

“PETER’S SPIRITUAL JOURNEY”

by Dr. D. W. Ekstrand

Everything that exists was created by God, and man was made in God’s image in order to glorify Himself — as Paul declared, “All things were made by Him and for Him” (Col 1:16; Rom 11:36); that is the reason for human existence. Therefore it should not seem strange that God is assembling a group of redeemed people for Himself who will forever exist to the praise of His glory (cf. Eph 1:6; 3:21); that is, to the praise of the glorious God of love, forgiveness, mercy, and compassion — this is the theme of redemptive history. Because of the sinfulness of mankind, it was necessary for God to send His own Son (Jesus Christ) into the world to die for the sins of man, and provide salvation for him (cf. Jn 3:16; Rom 5:8; Eph 2:1-5; 1 Pet 1:3; 2:24; 1 Jn 4:10; Rev 1:5). Thus from out of this corrupt world in which we live, God is now calling out a “redeemed church” that will forever be privileged to render Him glory (cf. Rev 4:6-11; 5:9-14). As the Maker and Redeemer of mankind, Jesus Christ is the supreme and sovereign architect of history (cf. Jn 1:3; 1 Cor 8:6; Col 1:16-18; Heb 1:2). The word “church” in the New Testament language of Greek (*ekklesia*) literally means “called out ones.” The process whereby God brings unredeemed sinners into the family of God (the Church) is through the proclamation of the word of truth (the good news of Jesus Christ), under the conviction of the Holy Spirit (cf. Mt 28:19-20; Mk 16:15; Jn 16:13-14; Acts 16:14; Rom 10:14, 17; Acts 1:8; Gal 1:11-12; Col 3:16) — be it through the spoken word or the written word. Once a person becomes a child of God, the Holy Spirit then begins a “transforming work in him,” whereby He will ultimately recreate him into the “image of Christ” (Rom 8:29; 2 Cor 3:18; Gal 4:19; Phil 1:6; 1 Pet 5:10). It is in the midst of “this process” that the believer now lives, and where spiritual progress takes place.

At the beginning of Jesus’ earthly ministry, the first two people He chose to be His disciples were two brothers who were fishermen — Andrew and Simon — and the Lord immediately said to Simon, “You shall be called Cephas (Aramaic) or Peter (Greek),” which means “rock” (Jn 1:40-42; Mt 4:18-20; Mk 1:16-18; more on this later). Simon was originally from Bethsaida (Jn 1:44) and lived in Capernaum (Mk 1:29) — both cities are on the Sea of Galilee. He was married (1 Cor 9:5), and he and his brother, along with James and John were partners in a profitable fishing business (Lk 5:10). Because he was a natural leader, Peter became the *de facto* spokesman for the Twelve (Mt 15:15; 18:21; 19:27; Mk 11:21; Lk 8:45; 12:41; Jn 6:68; 13:6-9, 36). He was not only among the first of the apostles called... he appears first in all biblical lists of apostles (Mt 10:2)... he was part of an inner group that was especially close to Jesus (Mt 17:1; 26:36-38; Mk 14:33; Lk 8:51)... he was probably the first apostle to see the resurrected Jesus (Lk 24:34; 1 Cor 15:5)... and shortly before His ascension into heaven Jesus commissioned him to pastor and shepherd the flock (Jn 21:15-17). In the primitive church, as described in the Acts of the Apostles, Peter clearly emerges as the leader (Acts 1:13-22) — He was the one who preached at Pentecost (Acts 2:14-42), the one who opened the way for salvation to the non-Jewish world (Mt 16:16-19; Acts 8 & 10; more on this later), and the preeminent spokesmen in this regard at the Council of Jerusalem (Acts 15:7-11). Furthermore, the apostle Paul in the early years of His own faith also singled out Peter when he went to Jerusalem to meet with him (Gal 1:15-18). In the later years of his ministry, Peter spent time with John Mark (1 Pet 5:13), who wrote the gospel of Mark and based some of it on Peter’s remembrances of his time with Jesus... and Peter also penned two inspired epistles (First & Second Peter) between AD 60-68.

Though Peter was a natural-born leader and an outspoken and ardent disciple of Jesus, he is said to have had a personality that was aggressive, enthusiastic, self-confident, impetuous, strong-willed, loud-mouthed and impulsive — one that needed to be harnessed in a myriad of ways if he was to grow spiritually. For all his strengths, Peter had a number of shortcomings as well; nevertheless the Lord chose him and perseveringly molded him into the person He wanted Peter to be. As a young buck, he had a lot of raw edges that needed to be removed, but such is the case for you and me. None of us come to Christ with strong spiritual qualities; we all begin our spiritual journey with Christ as spiritual babies. It was no different for Peter and the Twelve. Because Peter was such a dominant figure in the gospels, we have the advantage of tracking his spiritual development as a believer from beginning to end. The natural tendency for most believers is to somehow think of “the Twelve” as being spiritual giants right from the start — but nothing was further from the truth. So as we carefully traverse the roads Peter traveled, each of us will be able to identify more closely with him on his journey of faith. In the following study we are going to chronologically track Peter’s spiritual journey from beginning to end. The two authors that helped inspire much of what I have written in this study are Luis Palau and Sinclair Ferguson (I identify their books later).

