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Earthquakes move rocks—and people. And when the ground under our feet begins to shake, our view of the world changes.

Something like that happened to a first-century fisherman named Simon. When Jesus came into his life, the ground under his feet began to shake.

In the following pages, RBC Associate Bible Teacher Bill Crowder gives us a fresh look at a series of unexpected events in Simon’s life that shook him to the core but that Jesus used to transform him into Peter, which means “rock.”

There’s a lot that we can learn from Peter’s struggle to become “rocklike”—stable and consistent. And in the strength that only Jesus can give, we too can have victory over our failures.

Mart De Haan
WHEN THE EARTH MOVES

In the mid-1980s, my wife and I moved our little family to Los Angeles so that I could pastor a church there. Within months of our arrival on the West Coast, we found ourselves smack in the middle of the Whittier earthquake of 1987.

Where do you hide when the ground itself shakes? Where do you run for cover when terra firma is no longer firm? It was one of the most unsettling experiences of my life.

Earthquakes come suddenly and without warning. And they are a picture of the kind of instability that can shake our lives. In addition, they force us to admit that we are frail and inadequate. They force us to see things about ourselves that we probably would rather not know.

Having experienced an earthquake and its resulting emotional impact, I’m reminded of a man in the Bible whose life was profoundly affected by a series of unexpected moments and events that shook him to the core. His name was Simon, son of Jonah—who later became known as Peter.

Peter’s story can be told around some of the earthquake-like moments that shook him out of self-confidence and deep conviction and into emotional episodes of fear and indecision. As a result, we can view his life by comparing it to a seismic graph that shows times of relative stability marked by occasional quakes and tremors that helped to define his life and bring him into a deeper awareness of his spiritual need.
Peter's spiritual journey began, or at least changed dramatically, when he was introduced to the long-awaited Messiah of Israel.

John the Baptist had been preaching his message of repentance and had gathered a number of followers. But then he began to turn their focus away from himself to Jesus of Nazareth. He wanted to make it clear that Jesus, not himself, was the promised Messiah of Israel. One of John's followers, a Galilean fisherman by the name of Andrew, turned from John the Baptist to follow Jesus, and then brought his brother Simon to meet the teacher he believed to be the Messiah.

One of the two who heard John speak, and followed Him, was Andrew, Simon Peter's brother. He first found his own brother Simon, and said to him, "We have found the Messiah" (which is translated, the Christ). And he brought him to Jesus. Now when Jesus looked at him, He said, "You are Simon the son of Jonah. You shall be called Cephas" (Jn. 1:40-42).

Cephas is Aramaic for the Greek name Petros, which literally means "stone" or "rock." In that announcement, Jesus did more than give Simon a nickname. He changed his name in anticipation of what He would do with Peter.

A stone or a rock is a picture of stability. But the name that Jesus gave Simon seems to conflict not only with his personality but with some of the events of Peter's life over the next 3 years.

In comparing Peter to fireworks, one writer said that Peter was not like a
sparkler or a smoke bomb—he was like a rocket with a faulty fuse. He was too rough, too outspoken, and too underqualified.

Nevertheless, Jesus called him. Simon was not a man who would be quietly tucked in on the fringes of Jesus’ followers. He was high maintenance. Though unpolished, untrained, and uneducated, he would become the spokesman of a group that would turn the world upside down.

Still, Peter may be the easiest disciple for us to relate to. The Scriptures make his life an open book by describing not only his strengths and successes but also his unexpected failures that rocked him to the core. Let’s look at four of these defining moments.

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**SHAKEN BY THE POWER OF CHRIST**

In Luke 5 we find Peter so shaken by his encounter with Jesus that it led to a seismic shift in his thinking.

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**A CALL FOR PETER’S INVOLVEMENT**

So it was, as the multitude pressed about Him to hear the word of God, that He stood by the Lake of Gennesaret, and saw two boats standing by the lake; but the fishermen had gone from them and were washing their nets. Then He got into one of the boats, which was Simon’s, and asked him to put out a little from the
land. And He sat down and taught the multitudes from the boat (Lk. 5:1-3). The scene is the “Lake of Gennesaret” (the Sea of Galilee). The crowds were gathering to hear Jesus teach, and a small group of fishermen were also there cleaning their nets after a long night of fishing.

Today people fish for relaxation and sport, but for many in first-century Galilee, fishing was about survival. It taxed every ounce of their energy as they rowed, cast nets, and hauled in the nets. On this occasion, the boats and nets had been empty all night. In that setting, Jesus focused on one of the boats and its owner—Simon.

