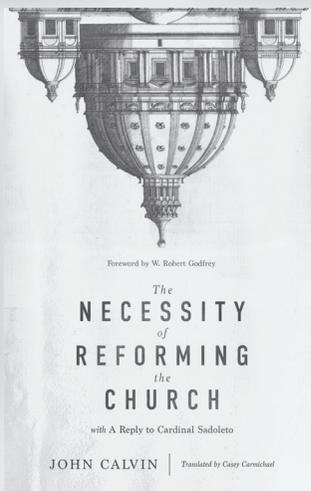
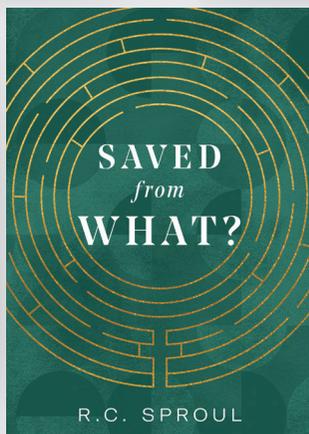
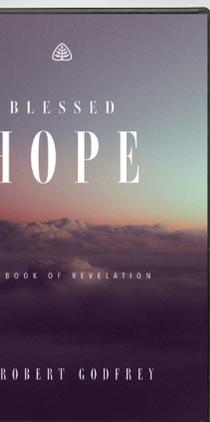
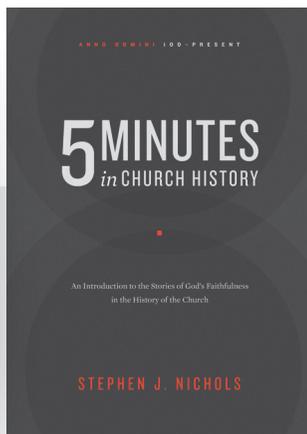
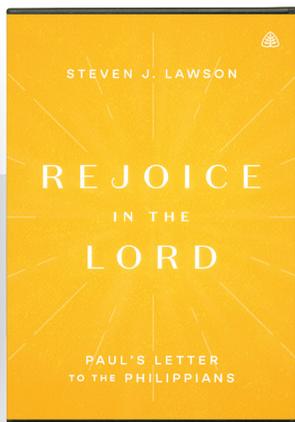
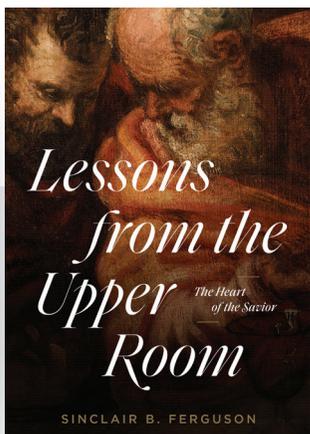
An Eyewitness of Jesus

Peter came to Bethsaida to see and hear John the Baptist. But he did not know that God had other plans for him, plans that would change his life completely.

It was the day after Jesus' baptism. Andrew and an unnamed disciple, probably John (John 1:35, 40), overheard the Baptist refer to Jesus as "the Lamb of God" (v. 36). The expression would have evoked powerful images in the minds of devout Jews. They would have recalled the incident with Abraham when a ram was caught in the thicket by its horns and the sacrifice of Isaac was averted (Gen. 22:1–24). They would have remembered the annual ritual of sacrificing a lamb for Passover (Ex. 12:43–51). And they would have recollected that the prophet Isaiah, in the fourth Servant Song, referred to "a lamb that is led to the slaughter" (Isa. 53:7).

There is always something about Jesus that entices and attracts attention. Andrew was bold enough to ask where Jesus was staying (the account in John covers several days, and Jesus would have needed somewhere to eat and sleep [cf. John 1:29, 35, 43]). We are not told who these hospitable folks were, but imagine the stories they could relate in later years about Jesus' having slept in their house!

We want to see men and women around the world connect the deep truths of the Christian faith to everyday life.



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