1. Peter’s journey with Jesus began when his brother Andrew (who was a follower of John the Baptist) said to him, “We have found the Messiah!” (Jn 1:35-41). When they came to Jesus, the Lord said to them, “Follow Me, and I will make you fishers of men; and they immediately left their nets and followed Him” (Mt 4:19-20)... and then Jesus more specifically said to Simon, “You are Simon, but you shall be called Peter the rock” (Jn 1:42). When Peter first met Jesus he did not realize what the future held for him; he was simply a fisherman who earned his living fishing at night and mending nets during the day. What God did in Peter’s life serves as an excellent example of how God accomplishes His redemptive purposes in our lives. God changes us from being self-centered men and women into mature Spirit-controlled vessels so that we will be free from the tyranny of selfishness which tends to make us proud, ego-centered people whom God cannot use to do His kingdom work. Peter possessed all of the faults and foibles and frailties that exist in you and me... nevertheless, “God is able to transform our lives into the image of Christ” (Rom 8:29; 2 Cor 3:18; Gal 4:19; Eph 1:5; Phil 1:6; 3:21). In short, what God promises... happens! Just as God made Simon into the great apostle Peter, so He will completely transform our lives as well. The Lord loves to work through people like you and me who are willing to be changed, but before He can really work through us He has to mature us and make us grow... though He can use us from the beginning, to make us greatly effective He must transform us. When God takes a man in hand, no matter how wild a character he may be... He changes him! As the apostle Paul said, “He who calls you is utterly faithful and He will finish what He has set out to do” (1 Th 5:24; Ps 138:8). All of us are just spiritual babies when we come to Christ... but once He begins His work in us we begin to grow from babyhood into spiritual adolescence, and then into maturity in Christ — all because God Himself is at work in us! As we will see, Peter stumbled and faltered along the way as all growing Christians do, but by God’s grace he recovered and continued to grow in spiritual maturity — with Jesus, failure is not the end. The Lord did not leave Peter alone after introducing Himself to him, but continued to lead him step by step to maturity. Though the process was often painful and challenging, his transformation was certain, as is yours and mine (Phil 1:6; 1 Pet 5:10; Ps 32:8-9).

Sinclair Ferguson, in his book “*Grow in Grace*,” reminds us of three things regarding spiritual growth: (a) spiritual growth is not the same in every Christian... (b) spiritual

growth can take place despite failure... and (c) we must never measure spiritual growth merely by outward appearances. Most believers make the mistake of confusing growth with perfection; but no spiritual development in this life is without its weaknesses. Peter's failures were within the purposes of God for his life, and were not outside God's control. It is also important to remember that God looks at the heart, not just outward behavior (1 Sam 16:7); thus God is mindful of the amount of opposition which needs to be overcome in order to produce fruit — so do not be discouraged by slow progress against great opposition. Though some Christians appear to grow spiritually by leaps and bounds, the growth in others may almost be imperceptible — spiritual growth is like an "iceberg;" only a small part of it can ever be seen above the surface.

2. The Lord Jesus said to Peter, "Put out into the deep water and let down your nets"

(Lk 5:4). Peter responded, "Master, we worked hard all night and caught nothing, but at Your bidding I will let down the nets" (Lk 5:5)... and when they did they caught so many fish, their nets began to break and cause their boats to sink (Lk 5:6-7). When Peter recognized what had just happened, he fell on his knees before Jesus and said, "Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord" (Lk 5:8). Though Peter had witnessed the delivering of his mother-in-law from a high fever, this vision of the glory of the Lord Jesus produced in Peter an overwhelming sense of his own unworthiness; such it is with all those who see the majesty of God (Is 6:5). Peter now saw Jesus as "the Lord" — the One who controls all the circumstances of life — as such he was not only gripped by a sense of his own inferiority, but of his sinfulness as well. God often has to send into our lives some dramatic experience to wake us up and make us face the fact that Jesus Christ can be a significantly greater reality in our lives. Peter saw something of his own heart when he beheld the miracle of the fish. All of us must individually come to that place where we discover our own sinfulness of heart (brokenness) — a person can't go very far with God until he discovers his own sinfulness and the corruptness of his heart (Jer 17:9)... as long as one believes that he is not all that bad, he will remain spiritually lukewarm and an ineffective servant of God.

Not only did Peter see something of his own heart in this second meeting with Christ, he also saw something of what he will be. Jesus said to him, "Don't be afraid... from now on you will be catching men rather than fish" (Lk 5:10). It was while Peter was engaged in his ordinary employment that Christ called him to be a "fisher of men" (Lk 5:10-11). When Christ takes over our lives, He promises to forgive us and bless us and make us grow... then He slowly begins to point out and clarify what He is going to do with our lives. It was at this point that Peter responded by fully surrendering his will — "he left everything and followed Jesus" (Lk 5:11). It is the full commitment of one's heart and spirit that Jesus is looking for in a man. Many Christians commit themselves to serving Christ with all their being... but a few months later they are like a deflated balloon. Why? because they have not yet learned what Jesus taught Peter and the Twelve, "I am the vine and you are the branches. He who abides in Me... he it is that bears much fruit" (Jn 15:5). It takes some of us years to learn this lesson. We refuse to believe that we can't do it alone. As **Luis Palau** says in his book "*Walk on Water, Pete!*", "It is especially hard for the man who has a good education, a good Christian background, and knows quite a bit about the Bible. He can't help but believe he can do it alone." Sadly, most preaching today is "action-based" — "do such and such and your world will change!" So the focus of most believers is on "doing" (rather than "being"). Abiding in Christ, intimacy with Christ, and depending on Christ — those things are at the heart of true spirituality.

The biggest lesson the Lord has to teach us as believers is that the Christian life is not a matter of “self-effort,” but a matter of “Christ living in us” (Rom 8:5-6; Gal 2:20; 5:16-23; Col 1:27; 3:16). When we “walk according to the Spirit,” we live life with a conscious awareness of God’s presence at all times... a desire to love and obey Him... a willingness to trust in His promises (that’s faith) ... and a strong sense of our own inadequacies and weaknesses (2 Cor 12:9). You can’t let your mind continually wander [unchecked] into all the things of this world, and expect to live a fruitful life. Intentionality is essential for the fruitful Christian (Phil 4:6-9, 11-13). We have to take up residence in Christ and His Word if we truly want to experience the liberated life that Jesus so desperately wants to give us (Jn 8:31-32; 10:10; 15:5).