As we’ve already seen, this was not the Teacher’s first contact with Peter (Mt. 4:18-20; Mk. 1:16-20; Jn. 1:40-42). Prior to this, Peter had become a nominal follower of Jesus. But now the Messiah was laying claim on all that Peter was—and He began by using what little Peter had.

Jesus sat down to teach, using Simon’s boat as a pulpit—and for Simon, what was about to happen would so shake his world that Luke would later record, “When Simon Peter saw it, he fell down at Jesus’ knees, saying, ‘Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord!’” (5:8).

What was it that would bring Peter to this point? The events leading up to that moment deserve our thoughtful attention.

AN INDICATION OF JESUS’ IDENTITY

When He had stopped speaking, He said to Simon, “Launch out into the deep and let down your nets for a catch.” But Simon answered and said to Him, “Master, we have toiled all night and caught nothing; nevertheless at
Your word I will let down the net.” And when they had done this, they caught a great number of fish, and their net was breaking. So they signaled to their partners in the other boat to come and help them. And they came and filled both the boats, so that they began to sink (vv.4-7).

Jesus finished His teaching, then turned to Simon—who was a captive audience at the time. His instructions to Simon to “launch out into the deep and let down your nets” come across more like an order than a suggestion. And they ran contrary to everything Simon knew about fishing. In the Sea of Galilee, fishing was done at night near the shore—not in the daytime out in the deep. So it’s understandable that Simon would respond with an argument: “We have toiled all night and caught nothing.” Even though he had been unsuccessful, he was certainly an expert. For Jesus to expect such an action after a long, frustrating night must have seemed unreasonable. But Jesus had his boat, and now He wanted Simon’s nets—and his will.

The story is told that the Duke of Wellington, the great British commander who defeated Napoleon’s forces at the Battle of Waterloo during the Hundred Days War in 1815, once gave a command to one of his generals, who then responded that it was an impossible command to execute. The Duke told him, “You go ahead and do it, because I don’t give impossible commands.” Jesus doesn’t give impossible commands either—a truth Peter discovered when he finally obeyed.

This is an important step in Peter’s growth. It seems...
as though he initially questioned Christ's command when he said, “We have toiled all night and caught nothing.” But then the text says, “Nevertheless at Your word I will let down the net.” He did what he was told, even though all his professional skills told him it was a royal waste of time. Notice that he called Jesus “Master.” He didn’t call Him “Rabbi” or “Teacher” here. He used the Greek word epistates, which in this context can be translated “Captain of the Boat.” Peter knew who was in charge, so he responded to the word of Christ and obeyed—even though he couldn’t comprehend how it would make a difference.

What was the result? Although it seemed utterly impossible, a huge number of fish were caught—at the wrong time and in the wrong way. And Peter found himself in the presence of One who could do the impossible.

One writer saw in this event a clear comparison to the apostle Paul’s great doxology in Ephesians 3:20, which reads, “Now to Him who is able to do exceedingly abundantly above all that we ask or think.” Peter found himself in a boat with One who was doing just that:

- **Able to do**—“caught a great number of fish”;
- **Exceedingly abundantly**—“their net was breaking”;
- **Above all that we ask or think**—“they came and filled both the boats, so that they began to sink.”

**AN AWARENESS OF PERSONAL FRAILTY**

When Simon Peter saw it, he fell down at Jesus’ knees, saying, “Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord!” For he and all who were with him
were astonished at the catch of fish which they had taken (vv.8-9).

Simon’s immediate response was not about all the fish he had just caught, but about the One who had accomplished it. He realized that he was in the presence of the Creator. Certainly the Christ who spoke the universe into existence had no trouble in getting a few fish together to display His majesty to this poor, overwhelmed fisherman. So Peter recognized that he was in the presence of God, and he was “astonished” because what had transpired was beyond reason, description, or explanation. Only God could have done it.

Jesus revealed Himself as supreme in the realm where Simon was most familiar, most skilled, and most adequate. The realization of who Jesus was elicited from Simon a most appropriate response: Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord!

Peter was “astonished” because what had transpired was beyond reason, description, or explanation. Only God could have done it.

In calling Jesus “Lord,” not just teacher, rabbi, or master, Simon was indicating his belief that he was face to face with deity. He saw:

- The incomprehensible difference between holy God and sinful man.
- The overwhelming burden of sin that weighs down the soul.
- The need for repentance so that his own sinful
condition could be corrected.

One commentator wrote that it was as if Simon were saying, “I’m not worth it, Lord. Give up on me. I failed You when You called me before, and I will fail You again. Call someone worth Your time and trouble. Call someone You can trust. You once said that I’d be called Rock—but there’s no rock in me. Give me up. I’m a sinful man.”

