



## How the Christian Goes Up, By Way of Down

"You are Simon...? You shall be called a rock" (John 1:42). You are a pebble? You shall be called a rock. Yes! Petra –a rock.

**According to Jesus, this Galilean fisherman was destined to become a person of rock-like character.** I expect his friends heard this saying with tolerant, knowing smiles. If his enemies heard, they would have laughed. Certainly, Peter must have wondered himself.



Whoever of the followers of Jesus is destined to become a rock, all would have agreed, "That person is surely not Peter." Yet, Peter did arrive to an amazing degree. He became so outstanding that some claimed him as the first pope (whether you agree or disagree; they did). However, he certainly was the acknowledged leader among the twelve, as well as in early missionary service and work. If a survey were taken today, Peter's name would still be at the top of the Apostle list.

Of course, that is not because of his superior ability; nor because he was smarter than the rest. We never love people just because they happen to be clever. And it is not because Peter was faultless either. In fact, right or wrong, many sermons about Peter are about his faults –or, at least what we think are his faults.

Maybe *this* is what we like about Peter: He was a person with faults, and he was still used of God. He was a pebble and God was able to make him into a rock. If Peter can count for something, then maybe, just maybe, we can count for something. Because Peter had ups **and downs**, he seems real to us.

### **Take a look at Peter's strong points:**

*First, he was genuinely human.* That is good if you're preaching to me. For, whenever a minister becomes more of a minister and less of a person, he or she is up at bat with two "outs" and two "strikes." Peter was always himself. He never tried to hide his ignorance. Will Rogers aptly said, "Everyone is ignorant, only on different things." We know that; Peter didn't try to hide it. He constantly said what he thought, instead of what he thought others wanted him to say. Even in Jerusalem, the Boston of his day, he continued to speak with his Galilean "brogue." We appreciate that. He was to the early church, what Davy Crockett was to the early congress. Now, we have a lot of people "pretending" to be Davy Crockett –and they're not.

*Second, Peter had gifts of leadership.* He had something that we call personality. And, whatever that is, it is something that if one has none of it, one is largely ineffective. However, with enough of it, a person

can say, "I'm going fishing," and instead of yawning and finishing their books, his or her friends will say, "Can we go with you?"

*Another thing we like about Peter is his wholeheartedness.* He was sometimes wrong and sometimes right, but he was not known for not being able to make up his mind. You always knew what Peter was thinking; he would tell you. Peter was not sneaky.

***However, along with the strong points, there were the weak points.*** No one ever thinks of Peter as about ready to "fly-away" to heaven, even though I understand he is now the "gatekeeper" up there above. Peter had his faults.

*First, he had too much self-confidence.* He had so much self-confidence that we often think of him as having a sort of "boyish" charm. It makes us smile, and we say, "You can, can you?" He took himself too seriously, and because of that, he impresses us as being about as humble as a mother cat leading a train of new kittens about.

So long as Peter had first place he was perfectly willing for others to take second or third. He always had to consider himself the official spokesperson. When Jesus warned him about this, the warning had about as much effect as a BB gun would have on a battleship. "Yes, it might be possible for James and John to fail; we grew up together --I know them. My brother Andy might even run away and hide. At least you'll have me. Lord, when the chips are down, you'll have me. You can count on it!"

Not only was this Peter's attitude toward other people, it was also his attitude toward Jesus. One day a lady who had been sick for 12 years came through a crowd, touched Jesus' robe and was healed. Jesus asked, "Who touched me?" Peter tried to stop him. "What do you mean, 'who touched you?' There are hundreds of people around here. Don't let people hear you say that. You've done pretty well until this; now you're making yourself look ridiculous. You'd better keep quiet before someone hears you. Wow, I can't believe this! He just asked, 'Who touched me?' --right here in the middle of all these people."

I often think that Peter thought that he was Jesus' campaign manager. Later, Jesus proposed to wash the feet of the disciples. Peter seemed to said, "Now you're going to wash feet. I can't allow you to do that. You're a star; you can't do that. Don't you know how to fill out a resumé? You'd better hold out for a better offer than that, Jesus. Hold your head up high; where's your self-worth? I can't believe this; I've almost got him on the throne, and he wants to wash feet, hang-up coats, polish shoes, and do dishes."

*Then he was too quick --too impulsive.* He spoke before he thought. He rushed to do things he couldn't. Parents and teachers think that about ten percent of the kids in the world are hyper-active. That's millions and millions. These kids have a built-in, super power-pack. How much do you want to bet about what Peter's mother felt? Your going down the road driving the speed limit, just as you get to an intersecting side road a car pulls out right in front of you, ten to one Peter is driving.