3. In the dark early morning hours while the disciples were in a boat on the Sea of Galilee, the Lord appeared to them walking on the water... they were startled and thought it was a ghost! But Jesus immediately said to them, “Do not be afraid, it is I myself” (Mt 14:27)... and Peter responded back, “Lord, if it is really You, command me to come to You on the water”... and Jesus said, “Come” (vv. 28-29). Thus Peter stepped out of the boat and began walking on the water toward Jesus, “but when he saw the fury of the wind he panicked and began to sink,” and cried out, “Lord save me!” Jesus reached out His hand and caught him saying, “O you of little faith, why did you doubt?” (vv. 30-31). Alas, Peter was learning the obedience of faith to the Word — few believers get to test their faith in such a dramatic way; sadly few Christians dare to test their faith at all. Obedience is faith in action. One of the biggest lessons God wants to teach us is how to start walking on water — stepping out in faith from our comfort zone. Abraham was a man of this kind of faith; he left the land of his birth and followed after God (Gen 12; Heb 11:8). When God called Abraham, he had no idea where God was taking him... all he knew was God had called him to follow Him. Likewise, Peter obeyed God’s command, but soon after began to question what God had said, and began to demonstrate a lack of faith. Whatever God may be “calling you to do,” when you hear His voice you need to step out in faith (obedience), believing what God has said... and not just focus on all the reasons why you don’t want to do what we feel God is urging us to do. Incidentally, “if we are not willing to do God’s will” (whatever that may be), we will never truly know His calling (Jn 7:17; Ps 25:14; Prv 3:32; Jam 4:6) — God’s calling is not up for negotiation.

4. Jesus said, “I am the bread of life... if anyone eats this bread he will live forever” (Jn 6: 48-51). Many of His disciples said, “This is a difficult statement; who can accept that?” Jesus responded, “Does this cause you to stumble?” At this point, many of His disciples withdrew and no longer followed Him. Jesus then said to the Twelve, “You do not want to go away also, do you?” And Peter answered, “Lord, to whom shall we go? You have words of eternal life.... We have believed and have come to know that You are the Holy One of God” (Jn 6:68-69). Everyone has to come to terms with the Bible, that it in fact is the living word of God (2 Tim 3:16-17; 2 Pet 1:20-21). Carefully reflect upon that truth — it is GOD’S Word! Unless we accept the Word of God in all its fullness, we cannot come to know or enjoy the spiritual realities of the Christian life. Unless we accept the authority of Christ over our rational processes, we will remain floundering babies. The question is this: Will you follow Christ when your sensibilities are offended? or when He sounds irrational? Peter answered rightly, “Lord, who else should we go to? You have the words of eternal life.” With those words Peter settled the issue of “who has the answers.” When we have to come to the position where we are no longer intimidated by “the deductions of human wisdom,” we are ready to take the next step in spiritual growth. As Luis Palau says, “This doesn’t imply an irrational acceptance without thought and intelligent question.” Being

a Christian doesn't mean "committing mental suicide" as the enemy of our soul wants us to believe! God gave us a "mind with which to think and worship Him" (Mt 22:37), and has placed His Spirit in us that we might "discern" truth from error... He inspires our thinking that we might behold and understand spiritual truth. As the Lord's brother James writes, "The wisdom from above is pure and reasonable and without hypocrisy" (Jam 3:17; cf. Jn 14:26; 15:26; 16:13; 1 Jn 2: 20, 27). As Christians we have to decide who we are going to follow... once you settle the issue of Christ's authority over you (as Peter did), then you will be able to listen to what the world has to say without being shaken, and weigh it intelligently and critically. When you settle the issue of authority, you are then free to be a real intellectual. Can you accept the "hard things" of the Lord? That is a good measuring rod of maturity. When you question the wisdom of God, you are suggesting that you are wiser than God and make your fleshly mind the ultimate determinant of what is really true. In short, to challenge God's authority is a manifestation of a sincere lack of humility and being a very poor student of the Word. Though the road we travel on this issue can sometimes be very challenging (as it was to Peter)... "when we really wrestle with the truths of Scripture, we will finally settle this issue." God understands the difficulty of "walking by faith and not by sight" (2 Cor 5:7), yet He expects us to "fight this fight" and come out a winner (1 Tim 1:18; 6:12; 2 Tim 2:15; 3: 16; 4:7). If you are into an easy, simple, elementary kind of Christianity, you have been seriously misinformed — no such thing exists (Heb 5:11-14; 6:1). Prayerfully and humbly reflect upon all of the scriptural references in this study, and the Holy Spirit will open your mind and heart to the truth (Acts 16:14; 17:11).