Bishop J. C. Ryle wrote of this passage:

The words of Peter exactly express the first feeling of man when he is brought into anything like close contact with God. The sight of divine greatness and holiness makes him feel strongly his own littleness and sinfulness. Like Adam after the fall, his first thought is to hide himself. Like Israel [at] Sinai, the language of his heart is, “Let not God speak with us, lest we die.” But Christ’s love would not let him go. He was prepared to do whatever it took to make Simon into a rock.

AN INVITATION TO A LIFE THAT MATTERS

Jesus said to Simon, “Do not be afraid. From now on you will catch men.”

So when they had brought their boats to land, they forsook all and followed Him (vv.10-11).

Jesus invited Simon on an adventure of faith that would radically transform his life, giving him:

**A New Attitude.** “Do not be afraid.” G. Campbell Morgan wrote, “Oh, the infinite music of it. He first said, ‘Fear not.’ He said it to that man, that elemental man, great emotional soul; the man who did not seem
to have the strength to arrive anywhere; and He said it to him, conscious of his failure.”

A New Day. “From now on . . . .” It breaks with the past and changes everything. The failure of the past is replaced with a new future.

A New Purpose. “. . . you will catch men.” In other words, Peter would take men alive. As God had called David and Moses to leave what they were doing to shepherd His people, He now called Simon to leave his nets and fish for people.

A New Life. “They forsook all and followed Him.” This is an expression of radical commitment. For Simon, everything was becoming new. Yet the extent of the transformation Jesus envisioned for Peter would not happen overnight. The man He had named “the rock” would be slow in forming.

Peter’s journey had begun. He had been shaken by the power of Christ. He had felt his weakness. And he had sensed his need for One so much greater than himself. He had met the One to whom later generations would sing:

I need Thee every hour; teach me Thy will;
And Thy rich promises in me fulfill.
I need Thee, O I need Thee;
every hour I need Thee;
O bless me now, my Savior,
I come to Thee.

SHAKEN BY DISTRACTION

I really love playing golf. It’s a simple game, but it’s far from easy. What makes it so challenging is that it can’t be approached casually. It requires every ounce of concentration and self-discipline you have—if you’re going to play well.
Golf instructors say, “Every time you swing a golf club, there are a thousand things that can go wrong and only one thing that can go right.” Only by seeing and executing the correct contact of clubface and ball can you avoid an unwanted push, pull, hook, slice, or dub. Only by undistracted focus on the object of your backswing, contact, and followthrough can you put the ball where you want it to go.

It’s like this in our next encounter with Simon Peter. As he slowly learned to follow Christ, he would discover what it meant to be shaken by distraction.

Matthew gave us the details in chapter 14. Jesus and His men had been engaged in a long and wearying day of ministry. As the night drew near, Christ let His disciples know that He needed some time alone.

As Jesus used the moments of solitude to commune with His Father, His men began making their way across the Sea of Galilee by boat. That’s when another amazing event happened.

**SEEING JESUS**

*In the fourth watch of the night Jesus went to them, walking on the sea. And when the disciples saw Him walking on the sea, they were troubled, saying, “It is a ghost!” And they cried out for fear. But immediately Jesus spoke to them, saying, “Be of good cheer! It is I; do not be afraid” (Mt. 14:25-27).*

The disciples were terrified by the dim, hard-to-see appearance of someone on the water, so they began to cry out. At the very least, they were disturbed to see something as bizarre as this, and they may have even
feared for their own safety and well-being.

We must remember that this would have been an extraordinary sight for anyone to witness. But these aren’t just ordinary guys out for a boat ride. A number of them were professional fishermen who had spent their entire adult lives on the Sea of Galilee. While they may have been uneducated men, they knew water. And they knew that people just aren’t capable of walking on water. It’s not improbable; it’s impossible.

Yet Jesus called to them out of the mist and assured them that they didn’t need to be afraid. At this point, Peter acted true to form. Impulsively, he took Jesus’ reassuring words not only literally but to the extreme. He let Jesus know that he wanted to experience walking on water for himself!

**WALKING BY FAITH**

Peter answered Him and said, “Lord, if it is You, command me to come to You on the water.” So He said, “Come.” And when Peter had come down out of the boat, he walked on the water to go to Jesus (vv.28-29).

Here, we see the quintessential Peter—stepping out in bold, almost audacious faith in Jesus, abandoning himself to the ability of Christ. Although we have read or heard this story a thousand times, and we know that Peter is going to sink like a rock, we mustn’t allow that fact to hide the amazing reality of the moment. “He walked on the water to go to Jesus.” This is Peter at his best—trusting Christ absolutely, and acting on that trust.

