



The Lengthening Shadow of Peter

By [Jeffrey R. Holland](#)

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Several years ago a newspaper carried an Easter editorial written by a minister of religion. The editorial lamented the career of the apostle Peter, denouncing, among other things, his indecisiveness, lack of humility, fear of man, and failure to pray. The minister concluded his Easter appeal: "Let us as people, especially those who are Christians and claim to abide by the Word of God, not make the same mistakes and fall as Peter fell."

This editorial came to the attention of another "Peter," another resolute chief apostle. President Spencer W. Kimball, then acting president of the Council of the Twelve, saw this journalistic piece and shuddered.

"I had some strange emotions," he recounted before an audience of young adults. "I was shocked, then I was chilled, then my blood changed its temperature and began to boil. I felt I was attacked viciously, for Peter was my brother, my colleague, my example, my prophet, and God's anointed. I whispered to myself, 'That is not true. He is maligning my brother.'"¹

Move from this scene of one mighty apostle defending another to a scene in Jerusalem not long after Jesus' ascension into heaven. Peter and John were about to enter the temple to worship and seek strength for the tasks that lay before them. A 40-year-old man, "lame from his mother's womb," asked alms of them as they passed. There was nothing unique about his plea; the man had been begging every day for years in this same place. But Peter did not brush by. What would his petition mean, offered up in this holy house at the hour of prayer, if he suffered this man to offer up a similar petition in vain?

He turned to the invalid, "fastening his eyes on him" with a gaze that probed the deepest recesses of his soul. Finding faith there, Peter said deliberately and clearly: "Silver and gold have I none; but such as I have give I thee: In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth rise up and walk." (Acts 3:1–6.) Peter had no money but he had riches: "such as he had" included every key to the kingdom of God on earth, priesthood power to raise the dead, faith to strengthen bones and sinews, a strong right hand of Christian fellowship. He could not give silver or gold but he could give that which is always purchased "without money and without price" (Isa. 55:1) — and he gave it.

President Harold B. Lee, who loved this powerful account of the priesthood in action, once said, "Now in my mind's eye I can picture this [lame] man and what was in his mind. 'Doesn't this man know I have never walked? He commands me to walk.' But the biblical record

doesn't end there. Peter just didn't content himself with commanding the man to walk, but he 'took him by the right hand, and lifted him up...'

"Will you see that picture now of that noble soul," invited President Lee, "that chiefest of the apostles, perhaps with his arms around the shoulders of the man, and saying, 'Now, my good man, have courage. I will take a few steps with you. Let's walk together...'. Then the man leaped with joy.

"You cannot lift another soul until you are standing on higher ground than he is," President Lee concluded. "You must be sure, if you would rescue the man, that you yourself are setting the example of what you would have him be. You cannot light a fire in another soul unless it is burning in your own."²

Who was this man among men, admired by modern prophets and anointed of God? What manner of man is chosen from among the hosts of heaven to become the first ordained apostle of the Lord Jesus Christ, to lead his church in perilous times? How high was the ground he stood on? How bright was the fire in his soul? For answers we open the scriptures and find "a man who had grown perfect through his experiences and sufferings — a man with vision, a man of revelations, a man fully trusted by his Lord Jesus Christ."³ We find there a mighty stone in Israel.

When Jesus walked out of the wilderness after 40 days and nights of preparation, his eye fell upon a man who made his living sailing on a turbulent sea. With powers of discernment not of this world, he declared in that first encounter, "Thou art Simon, the son of Jona: thou shalt be called Cephas," or literally "a stone."⁴ (John 1:42.) Here was a principal building block for the priestly foundation to be laid. Jesus himself would be the chief cornerstone, but at his side would be apostles and prophets full of courage and strength and integrity. In those earliest hours of his ministry, Jesus had found the man prepared from before the foundation of the world to become his chief apostle and special witness in the dispensation of the meridian of time.

Peter was, in President Kimball's Words "a diamond in the rough — a diamond that would need to be cut, trimmed, and polished by correction, chastisement, and trials — but nevertheless a diamond of real quality. The Savior knew this apostle could be trusted to receive the keys of the kingdom."⁵ Time was short. Much had to be done in a matter of months. Jesus prepared Peter as quickly as possible for the call that was to come.