5. Jesus asked His disciples, "Who do people say the Son of Man is?" (Mt 16:13). They told Him, "Some say John the Baptist, others Elijah, others Jeremiah or one of the prophets" (v. 14). The Lord then said, "Who do you say that I am?" And Peter responded, "Thou art the Christ (Messiah), the Son of the living God" (v.16). Jesus said to him, "It is important that you understand that it was My Father in heaven who revealed this truth to you; it was not something that you came up with on your own" (v. 17). Carefully reflect upon what Jesus just said here. It might be helpful to reflect upon Jesus' words to His Father in Matthew 11 — "I praise Thee, O Father, Lord of heaven and earth, that Thou didst hide these things from the wise and intelligent and didst reveal them to babes" (Mt 11:25; cf. 1 Cor 1:18, 21, 29). Eternal spiritual realities, including the divinity of Christ, are supernaturally revealed to the believer by the Holy Spirit; they are not the result of human intellect, deductive reasoning or natural wisdom (though some like to think it was their own efforts that led them to such conclusions). Again, there are "hard teachings" in Scripture that transcend human thinking; if you refuse to humble yourself before the Lord, you will really "limit" God's input into your mind and heart. Obviously some of the "hard teachings of Scripture" are a big hurdle for some believers to traverse. I can only suggest that you prayerfully & humbly approach God's eternal Word, and that "you not read your own bias into it," because you will only end up seeing what you want it to say. For some of you this is a very difficult issue... I respect that, that is simply one of the spiritual battles that you must overcome. Back to the topic at hand: once Peter responded to Jesus' question, the Lord said to him, "I will build My church upon this rock (i.e., upon the mountain of this truth), and the gates of hell itself will not overpower it" (Mt 16:18). The mountain of truth upon which the church is built is this — "Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the Living God!" (Mt 16:16). Scripture here gives us the revelation of Jesus Christ as in fact being GOD! (cf. Jn 5:18; 10:30, 33, 36; 19:7).

Jesus then says Peter, "I will (future tense) give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven" (Mt 16:19). The idea here is that Peter (after the ascension of Christ) would be the one through whom the

“doors of salvation” would be opened up to the “non-Jewish” world (cf. Acts 8:14-15; 10:44-45; 15:1-19) — it is important to remember, all of the apostles were Jewish, as was the entire church in the early years of her development; and the Jewish apostles (Peter, in particular) were the ones through whom salvation would be introduced to the non-Jewish world. When the apostles saw that the non-Jewish world was being indwelt by the Holy Spirit (as evidenced by “their speaking in tongues” just like they did at Pentecost)... the Jewish leaders of the early church officially concurred that the church was now comprised of all people (irrespective of their ethnicity), and that salvation was simply a matter of believing on the Lord Jesus Christ (Acts 15:1-20). The accompanying “sign” of speaking in tongues was evidence to the Jewish church, that the non-Jewish world was also being indwelt by the Holy Spirit at conversion just like they were (cf. Acts 2:1-4; 10:46; Mk 16:17). As a side note — according to the Bible, speaking in tongues (ultimately) was a “sign” to unbelieving Israel that God was now not just bringing salvation to the Jewish community, but that He was now bringing salvation to the ends of the earth (cf. 1 Cor 14:21-22; a quote of Is 28:11ff; also Mt 28:19-20; Acts 1:8; 1 Cor 1:22; Jn 2:11; 20:30-31). For a more comprehensive look at this particular subject, read my study on “Signs, Wonders & Miracles” — check out my website at: www.TheTransformedSoul.com

6. Toward the end of Jesus’ earthly ministry, He began to explain to His disciples that He would have to go to Jerusalem and endure much suffering and ultimately be killed (Mt 16:21)... and at this point Peter said to Him — “God forbid it! This shall never happen to You!” (v. 22). Jesus then turned to Peter and said, “Get behind Me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to Me; for you are not setting your mind on God’s interests, but man’s” (v. 23). Then Jesus said to His disciples, “If anyone wishes to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow Me. For whoever wishes to save his life shall lose it; but whoever loses his life for My sake shall find it” (vs. 24). Obviously, there are significant obstacles to maturity... and every single one of them must be removed. When God allows us as believers to go through troubles and problems, it is because He is trying to remove from our life those obstacles that stand in the way of our growing up. Only when a man sees himself as God sees him, does he then realize that “Christ alone is the answer to his problems and his reason for living.” Peter had not yet learned that he must “die to self, to his own wishes, preferences, and opinions, and let Christ rule in his heart without opposition.” God used the same process centuries before in the life of the impetuous Moses — as a young man he seems to have assumed that he could easily become the deliverer of Israel (Acts 7:25), but God took forty years of his life to prepare and equip him for the work of the exodus — He taught him patience through exile, just as he taught Peter wisdom through suffering. As believers, we are to “take up our cross and follow Christ” — i.e, every time our will clashes with God’s will, we must choose His will — we must “die to ourselves” every single day, because the old man within (the flesh) will be a constant challenge to our everyday life; thus the Christian life is a never-ending battle (1 Cor 15:31; cf. Mt 26:39; Eph 6:10-17). Saying “No” to your will, when it conflicts with God’s will, is the hardest lesson for us as Christians to learn. There are millions of Christians in the world today who are still babies spiritually, because they have stopped at this obstacle and will not go any further; they simply cannot accept the cross of Jesus Christ (death to self).

As human beings, we have each developed “our own unique culture of understanding” whereby we live life... and when things go contrary to “that culture of thinking” it causes frustration and disconcertion in our soul. Ultimately, this “indefensible bias with which we live life” is strongly influenced by our innate sinfulness, our upbringing, and all the multi-