Remember, this was a professional fisherman who had spent his entire life working on the Sea of
Galilee. Yet, with confidence in the ability of the Master, Peter did what no fisherman would ever be so foolish as to attempt: He climbed out of the boat and stepped across the watery surface of the Galilee toward Christ. With Moses, God made a way through the Red Sea. With Joshua, God made a way through the Jordan River. But as remarkable as those events were, this was even more. Peter did not travel *through* the water—he walked *on* the water.

I don’t think any of us would try to make a case that Peter was somehow especially gifted in water-walking, or that he was somehow more spiritual than the other disciples who stayed in the boat. Far from it. In this moment of faith, Peter was walking on water because he had absolutely released himself to the Creator and His power. The power of the Creator over His creation caused Peter, the Bible’s true everyman, to do one of the most supernatural things in the pages of Scripture. Peter walked on water—until he wondered whether he should be doing this in the middle of a storm.

**DISTRACTED BY THE STORM**

*But when he saw that the wind was boisterous, he was afraid; and beginning to sink he cried out, saying, “Lord, save me!” And immediately Jesus stretched out His hand and caught him, and said to him, “O you of little faith, why did you doubt?”* (vv.30-31).

Peter was suddenly shaken by the realization that he was walking on water *in the midst of a storm*. He became distracted and stopped looking at his Lord.

I mentioned earlier
that I like playing golf. As keeping one's eye on the ball is a fundamental of the sport, so keeping our eyes on Christ and staying focused on Him is a basic fundamental of following Him. Nothing is more important than using our Bible, our prayers, and even our fears to keep our focus on Him.

We need to continually make choices about whether we will allow distractions to seduce us and draw us away from what is most important.

Because there are countless realities in this world that can distract us from our Lord, we need to continually make choices about whether we will allow these distractions to seduce us and draw us away from what is most important.

Some of the distractions we all face are:

- **Fear**—the emotion we feel when we perceive that life is suddenly beyond our control instead of trusting that life is in God's control.
- **Despair**—the internal sense of loss that causes us to lose heart and hope because circumstances cloud our view of God's purposes.
- **Disappointment**—the woundedness of soul that results from placing our trust in people who fail us.
- **Stress**—the pressure that comes into our lives when we try to take on life in our own strength.
In the face of such challenges, we need to be people of purpose—people who look beyond the distractions that surround us, so that we can run the race of life . . .

looking unto Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith, who for the joy that was set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God (Heb. 12:2).

Peter’s brief encounter with water-walking was scuttled for a very human and understandable reason. He failed to focus on the Savior because he was distracted by his circumstance. His desperate, sinking cry for help, therefore, becomes a useful warning to us.

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especially dramatic picture of how Peter experienced a life-shaking defeat on the heels of a great moment of insight. One minute Peter was warmly affirmed by Jesus. But then it was followed almost immediately by a humiliating rebuke by Him. In the process, Jesus’ impulsive disciple helps all of us to see how quickly our emotional landscape can shift—revealing once again why it’s so important for us to keep our focus on our Master.

Let’s look together at the events leading up to another moment that must have shaken Peter to the core.

PETER’S MOMENT OF INSIGHT

In Matthew 16:13, Jesus had just finished yet another confrontation with Israel’s religious leaders and then traveled north with His men to the base of Mount Hermon in the region of Caesarea Philippi, a Roman outpost city that was used as a retreat for occupying Roman troops. It was here at the rocky base of the mountain that the Romans had built temples and altars to the pantheon of their Roman gods.

It seems that Jesus brought His disciples to this out-of-the-way place filled with the landmarks of false religion for one purpose—to provide the necessary backdrop for an important examination. Here, Jesus would test their opinion of Him in the presence of other “options of faith.” And it is here that Peter would pass the first test with flying colors—only to be thoroughly shaken by a failure he never saw coming.

A Powerful Question With Many Possible Answers. Jesus gave His disciples a test that was made up of only two questions. The first: “Who
do men say that I, the Son of Man, am?” (v.13).

It was like hearing the results of an ancient Gallup poll. According to His disciples, people were saying that Jesus was:

- **John the Baptist.**
  Perhaps these people recognized Jesus’ and John’s shared themes of repentance and the kingdom.

- **Elijah.** Some people, having witnessed the miracles of Jesus, remembered the Old Testament stories of the powerful ministry of Elijah, and assumed Jesus to be Elijah returned to the earth.

- **Jeremiah.** The people with this opinion may have seen a similarity between the ministry of the “weeping prophet” and the deep compassion of Jesus whose care for people was bathed in many tears.

- **One of the prophets.**
  These people didn’t want to specify but felt that Jesus demonstrated the characteristics of the great spiritual leaders of days gone by.

  The disciples’ summary of popular opinions about Jesus’ identity was impressive. All were favorable, yet none was adequate. They knew the crowds had been amazed by His miracles. But even those who spoke well of Jesus didn’t fully grasp what they saw.