"Launch out into the deep," he counseled this fisherman one morning in Galilee, "and let down your nets for a draught." (Luke 5:4.) After an unsuccessful night of effort, Peter's expert judgment told him a final effort was useless. But this was a man of genuinely childlike faith, and he lowered the net. The number of fish taken in that single attempt strained the strings until they began to break and filled two boats until they began to sink. In that small ship Peter kneeled, stunned, at the feet of the Master. Jesus said lovingly, "Henceforth thou shalt catch men." (Luke 5: 10.)

Launch out into the deep! Peter could not have known the ever-widening circles that single command would make in the stream of his plain and simple life. He was launching out into the expanse of godliness, into the eternal possibilities of redeemed and celestial life. He would be learning the mysteries of the kingdom. He would be hearing unspeakable things. To launch out into that limitless sea of the gospel of Jesus Christ, Peter brought his craft to shore, turned

his back on the most spectacular single catch ever taken from Galilee, "forsook all, and followed him." (Luke 5:11.)

From that moment on Jesus taught and trained Peter at every opportunity. He walked with him in the hills outside Capernaum. He sat with him beside the sea they both loved so much. Jesus stayed in Peter's home, ate at his table, gave blessings to his family and friends. Peter watched silently as the Son of God cast out devils, healed the sick, restored the blind. When Jesus sought some respite from the crowd, Peter appealed to him in their behalf. "All men seek for thee" (Mark 1:37), he told the Master, and perhaps Jesus smiled a knowing smile. Peter did not know that very soon other men would seek Jesus — and not to receive a blessing at his hand. But Jesus knew and he hastened the work.

He called his disciples together, chose 12 from among them to be apostles, and ordained Peter to be the president of the council they now constituted.⁶ This newly appointed officer watched and learned and added to his faith, wholly absorbed in the life of his teacher. He eagerly walked along the pathway of miracles that Jesus walked, but slowed to stand in reverential wonder as the Redeemer took the lifeless hand of a child and commanded her to arise. Though he had never witnessed such an event nor imagined it could be so, nevertheless "her spirit came again, and she arose straightway." (Luke 8:55.) Like Mary before him, so Peter must have kept all these things, and pondered them in his heart. Little did he know that one day he would vividly recall every detail of this dramatic moment and, taking another beloved woman by the hand, raise her from the dead. (See Acts 9:40–41.)

As surely as the Jordan River runs to its sea, so this uniquely designed training had its calculated and inevitable effect. Peter's faith began to reach heights virtually unequalled in the New Testament record. It so surged within him that upon the Lord's invitation Peter once climbed down out of his fishing boat and "walked on the water, to go to Jesus." (Matt. 14:29.) That fact of faith has never been recorded of any other mortal man. If his faith faltered because of treacherous waves and adverse winds, "perhaps we should take a few steps on [the] water"⁷ before ascending to the judgment seat. In any case, with such rigorous challenges and "hard sayings" increasingly apparent in Jesus' teachings, many of the followers were unable to endure "and walked no more with him." But as the numbers dwindled, Peter was the more conspicuous by his presence. He knew no other way. He believed and so declared, "Lord...thou hast the words of eternal life." (See John 6:60–68.)

Such increasing conviction soon found its most profound utterance on the road to Caesarea Philippi. When Jesus asked his disciples, "Whom say ye that I am?" Simon Peter could not be restrained. With a conviction born not of reason or signs but of undeniable revelation from God, Peter burst forth: "Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God." (Matt. 16:15, 16.) From the moment he had named him Cephas, Jesus had been waiting for this man's strength of testimony to equal his strength of character. That time had come, and Peter was ready to receive the remaining keys of the kingdom.⁸

With Jesus leading the way, Peter, James, and John ascended "an high mountain apart" and there witnessed the transfiguration of the Son of God. His face shone as brightly as the sun at noonday and his raiment was as radiant as light itself. Then heavenly messengers appeared, bestowing upon this First Presidency every needful key for their ministry. In benediction to the event, a bright cloud overshadowed them and they heard the voice of Deity declare, "This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased; hear ye him." (Matt. 17:5.)

The moment passed. The vision ceased. Peter still had many lessons to learn in the days ahead

— of political loyalty and personal forgiveness, of material sacrifice and fruitful service. With his brethren he was yet to receive the sacrament of the Lord's supper, to hear Jesus pray for their unity, and to discover which of their number was "a devil." (John 6:70.) But whatever lay before him, the transfer of authority was now complete. Endowed with power from on high and armed with the certainty of his conviction, he descended with Jesus into the valley of the shadow of death.