faceted experiences of life... and each of these experiences is interpreted through the lens of our own unique personalities. The truth of the matter is, this “culture of understanding” that each of us has developed is neither fully understandable or justifiable — it is simply that “fallen vortex of reason” with which we live life. Let me illustrate this reality through the confounding world of football — last night I was watching a ballgame on television, and after a third down play the ball had been advanced into field goal range... but immediately after the play the ball carrier threw the ball in the face of an opposing player, thus incurring a 15 yard penalty that moved the ball out of field goal range. His inane behavior almost cost his team the game. So why did he respond the way he did? His “culture of understanding” simply overwhelmed him in the moment, and he just lost it. Following a stern rebuke from his coach, he felt totally humiliated and couldn’t help but wonder why he did something so stupid. That pretty much describes the “vortex of reason” that oftentimes governs our lives; as believers, we know what’s right and what’s wrong (especially if we are students of the Word), but in the moment we often struggle with doing the right thing; our flesh simply gets the better of us, and rather than “dying to the thoughts of our flesh,” we let them govern the moment. This is what happened to Peter over and over again throughout the course of his spiritual journey. Each of us as humans have developed an abundance of likes & dislikes... wants & aversions... and passions & desires in life, and they strongly influence our thinking, feelings and actions at any given moment. Sadly, we all have a tendency, in large part, to live by those thoughts and feelings, and end up experiencing the repercussions of it (Rom 7:15). It should be noted, once we “wed ourselves” to some particular value or ideal, it is very difficult to divorce ourselves from it. The great American statesman, **Daniel Webster**, puts it this way: “It’s very difficult to get a new idea into a person’s head... but it is almost impossible to get an old idea out.” That’s very insightful wisdom. One of the leading preachers of our day, **Chuck Swindoll**, expressed it thus: “You can’t erase sinful thoughts from your brain; once they are there, they are there to stay!” So once sinful thoughts have been downloaded on to the hard drive of your brain, they are there until your brain is no more! You should know, our flesh is not only not improving with age (as believers are inclined to think), it is actually in a progressive state of degeneration; that is, it is getting worse and worse — obviously none of us have a better flesh today than we had when we were little children; we had a degree of innocence then, but we have very little innocence now. The apostle Paul stated it this way: “Your old self is [in the process] of being corrupted in accordance with the lusts of deceit” (Eph 4:22). So the Christian life is not about “making the old you better,” that is completely out of the realm of possibility; thus, there is no reason to “beat yourself up” because it is not improving. Your flesh simply awaits its “final burial,” which will happen the day you die.”

In actuality, you are like a computer with “two hard drives” (a good one and a bad one), and there isn’t anything you can do to make the bad one good — that is simply an impossibility. The object in life is to “continually stay on line with Christ” (that is, abide in Christ), in spite of the fact that “little tempting messages are going to continually keep popping up on your screen!” And when they do, don’t even read those messages! because they will only trigger your flesh (i.e., open your bad hard drive) and give fleshly input into your thinking... and down you will go! (Jam 1:14). You simply do not have the ability to “entertain evil” at any level, and come away unscorched — you play with the fires of hell on any level and you will get burned! Those who claim to have “no problem with their flesh” are lying or incredibly deceived, and simply think it is absolutely essential that others see them as being virtuous through and through; but “only God is good!” (Lk 18:19; Jam 3:2; 1 Jn 1:10 — though each of us

would like to be good, none of us are. The apostle Paul said, “In my flesh dwells no good thing” (Rom 7:18). Because so many Christians struggle with “the flesh,” let me encourage you to read my study, “*The Game Changer!*” Check it out at: www.TheTransformedSoul.com. It is important to note, the dynamic of the flesh is “feeling,” whereas the dynamic of the Spirit is “faith,” and these two realities are frequently in opposition to each other. Thus Paul writes, “we can’t just do the things we feel like doing” (Gal 5:17); rather, “we must die to self and walk according to the Spirit” (Jn 12:24; Rom 8:13; 1 Cor 15:31; Gal 5:16). Likewise says Peter, “Jesus bore our sins in His body on the cross, that we might die to sin (self) and live to righteousness (Christ)” (1 Pet 2:24). The truth of the matter is, when we make “feeling good” our highest priority in life (which all of us do at times), we end up experiencing a lot of anxiety and discontent in our soul, because joy and peace only reign within when we walk according to the Spirit (Gal 5:16-24). Thus writes Paul, “Do not let anxiety reign in your soul; instead focus your attention on that which is really true (as opposed to the lies of hell); if you will practice doing so, the God of peace will guard your heart and mind in Christ Jesus” (Phil 4:6, 8, 9). Paul also reminds us that “we are transformed by the renewing of our mind” (Rom 12:2; cf. Jn 8:31-32); and that only happens when we diligently study the Word (cf. Acts 17:11; Rom 10:17; Eph 5:26; Col 3:16; 2 Tim 2:15; Heb 4:12; 1 Peter 2:2; 2 Pet 3:18).

When we surrender our will to God’s will, in effect we are saying, “Lord, everything in my life (possessions, position, circumstances, strengths, weaknesses and abilities) are gifts of grace from You, and ultimately were given to me for the purpose of glorifying Your name in this world” (cf. 1 Cor 10:31; Phil 1:29). The truth is, it is only when we give up the self life, that the divine life will flow through us. As the apostle Paul said, “My present life is not that of the old ‘I’ but the living Christ in me, and the bodily life I now live, I live believing in the Son of God, who loved me and sacrificed Himself for me” (Gal 2:20); “for me, to live is Christ!” (Phil 1:21; 2 Cor 5:17). When we “take up our cross,” it is at this point where we actually choose God’s will over our own will, and the indwelling Christ takes over, and His life then overflows in us (Jn 7:37-38). There is a peace and a quietness and a reality within the soul of the person where Christ is in control (cf. Gal 5:22-25; Phil 4:11). Until the obstacles are removed which prevent us from realizing full obedience to Christ, however, we will continue to be unfulfilled, restless, discontented Christians. Christ must have preeminence in all things in our lives (Col 1:18, 24). Noted theologian, **A. W. Tozer**, puts it like this in his book, “*The Root of the Righteous*” — “we either flee from the cross or we die on it.” The truth is, the cross is a challenge that many of us hide from — we want to be saved, but we insist that Christ do all the dying! No cross for us, no dethronement, no dying — we remain king of the little kingdom within us. As such, Tozer says, “we doom ourselves to weakness and spiritual sterility.” Taking up our cross is at the very foundation of the Christian life... a spiritual house simply cannot be built without it, and any attempt at doing so is sheer folly. Reflect upon the words of the following hymn by **Charles William Everest** —