  The same is still true today, 2,000 years later. When the question is asked, “Who is Jesus?” the answers come back: “A great teacher, a good man, a moral example, a religious leader.” All too often, the inexpressible wonder and majesty of the real identity of Jesus is completely missed.

  For that reason, it's
essential that we don’t miss what Jesus was doing with His disciples at the base of Mount Hermon. With the options of public opinion fresh in their mouths, and the garden of the gods of the world surrounding them, Jesus asked a second question.

**A Personal Question With Only One Answer.** In verse 15, Jesus took the issue of His identity out of the realm of information and made it personal. “But who do you say that I am?” Without commenting on the different opinions of the public concerning Him, Jesus put this question to His disciples, which was His intent from the start.

Their own eternal well-being would not lie in their knowledge of public opinion or a cross-sampling of the marketplace. Their relationship with the Father in heaven would be tied directly to their knowledge of who Jesus was.

The disciples had believed in Jesus and had become His followers, but they needed to more fully understand and confess who He was before His life took a dramatic turn that would shake and confuse them. So Jesus asked His men for their own opinion: “Who do you say that I am?”

The question in the Greek is emphatic. It’s as if Jesus said, “Don’t parrot back the multitudes and their empty speculations. You, what do you yourselves say?” Wilbur M. Smith wrote:

Christ’s miracles had two fundamental objectives: first, that of helping broken, diseased, enslaved, handicapped men and women to obtain soundness of health again, freedom from demon-enslavement, [loss of]
hearing, sight, [and] the ability to walk; secondly, to glorify God in such a way that men would recognize that the One performing these miracles was indeed sent by and approved by God. Had the disciples understood the majesty to which they had been exposed? Would their view of Christ be molded by public opinion or by the evidence? It was Peter who answered.

The Timely Answer To An Eternal Question. Peter's answer was his confession that Jesus was, in fact, the long-awaited Messiah. So he declared, “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God” (v.16). This is the only complete and perfect answer to the question. Every word here was clear and direct, forming a comprehensive statement of faith. The Christ points out Jesus' office; the Son shows His deity; Of the living God distinguishes Him from the dead idols of paganism and points Him out as the source of all life—present, spiritual, and eternal.

Amazingly, what made the difference between Peter's confession and public opinion was not just the abundance of evidence, but the work of God in the heart to bring a life to faith. Notice Jesus' response: "Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jonah, for flesh and blood has not revealed the Christ, or Messiah, to you, but My Father who is in heaven has revealed Him out as the source of all life—present, spiritual, and eternal. The investigation, study, and weighing of evidence are not enough. It's been said that between God and man is an impenetrable curtain of unknowing. Only God can draw aside that curtain and bring to a

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person a certain, unshakable knowing of who Jesus Christ is. Remember, human categories will always be insufficient. This is an issue of personal discovery, and it has eternal implications.

Peter went from being a fisherman who was untrained in theology to a disciple who uttered the greatest theological statement in history. His progress had been slow, but steady. His growth had been the byproduct of his exposure to Christ. And that exposure bore fruit in a clarity of mind that was profound. Everything Jesus had done with Peter up to this moment had been to bring him to this point of understanding.

Peter's life, however, was like a roller-coaster ride with all its ups and downs. His incredible moment of God-given insight was quickly followed by a disappointing failure. Upon the heels of Peter's confession, Jesus began to unfold the eternal plan of the Father—but Peter wasn't ready for it.

**PETER’S DISAPPOINTING FAILURE**

*From that time Jesus began to show to His*
disciples that He must go to Jerusalem, and suffer many things from the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and be raised the third day (v.21).

The key word in this verse is must. This is the divine mandate, the divine mission, and the divine priority. There will be no looking back, no avoidance of the danger. Jesus must go to Jerusalem, the place where danger awaits. This intense focus applies to the rest of the verse as well:

- He must suffer many things.
- He must be killed.
- He must be raised the third day.

Notice that there are two aspects to Jesus' sense of passion:

The Human Reality. Jesus had to suffer as the natural outcome of all that He had been saying and doing. The people were increasingly rejecting His message, and the religious leaders were plotting to rid themselves of Him. This was the inevitable consequence of the radical message He had presented to a spiritually deaf, dumb, and blind world.

The Divine Reality. Jesus was not simply devoted to enduring human rejection heroically. The eternal counsel of the Godhead was operating in Him, leading to suffering that would be followed by a dramatic, victorious resurrection from the dead.

Because Peter didn't understand this, he responded just as wrongly to this matter as he had rightly responded to Jesus' question, “Who do you say that I am?”