He could not descend completely with Christ; no one could. Furthermore, he was restrained by Jesus himself when he physically assaulted those who had come to seize the Lord. Peter could not go with him, but neither could he in his most confused and frightened moment flee from him. Denying that he knew him, Peter stood in the courtyard of the accusers and saw the indignities his Lord and Savior suffered. Then he did what all repentant men have cause to do. Silently and alone, he "went out, and wept bitterly." (Luke 22:62.) Peter had been so certain that his strength was sufficient for such times; that, if necessary, he would withstand evil alone. Reassuringly he had said to Jesus. "Though all men shall be offended because of thee, yet will I never be offended." (Matt. 26:33.) But in the kingdom of God no man's strength is sufficient. This sobering, sorrowing realization — that he was not, of himself, capable of what God requires — was perhaps the final ingredient in Peter's short months of personal preparation. In the years ahead he would preside over the Church of Jesus Christ with dignity and great power, not in spite of his need for divine assistance, but clearly and admittedly because of it. Heavenly guidance and spiritual manifestation would be the marks of his administration.

And there would never again be a denial of Jesus. "Why look ye so earnestly on us, as though by our own power or holiness we had made this man to walk?" he would declare to all who marveled at the miracles. "Jesus, whom ye delivered up...his name hath made this man strong." (See Acts 3:12–16.)

Responding to the resurrected Lord's thrice-repeated injunction to "Feed my sheep," Peter took vigorous command of his assignment. Moving quickly to fill the vacancy created in the Council of the Twelve by Judas' death, Peter and his brethren were prepared on the day of Pentecost for the promised outpouring of the Spirit of the Lord. This fiftieth day after Passover had traditionally been celebrated in Israel as the "Feast of the Harvest" (Exod. 23:16) or "Day of the Firstfruits" (Num. 28:26). Now it is remembered as the day the Lord sent with "cloven tongues like as of fire" his benefaction upon the Church and the harvesting of souls about to begin.

Indeed, it literally marked the firstfruits of Peter's missionary labors. So powerful was his witness of these manifest wonders of Christ that fully 3,000 souls were "pricked in their heart" and accepted Peter's invitation to "Repent, and be baptized...in the name of Jesus Christ...and...receive the gift of the Holy Ghost." (Acts 2:37–38.) Days later his message of "Repent ye therefore, and be converted" was heard in Jerusalem, and 5,000 more believed. (Acts 3:19; 4:4.) Sacred writ contains few accounts of missionary powers like these. Wherever he went, men and women heard a testimony kindled by the revelations of God.

Of course, the tidal wave of conversion that swept Jerusalem under Peter's direction aroused the anger and fear of both Sadducee and Pharisee. But Peter's compelling' declarations could not be silenced. In prison he overwhelmed his accusers with a piercing testimony of Jesus and found himself set free by angels as well as by mortal men. Such powers stunned Jewish lawyers who marveled at these "unlearned and ignorant men." (Acts 4:13.) They did not understand that in the gospel of Jesus Christ those have never been synonymous terms.⁹ The

Spirit of the Lord attended the Twelve wherever they met, shaking both body and building with its power. Multitudes were brought to them and they were healed "every one." (Acts 5:16.) Faith in Peter's faith brought the sick into the streets on their beds of affliction "that at least the shadow of Peter passing by might overshadow some of them." (Acts 5:15.) One wonders if there is a single written line in any other record that stands as a greater monument to the faith and power of one mortal man bearing the holy priesthood of God. May we be forgiven for accusations of "indecisiveness, lack of humility, fear of man, and failure to pray."

With his own sense of urgency, Peter aggressively defied the injunction not to teach in the name of Christ and he returned again and again to the temple, where his safety was never secure. President Kimball pictures him there in the house of the Lord, "the number one man in all the world," stretching to his full height and speaking with power to those who could imprison him, flog him, even take his life from him. With "courage superior and integrity supreme,"¹⁰ Peter testified plainly, "We ought to obey God rather than men... We are his witnesses of these things." (Acts 5:30, 32.) Imprisoned and beaten, forbidden to speak, Peter was as irrepressible as Abinadi of old. He and his brethren rejoiced that they were "counted worthy to suffer shame for his name. And daily in the temple and in every house, they ceased not to teach and preach Jesus Christ." (Acts 5:41-42.)