*Take up thy cross, the Savior said,
If thou wouldst My disciple be;
Deny thyself, the world forsake,
And humbly follow after Me.*

*Take up thy cross, and follow Christ,
Nor think till death to lay it down;
For only he who bears the cross
May hope to wear the glorious crown.*

7. In Peter we see a man in the process of maturing. Every believer is in this process. The measure of how far we have come depends on how willing we have been to let the indwelling Christ take over our lives. It was necessary to “shock Peter” out of his self-life (Mt 16:23). Christ used Peter’s failures to teach him how to walk with God — he is an excellent example for studying this process because he failed so dramatically, and so often. The night before Jesus went to the cross, He met with His disciples in the Upper Room; it was there that He washed the disciples feet. In the Middle East there were no paved roads... just a lot of dust... so dusty feet were a common daily occurrence. When people ate they did not sit at a table, but reclined on the floor next to each other; obviously nobody wanted to contend with the other person’s dirty feet, so it was the custom for a servant of the host to “wash the feet of those reclining.” The Lord Jesus took this duty upon Himself that night, and Peter brashly objected, “You shall never wash my feet!” (Jn 13:8)... to which the Lord responded, “If I do not wash you, Peter, you have no part with Me” (v. 8). So Peter replied, “Well do not then just wash my feet, but my hands and my head as well” (v. 9)... Jesus responded, “He who as bathed needs only to wash his feet” (v. 10). Spiritually speaking, Peter wasn’t aware of his defilement or his need of continual cleansing. It is a tremendous obstacle to maturity when we think we are all right, and that we don’t need the daily cleansing of the God’s Word and the blood of Christ. The vast majority of Christians overlook the fact that they need to have their feet washed (spiritually speaking) daily. We need the impurities of our mind and heart and soul cleansed every day as we walk through the dirt of this world; so every day we need to come back gladly to the feet of Jesus Christ and be cleansed and refreshed. God can handle our stumbling and temptations and failures if our hearts are simply willing to humble ourselves and continue trusting Him — though David committed grievous acts of sin, yet God said of him, “David is a man after my own heart” (Acts 13:22). God knows the failings of His children, and empathizes with their weaknesses, and by the power of His Spirit works a greater grace in their lives (Rom 5:20; 1 Tim 1:14; Heb 4:15) — praise be to His glory!

8. Jesus said, “Now is the time for the Son of Man to be glorified...” and where I am going you cannot come” (Jn 13:31-33). Peter then said to Him, “Lord, where are You going?” And He responded back, “Where I am going you cannot follow Me now, but you shall follow Me later” (v. 36). Peter replied, “Lord, why can’t I follow You right now? I will lay down my life for You!” (v. 37). Jesus replied, “Will you? Truly, truly I say to you, a cock shall not crow until you deny Me three times” (v. 38). Can you relate to Peter? Imagine the pain he must have felt when the Lord told him that. By the way, Jesus wasn’t mad or disappointed with Peter... if anything, he hurt for Peter because he knew the overwhelming power of the flesh within him. “Oh, Simon, Simon,” said Jesus, “Satan has demanded permission to sift you like wheat; but I have prayed for you, that your faith may not fail; and once you have turned again (because you are going to stumble), strengthen your brothers” (Lk 22:31-32). In spite of the fact that Satan would sift him like wheat, Peter simply couldn’t take that warning seriously; He still didn’t know himself, or really understand the implications of what Jesus was saying. He sincerely believed that he was ready to die for Jesus! He insisted that even if all the others denied Him, he would remain faithful. We are repeatedly warned in Scripture about not being self-confident, because that is when we are most likely to be caught off guard... that Satan is a powerful enemy, and that he is

alive and active in this world. To ignore Satan's influence is foolishness — the most dedicated and disciplined people sometimes are the very ones who fall flat (they simply think they are a whole lot stronger than they really are). Many Christians fool themselves and become overconfident and think that some of the spiritual realities as mentioned in Scripture are not as difficult and demanding as it suggests. Such misconceptions are common in the Christian world. It is important to remember the temptation of Jesus, the Bible says Satan "left Him for a season" — he simply departed for awhile and waited for another opportunity. Satan attacks us unexpectedly in waves and then lets us breathe a bit... and then comes back and attacks us again.

9. When the soldiers came to arrest Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane, "Peter withdrew his sword and slashed off the ear of Malchus, the High Priest's servant" (Jn 18:10)... and Jesus responded to him, "Peter, put your sword away; shall I not drink the cup which the Father has given Me?" (v. 11); "Do you not know that I could call for a hundred thousand angels to defend Me?" (Mt 26:53). It should be noted, Peter had just been with Jesus in the Garden where he failed to follow the Lord's instruction to "pray that you may not enter into temptation" (Lk 22:40; Mt 26:36-46); three times Jesus had asked His closest friends (including Peter) to pray with Him, and all three times they fell asleep... once again demonstrating the inherent weakness of men — "the spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak" (Mt 26:41). Let me restate what I mentioned above, God fully understands our frailties and weaknesses; they don't disappoint Him or cause Him to be impatient with us — they are simply the reality of our condition. He actually empathizes with our weaknesses because He was tempted in all ways such as we (Heb 4:15). We are the ones who have a difficult time accepting ourselves as we really are. With that said, few of us as Christians are men or women of prayer — Why? because we really don't see how critically important it is; in truth, it is a very abstract reality to us. Furthermore, prayer involves "dying to self" (Mt 6:10), and that is still a reality we have a difficult time understanding and accepting. Desiring God's will above our will is the most difficult hurdle in the Christian life. Likewise, the use of carnal weapons are a common obstacle to maturity — we are all inclined to resolve issues with our own natural thinking, and when things don't fit that paradigm, we have a tendency to argue and fight and become angry and rebel; that is simply the reality of what it means to be a fallen, sinful creature. It is very difficult for us to say "No" to our own thinking, and "Yes" to God's thinking, when the two positions are antithetical to each other — it is only when we grow and mature in our faith that this is more readily done. In spiritual warfare only "spiritual weapons" will work (cf. 2 Cor 10:4-5; Eph 6:10-17). All of us have a tendency to use carnal weapons of our own making, instead of trusting in the wisdom and power of almighty God — did you catch that? All power belongs to God; that's why He is referred to as God Almighty! All other power is simply "on loan from God" and the moment He decides to recall it, He will. Peter, in zealous obedience, gladly sliced off the ear of Malchus — perhaps he felt his actions in defense of Christ would merit appreciation as opposed to being found unacceptable. It seems that in everything Peter did, he was reproved, warned, or rebuked by Jesus.