**His Presumptuous Response**

Peter took [Jesus] aside and began to rebuke Him, saying, “Far be it from You, Lord; this shall not happen to You!” (v.22).
Peter’s attitude revealed a huge personal blind spot. Without realizing it, his heart was filled with presumption. In first-century Jewish culture, “Far be it from You” was a violent expression laced with anger. Simon had just confessed Jesus as the Messiah and Son of God. Yet now he was speaking as if he were the master and teacher of Jesus! Certainly more than he realized, he was speaking as if he understood God’s will better than the Son of God whom he had just confessed.

Why? Obviously, Peter had his own plans and ideas about the future. And what Jesus had just said about suffering and dying sounded absolutely unthinkable and impossible to him.

There’s a lesson here for all of us. So much of our living and thinking is rooted in our own predefined expectations. All too often, we fail to realize that God’s ways are not our ways.

When we don’t allow God to be God, and when we don’t see our dreams or goals being fulfilled, we are inclined to respond with presumption out of our own bitterness, resentment, and anger.

One commentator wrote that Peter’s reaction essentially said: “This isn’t what I signed up for, Lord. It was never supposed to be this way. It was supposed to be a coronation, not a crucifixion. It was supposed to be a crown of gold, not a crown of thorns. It was supposed to be a glorious throne, not an ignominious cross. This is the wrong plan. And I find it unacceptable.”

**Jesus’ Shaking Rebuke**

[Jesus] turned and said to Peter, “Get behind Me, Satan! You are an offense to Me, for you are not mindful of the things of God, but the things of men” (v.23).
In a rebuke that must have shaken Simon to the core, Jesus called him “Satan,” which means adversary. Why? Because Peter was doing the same thing Satan had done in Matthew 4 when he tested Christ in the wilderness. With better intentions, but with terribly wrong presumption, he, like Satan himself, was resisting the cross for which Jesus had come into the world.

Additionally, Jesus referred to Peter as “an offense” (Gk. skandalon), literally, a “stumbling block.” The cross was intended to be a stumbling block to the world (see 1 Cor. 1:18; Gal. 5:11), but Simon Peter had mindlessly become a roadblock to Christ’s path.

Peter’s reaction shows how far he had drifted from keeping his eyes on the thoughts and purposes of his Messiah and Master. Only a short time earlier, Peter had spoken the truth about who Christ was. But now, he spoke against the truth—rebuking Christ and becoming a stumbling block.

I suppose Peter’s words could be seen in a variety of ways, including the possibility that he was outraged at the thought of Jesus having to suffer, and he just wanted to protect Him. But Jesus’ response makes it clear that Peter’s words came from a different source—a heart filled with presumptive thoughts of self-confidence and self-interest.

Such a heart is fueled by natural affection and inclination rather than by the Spirit of God. The result is that it sees only the momentary interests of “me,” rather than the overarching purposes of God.

Even though none of us would knowingly...
choose to have such a heart, we, like Peter, can learn and experience the hard way that . . .
• a self-centered person cannot be a God-centered person.
• a self-deceived person cannot be a God-sensitive person.
• a self-driven person cannot be a God-purposed person.

It was the natural inclination of his own human nature that caused Peter to thoughtlessly assume the role of rebuking God the Son. As preposterous as that sounds, we need to realize that Peter shows us what we all are like, apart from submitting our own hearts to the will and Word of God.

Siding with Satan, as Peter did, isn’t limited to the conscious pursuit of mystical, occult practice. It is the inevitable result of following personal assumptions rather than thoughtful attention to Christ.

Peter’s experience of being shaken by the rebuke of Jesus gives all of us reason to consider the following questions:
• Am I submitting to the will of God in this moment—whatever it may mean?
• Am I committed to being a building block to the leading of the Spirit of God, instead of allowing my natural inclinations to be a stumbling block?
• What will motivate and compel my living? My interests or God’s?

To Peter’s credit, this humbling and shattering corrective from his Lord was taken in the proper spirit. He got the message. In fact, as they moved closer to the events of the cross that Peter wanted so desperately to prevent, his commitment to remain true to Christ at all costs only intensified.
SHAKEN BY THE FAILURE TO PREPARE

The Boy Scout motto rings out a timeless truth: Be prepared. Preparation can occur in various ways. For example:

- It can be the preparation of wise decision making that characterized American frontier legend Davy Crockett’s life motto: “Be sure you’re right; then go ahead.”
- It can be the kind of preparation seen in Proverbs 6:6-8 that is illustrated by the ant who works hard to prepare for winter.
- It can be the preparation of an athlete who, through sacrifice and self-discipline, prepares mentally, physically, and emotionally for a big game.

In each case, there’s no substitute for preparation.