As its prophet, seer, and revelator, Peter soon led the Church into its boldest and most fruitful venture, fulfilling Jesus' commission to "go ye into all the world, and preach the gospel to every creature." (Mark 16:15.) In unhesitating response to divine manifestation, he opened the work of salvation to the gentiles of every nation. "God is no respecter of persons," he declared to the converted Roman soldier, Cornelius, "but in every nation he that feareth him, and worketh righteousness, is accepted with him." (Acts 10:35.) When tradition-bound Jewish converts objected, Peter disarmingly replied, "What was I that I could withstand God." (Acts 10: 17.)

Obedient to the principle that "unto whatsoever place ye cannot go ye shall send" (D&C 84:62), Peter wrote letters to the Saints, at home and abroad. Two of these letters are included in the New Testament canon and contain what the Prophet Joseph Smith considered to be "the most sublime language of any of the apostles."¹¹ Peter wrote of proper marriage bonds, of a royal priesthood, and of a good conscience. He encouraged charity, gracious hospitality, and escape from the pollutions of the world. He spoke of being born again and of a more sure word of prophecy. He bore witness of "the precious blood of Christ" and of the "divine nature" we all should desire. (See 1 and 2 Peter.) It is little wonder that so many then and so many now respond to Peter as did President Harold B. Lee: "When I am wanting to pick up something that would give me some inspiring thoughts," President Lee once said, "I have gone back to the Epistles of Peter."¹²

In a final moment of instruction before his ascension, Jesus had warned Peter of the course that lay before him. "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.) That was, quite literally, part of what it meant for Peter to follow him. Christian tradition has suggested that Peter was executed by crucifixion but with his head downwards, lest he appear to be presuming in life or in death to be equal to the Savior he adored.

A recent announcement declared that excavations in Rome within the last decade had uncovered the remains of the apostle Peter.¹³ But Peter's bones were not discovered in that excavation nor will they be in any other, for the resurrected Peter appeared to the Prophet

Joseph Smith on the banks of the Susquehanna River 146 years ago. On that sacred occasion the ancient First Presidency committed to Joseph Smith and Oliver Cowdery the keys of the Melchizedek Priesthood that were to open a "dispensation of the gospel for the last times; and for the fulness of times." (See D&C 27:12–13.) Through the mighty work of the Melchizedek Priesthood, which has gone forth to all the world from that day to this, the lengthening "shadow of Peter" is still passing by and healing them, "every one."

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Notes

1. Spencer W. Kimball, "*Peter, My Brother*," BYU Speeches of the Year, July 13, 1971, p. 1.
2. Harold B. Lee, *Stand Ye in Holy Places*, Deseret Book, 1974, pp. 186–87.
3. "*Peter, My Brother*," p.1.
4. The King James version as well as most modern New Testament translations give both the Aramaic (Cephas) and Greek (Petros) surnames. Both mean literally, a *stone* or *rock*.
5. "*Peter, My Brother*," p. 2
6. Joseph Fielding Smith noted, "*Peter, James, and John acted as the First Presidency of the Church in their day... They served in this capacity while serving at the same time as three of the Council of the Twelve.*" *Doctrines of Salvation*, Bookcraft, 1956, 111:152. See also David O. McKay's *Ancient Apostles*, Deseret Book, 1964, p. 60.
7. See Richard Lloyd Anderson's "*Simon Peter*" in the February, 1975 ENSIGN, (pp. 47–49) for this provocative line as well as for a concise portrait of the chief apostle.
8. "The promise to give thereafter unto Peter 'the keys of the kingdom' seems clearly to show that up till this time, certain keys of the Melchizedek Priesthood had not been conferred upon the Apostles." J. Reuben Clark, *Behold the Lamb of God*, Deseret Book, 1962, p. 269.
9. "Unlearned they were; but not ignorant; for by their wisdom and preaching, they overthrew the whole edifice of human wisdom, and led the world to the light of truth." *Ancient Apostles*, p. 23.
10. Spencer W. Kimball, *Faith Precedes the Miracle*, Deseret Book, 1972, p. 244.
11. *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith*, p. 301
12. Message to the Regional Representatives of the Twelve, April, 1973, typescript, p. 2.
13. Papal Announcement, June 26, 1968.