When Christ was arrested and taken away, Peter followed Him at a distance, and sat down with a group of people who were sitting around a lighted fire in a courtyard... and one of the servant-girls of the high priest said to him, "You were with Jesus the Nazarene" But he denied it saying, "I don't know what you're talking about" (Mk 14:66-68). He then went out onto the porch, and the maid said to the bystanders, "This is one of them!" And again he denied it. After awhile the bystanders were again saying, "Surely you are one of them!" And at that point Peter began to curse and swear and said, "I don't know this man you're

talking about!” And immediately a cock crowed, and he remembered what Jesus had told him... and he went out and wept bitterly (Mk 16:69-72; Lk 22:62). Obviously, Peter made a critical error in overestimating himself... he was not who he thought he was. Our problem as Christians is that we don’t see ourselves as we really are; none of us are the spiritual giants we wish we were. In dying to self we are admitting that we are totally inadequate... that we can do nothing outside of Christ (Jn 15:5). It is painful to observe Peter being pushed all the way to total denial; conversely, when we suffer the consequences of our weaknesses, it also pains Jesus. When the cock crowed, Luke reminds us that “the Lord turned and looked at Peter” (Lk 22: 61) — this was an extremely touching scene... Jesus never uttered a word... He just looked at him with loving, tender, forgiving eyes. Obviously it was a tremendously moving look because Peter went out and wept bitterly — his Lord had been taken, and he was alone with his terrible guilt and his Master’s words echoing in his head. Peter finally recognized the depth of his depravity. We all desperately want to “feel good about ourselves,” but that is not going to happen as long as we continue to live here on this planet. We must focus on “feeling good about God,” for we have been called to a life of selfless abandonment to the person of Christ — the truth is, “to live is Christ” (Phil 1:21).

As Sinclair Ferguson says, “God does not humble us without a special reason.” In Peter’s case his self-image was a definite hindrance to God’s plan to lead him to a life of Christ-likeness. Bringing a deep consciousness of personal sin is a pattern which God often weaves into the lives of those whom He intends to use in a special way. Isaiah the prophet is the clearest illustration of this — when God broke into his life, he had already preached that the people had unclean lips, but now his self-image was shattered by his own self-discovery, “I am a man of unclean lips” (Is 6:5) — he was simply expressing what Peter ultimately experienced. On such occasions of spiritual crisis God is digging further down into the secret and sometimes confused and weak foundations of our faith, in order to form something new and lasting at the very core of our being. God prunes away everything that impairs our spiritual growth. It is a sight which few of us are able to bear for any length of time... that is why such experiences are usually brief and not prolonged. God shows us enough to make us see our need, and to break any illusions we may have about ourselves.

10. Following the crucifixion and resurrection, the Lord appeared to the Eleven in His resurrected body, and showed them both His hands and His side, and the disciples rejoiced (emphatic!) when they saw Him (Jn 20:20). It was during this time that He then commissioned them saying — “As the Father has sent Me, I also send you — go into all the world and preach the gospel to all creation” (Jn 20:21; Mk 16:15). And then after a short period of time Jesus manifested Himself again to seven of His disciples (including Peter & John) at the Sea of Tiberias — they had all gone fishing one evening and caught absolutely nothing (emphatic! — Jn 21:1-3). For those of you who have a difficult time accepting God’s sovereign involvement in the affairs of life, the fact that the disciples “caught nothing” was no accident; keep in mind these were extremely experienced fishermen who had been fishing pretty much all night, and as the dawn was starting to break, they heard a voice coming from the beach (about one hundred yards away) saying, “Children, you do not have any fish do you?” to which they replied, “No we don’t.” And then they were told to “cast their net on the other side of the boat, because there they would find a catch” (Jn 21:4-6)... they did as was suggested and they caught 153 large fish! The apostle John then immediately said to Peter, “It’s the Lord!” and Peter threw himself into the sea and swam to Him! After they all had breakfast with Jesus, He said to Peter, “Do you love (agape) Me?”