That applies to living by faith as well. We can never accomplish it in our own strength. And when we try, we fail. It’s only when we are properly prepared for the challenges of life that we can face them in the grace of our heavenly Father.

The night before the cross, Jesus twice warned Peter of coming danger. But Peter ignored His warnings. The result would be another failure that would profoundly shake him forever. Let’s look at the events as they’re recorded in Luke 22.

JESUS’ CAUTION AND CONCERN

Following the events of the Upper Room, the disciples began maneuvering for a position in what they expected to be the ruling administration of the long-awaited Messiah. After once again explaining that the leaders of His kingdom would be servants of all
(Lk. 22:24-30), Jesus turned to Peter and warned:

*Simon, Simon! Indeed, Satan has asked for you, that he may sift you as wheat. But I have prayed for you, that your faith should not fail; and when you have returned to Me, strengthen your brethren* (vv.31-32).

Difficult moments were ahead—moments much too big for Simon. So in this first warning, Christ gave both an assurance and a means for facing those hard times:

The assurance was that Jesus Himself would protect Peter in the testing that would follow, so that even though his heart and courage would fail, his faith would endure.

The means for facing those times of struggle was found in the example of Christ Himself. He had already begun His own preparation through prayer and had prayed for Simon’s protection.

The second warning came when they arrived at Gethsemane. Jesus Himself was again going to prepare for the horrors of Calvary by praying to the Father (vv.41-42). But first He told His disciples:

*Pray that you may not enter into temptation* (v.40).

The message here is clear: If Christ Himself needed a time of prayer to face the difficulties ahead, how much more did the disciples need to pray! It was so important that Jesus warned them a second time:

*Why do you sleep? Rise and pray, lest you enter into temptation* (v.46).

Prayer is not a security blanket for the weak of mind, nor is it the foolish chatter of people who are unable to cope with life. Time spent in the presence of the Father prepares us for challenges that will test our faith in
Him—moments we could not handle in our own strength. We see this in Peter’s life primarily by contrast. Even though Jesus urged Peter to pray in anticipation of the darkness that was coming, Peter soon fell asleep—at a critical moment. Because he was unprepared, he was shaken by another personal failure.

**Peter’s Courageous Stand and Fall**

In 1 Corinthians 10:12, Paul wrote, “Therefore let him who thinks he stands take heed lest he fall.” He could have been describing Peter—or any one of us who thinks that we can pass the tests of spiritual temptation by the force of our own thoughts or will.

In Luke 22:31, we saw that Jesus warned Peter that he was about to be tested by Satan. But he responded in typical Simon style:

> Lord, I am ready to go with You, both to prison and to death (v.33).

Jesus then told Peter that he would deny Him three times—abandoning Him in His darkest hour. Peter must have assumed that Jesus didn’t know how loyal he was determined to be.

Within just a few hours, Peter showed his resolve. When Judas came with a group of armed guards to take Jesus, Peter pulled out his sword and started swinging it (vv.47-50; cp. Jn. 18:2-10).

Courageous as he was,
Peter once again found that he needed his Teacher far more than his Teacher needed him. Jesus told Peter to put away his sword and then miraculously healed the servant whose ear Peter had lopped off with his sword (vv.50-51; Jn. 18:10-11).

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Jesus’ calm words and actions showed that Peter was out of step with the unfolding plan of God. On that night of nights, it was not physical strength that was required, but a heart yielded to God’s own strength and purposes. In that regard, Peter was thoroughly outmatched. 

Remember, Jesus had given Peter adequate warning that a difficult time was coming—once after leaving the Upper Room and again at Gethsemane. But when Peter drew his sword, he showed a self-reliance that left him completely unprepared for what was happening.

How did this happen to Peter? Perhaps the same way it happens to us. At least two things contribute to our lack of preparation:

• We underestimate the nature of the situations of life that can overwhelm us in a moment of disaster and our own capacity to betray our Lord in moments of pressure.

• We overestimate our own ability, savvy, and strength, so that we feel no need for the provision of God’s resources we so desperately require.
For Peter, this would result in circumstances and personal failure that would shake him even more than what he had already experienced.

But while acknowledging Peter's lack of preparation, let's make sure we don't miss something very noble in his resolve. When he pulled out his sword, he was proving his willingness to go to prison or even to die for his Master. He was trying to live up to the name Jesus had given him. I admire his heart.

And to Peter's credit, even though the other disciples forsook Jesus and fled after His arrest (Mt. 26:56; Mk. 14:50), Peter tried to be strong. He followed the arresting mob as they took Jesus to the house of the high priest (Mt. 26:58; Mk 14:54; Lk. 22:54). There, however, an unsuspecting Peter would be rocked even harder by fulfilling Jesus' prediction of his denial.