*Peter was also unpredictable and not very reliable.* You could not say what he would do in a given set of

circumstances. Sometimes he spoke with wisdom, sometimes not. Sometimes he was a hero, at others a coward. Sometimes he would step boldly from a bouncing boat to walk on water, the next minute he might be frantically calling for help, up to his neck in water. He was too impulsive to be reliable.

Now, I certainly don't mean to throw impulse out all together. It has its advantages. It's hard to hit a grouse without it; but, it has definite disadvantages too. Dick Cheney ended up hitting his friend instead of the grouse. Impulsiveness has its disadvantages even when hunting. Whoops! Was that a doe?

Friendship with Peter would have been a joy and a burden. Kind of a mixture of strength and weakness, stardust and mud. **How did Jesus propose to make him into a man of rocklike character? How can it be done?**

*First, he gave Peter a glimpse of his possibilities.* Certainly, the Lord saw what Peter was; but in addition to that, he saw what Peter might become. Jesus could see out ahead, a person whose weakness had become strength, whose pride had become humility, and whose ugliness had become beauty. This is what you are -- this is what you will become. Good! We can all say, good! What you are is of vast importance, but what you are becoming is far more important.

Oh, it may be true that some have climbed high; however, it is even truer that none of us are where we might be. There walks ahead of you --there walks ahead of me, a far more Christ-like person than either of us have yet become. That is not our despair; that is our inspiration and hope. That is our wonderful dream.

It does not hurt to dream. There are those who are fond of saying, "There be many a slip between the cup and the lip;" "Don't count your chickens until they hatch." And it is true in part; yet, almost every dream Gloria and I have ever dreamed has come true, I suppose, starting with our getting married. When God is our help and guide and source, then we dreamers realize our possibilities. So it was with Peter. So it may be with all of us!

*Second, our Lord not only showed Peter his possibilities in life, but he pledged him his help in the realization of those possibilities.* No one knew better than Jesus how impossible it was for Peter to reach the goal in his own strength. He said, "I have prayed for you Peter, that your faith fail not." The words of Jesus were not so much a *prophecy* as they were a *promise*. Even so, the Lord pledges himself to help us to become our best.

*Finally, if Peter is to become a rock, it must be by his own choice.* There is no "force feeding" of the *Bread of Life*. One can take it or leave it. God seeks to foster a faith that co-operates. The decision to follow was the work of a moment; yet, the full winning of the goal would take the rest of his life. His progress was often disappointing. The graph of Peter's life was no more an unbroken line headed toward the upper right hand corner of the chart than is your's or mine. Sometimes we do well to move up a two percent grade --and that with great struggle. Sometimes we go backward, and it becomes a struggle to hold even a little good ground.

Today, the proper noun "Peter" is also a verb. As to why, even Webster is not sure. However, I think we can safely guess that the name was forced to do double duty when Peter took it. He "petered out" so many times.

*Yet, in spite of weakness, Peter was an ultimate winner.* How? By some sort of magic? No. Peter, having dared to begin to follow Jesus, kept bravely on. In spite of the fact that he fell again and again, he understood every fall as a signal to check his map and adjust his course. Certainly, none of us like to continue when we are going down, but Peter never allowed any failure to become final.

The decisive difference between those who suffer ultimate defeat and those who gain ultimate victory is not in the fact that one sometimes failed, while the other never failed. It is rather this: That one dared to start again and again and again, while the other groveled in remorse and self-pity. "His mercies are new every morning" (Lamentations 3:22-23) –every morning. "Joy does come in the morning" (Psalm 30:5). Peter got a new start every day. When the sun came up –Peter got up; he didn't stay down. Even Judas might have become a Saint *if* he had returned to his Lord instead of trusting that stupid hangman's noose. Peter won because he held with Browning, that *we fall to rise*.

The chief danger to the church and to Christianity at the moment is that it seems to consider "Viciousness as a Value" –It's not! So, get back up and "follow Jesus." That's all the church was ever about –that's where Peter started –and that's where Peter finished. That's what you must do to arrive at any place worth going. **It's a hard thing to do;** but, it is the only way to get where you really want to go,

If we refuse to quit following Jesus, then nothing can defeat us. Galatians 6:9 says, "Don't be weary in well-doing, for in due season you shall reap if you do not faint." That is, if you don't give up and quit. The credit as Jesus gives it, goes to the persevering. "Well done you good and *faithful* servant," he said. Down can never be thought of as final when you think this way. It is only a reminder to look up. Up is always going to be Jesus.