The story of how Peter cursed and denied that he even knew Jesus has often been told, and the details do not require repeating here (see Mt. 26:69-75).

His fall, however, was greater than Peter could ever have imagined. Luke's account tells us that as the words of the final denial were escaping Peter's lips . . .

*The Lord turned and looked at Peter. Then Peter remembered the word of the Lord, how He had said to him, “Before the rooster crows, you will deny Me three times.” So Peter went out and wept bitterly (Lk. 22:61-62).*

Tragic. Yet it's even more tragic because it was so unnecessary. If only he had prayed. If only he had prepared. If only he had paid attention to the warnings of the Master.

This was a case in which
lack of preparation led to deep regret. And we would do well to learn from Peter's mistake. Bible teacher G. Campbell Morgan wrote:

There was a time in the younger years of my ministry when I would have enjoyed fifteen minutes [flogging] Simon. But not now. I am not exonerating him from blame; but if I investigate my own heart, I am not surprised. Moreover, I have ceased criticizing him because there has dawned on me the fact that Jesus did not do so. He understood. He never gave him up.

The collapse that Peter suffered was not unusual. In fact, it is the collapse that faces all of us when we decide that we are rich, strong, and have need of nothing—like the church at Laodicea (Rev. 3:14-22). Self-sufficiency sets us up—and then tears us down. We need to fully understand:

- Paul's words: “I know that in me (that is, in my flesh) nothing good dwells” (Rom. 7:18).
- Jeremiah’s words: “The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked; who can know it?” (Jer. 17:9).
- Jesus’ words: “Without Me you can do nothing” (Jn. 15:5).

If we truly understand our own inadequacy, we will be more likely to remember Paul’s words:

No temptation has overtaken you except such as is common to man; but God is faithful, who will not allow you to be tempted beyond what you are able, but with the temptation will also make the way of escape, that you may be able to bear it (1 Cor. 10:13).

Peter failed to prepare by making use of his spiritual resources, choosing rather to
depend upon himself. As a result, he experienced the collapse of a lifetime. The seismic shift that shook Peter to his core was a failure that, in human terms, didn’t have to happen—had Peter trusted in the warnings of Christ more and his own resources less.

**LIFE IS A JOURNEY**

Peter is so much like us. Right up to the final hours of his 3 years with Jesus, he struggled with failure.

Yet as an expression of God’s marvelous grace, the resurrected Christ sought out Peter and restored His dear friend to a lifetime of profitable service.

As a result of Peter’s restoration, we see him just 10 days after Jesus ascended into heaven, preaching the great sermon on the Day of Pentecost in which 3,000 people gave their lives to the risen Lord (Acts 2:41). He then showed courage born of the indwelling Holy Spirit by boldly declaring Christ’s resurrection to the very people who had conspired to crucify the Son of God.

Nevertheless, he also continued to do battle with his own heart. In Galatians 2:11, Peter was rebuked by Paul for aligning himself with men he knew to be in error. Peter, however, would move beyond his failings and would live out his life in service for the living Christ.

Years later, perhaps reflecting on so many spiritual battles fought and lost, Peter wrote:

> Be sober, be vigilant; because your adversary the devil walks about like a roaring lion, seeking whom he may devour. Resist him, steadfast in the faith, knowing that the same sufferings are experienced by your
brotherhood in the world (1 Pet. 5:8-9).

The lessons of Gethsemane had finally taken hold, so that Peter could use his painful life-lessons and provide us with the wisdom of 1 and 2 Peter, and, in the opinion of many scholars, the stories of the gospel of Mark from his own experiences with Jesus Christ. In 2 Peter 1:1-13, it's as if Peter was reflecting on his episodes of failure by marking out a path for spiritual growth and dependence—lessons learned through pain and failure. And, in fact, his final words are a penned reminder of how easy it is to stumble and fall:

You therefore, beloved, since you know this beforehand, beware lest you also fall from your own steadfastness, being led away with the error of the wicked; but grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. To Him be the glory both now and forever (2 Pet. 3:17-18).

Peter was reminding us that coming to Christ is an event, but becoming like Jesus is a journey. Along the way, we will have ups and downs, like Simon Peter, but we can trust in the strength of Christ to enable us to be useful—in spite of our human failings and inadequacies. We can grow in Christ's grace and knowledge. And we can, in prayer, find His mercy and grace to help us in our own times of need (Heb. 4:16).

Our struggle living the Christian life is a battle that lasts a lifetime—but it's a battle worth fighting. It will be worth it all, as the song says, when we see Christ. For then we will fully be like Him, when we see Him as He is (1 Jn. 3:2)—and the battle will finally be won in Him.
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