and he responded back, “Yes, Lord, You know that I am Your friend (phileo).” **“Then feed my lambs,”** Jesus said. A second time he asked Peter, **“Do you love (agape) Me?”** and again he replied, “Yes, Lord, You know that I am Your friend (phileo).” Luis Palau in the last chapter of his book *“Walk on Water, Pete!”* shares the following thoughts about Peter during his final conversation with the Lord — Peter could only admit to a real affection for Christ and a sincere friendship; he now understood his inadequacies and human limitations. Jesus simply wanted Peter to “share with Him what his heart and true convictions really were,” and that he was saying was what he really felt. Peter had finally learned his lesson and realized that he was incapable of promising anything beyond friendship. Thus there was a new honesty in Peter; he no longer pretended to be what he was not. Pretense and arrogance were now gone. No longer would he claim to “know better than God.” Peter now knew that God wasn’t demanding more than Peter could give; that Christ simply desires an honest, contrite, and humble heart. Once Peter was honest enough to confess that he didn’t even trust his own love toward the Lord... then he was ready to do the Lord’s bidding. **“Then care for My sheep,”** Jesus said. And yet a third time Jesus asked Peter, **“Are you really My friend (phileo)?”** And Peter responded, “Lord, You know all things. You know that I am Your friend!” **“Then feed my sheep,”** said Jesus. After He told Peter that he would ultimately die a martyr’s death, he left him with this charge — **“You must follow Me!”** God was not trying to make Peter a **“self-sufficient man”** — far from it; He simply wanted Peter’s relationship with Him to be one in which He completely trusted Him and was willing to let Him control him. It was not to be a relationship of **“sinless perfection”** — it was to be a relationship of **“spiritual maturity,”** where he would let the Lord to do His work in and through him.

Peter was the **“first disciple”** that Christ appeared to after His resurrection (1 Cor 15:5)... and the **“first disciple”** to enter the empty tomb! (Jn 20:1-9). It is significant that the Lord Jesus first went looking for Peter after He had come forth from the grave... He knew how Peter must have suffered at the cross, so He looked for him first after He arose from the dead. What does that tell you about Lord and His concern for us as His children? Then the Lord allowed Peter to go back to fishing so that He could remind him of his original calling — remember their second meeting? Peter had been fishing and hadn’t caught a single fish (Lk 5:4-6), and Jesus said to him, “Put out to deep water and let down your nets for a catch” — they caught so many fish it filled both boats to the point that they actually began to sink. Once again the Lord was reminding Peter of the barrenness of self-effort, and what happened when he followed Him. When Peter was empowered by the Holy Spirit and sent out as a leader of the budding Church... Scripture tells us that he indeed was the **“rock”** Jesus had prophesied that he would become — a fruitful, gracious, Christ-controlled man. The whole purpose of Christ’s dealings with Peter was not to crush him, but to make him a vibrant servant of the Lord... to get Peter out of the way, and to let Christ control his life. And this same Christ who lived in Peter, is the same wonderful Christ who lives in you and me. All He wants from you and me is that we be available to Him, and let Him live His life through us.

11. Of all the disciples in the New Testament, Peter’s faith was “tested” more severely than any of the others. Jesus told Peter, **“Satan has demanded to sift you like wheat”** (Lk 22:31); he had been singled out for an all-out attack because of his strategic position in the disciple band and as a leader in the early church. Thus Peter experienced more opposition from Satan than any of the other disciples. When we read Paul’s first letter to the scattered Jewish church (1 Pet 1:1), we see numerous mentions of believers undergoing **“severe testing”**... and of all the disciples who had

experienced testing, none were more familiar with it than Peter. He begins his first letter with these words, “In this you greatly rejoice, even though now for a little while, if necessary, you have been distressed by various trials, that the proof of your faith... even though tested by fire, may be found to result in praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ” (1 Pet 1:6-7). He goes on to say, “Since Christ has suffered in the flesh, arm yourselves also with the same purpose, because he who has suffered in the flesh has ceased from sin” (1 Pet 4:1). “Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal among you, which comes upon you for your testing, as though some strange thing were happening to you... to the degree that you share the sufferings of Christ keep on rejoicing; so that also at the revelation of His glory, you may rejoice with exultation” (1 Pet 4:10-11). By the way children, “if it is with difficulty that the righteous is saved, what will become of the godless man and the sinner? Thus, let those of you who suffer according to the will of God entrust your souls to a faithful Creator in doing what is right” (1 Pet 4:18-19). “Be of sober spirit and alert, because your adversary the devil prowls about like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour. You must resist him with a firm faith.... and after you have suffered for a little while, the God of all grace, who called you to His eternal glory in Christ, will Himself perfect, confirm, strengthen and establish you” (1 Pet 5:8-10). Those are highly poignant thoughts.

The truth of the matter is, without testing there would be no way for our faith to be refined, to be strengthened, and to be proved genuine. It is very much in God’s plan, Peter tells us, for God to validate our faith before the court of heaven, and to justly reward us for staying faithful in spite of the pressure, testing, and temptation we face in the devil’s world. God sometimes allows us to undergo testing which in the world’s eyes ought to “burn away our faith,” however, when we successfully endure such testing it serves as a witness to the world not only of the genuineness of our faith, but of God’s miraculous power to deliver. So rather than destroying our faith, fiery trials serve to “refine our faith.” Painful trials actually build our trust in God, and winnow out many of our flaws and imperfections as we learn to trust God more and more, and rely on our own wisdom and strength less and less. The essential mechanism of “faith-testing” is God continuing to work on our deficiencies by placing us in situations where we are forced to see and then work out our faith-weaknesses by trusting in Him to carry us through the crisis. To the extent that we trust in His promises when we are being tested, to that extent we will experience spiritual growth and the fruit of the Spirit in our lives. Many believers have faced the test of having to “wait for an answer” from God — be it David (Ps 31:1-3; 40:1-3), Job (35:14), Daniel (10:1-3), or others — Elijah waited some three years for God to deliver him from the persecution of Ahab and Jezebel (1 Kg 17), and despite the duration of the trial, God kept Elijah safe and provided for him throughout, until finally accomplishing a mighty victory by his hand against the priests of Baal (1 Kg 18). It is always important for us to remember, that in due time God will deliver us (Ps 37:25). Let us rejoice at the parting of our own Red Sea, and know with unshaken confidence that God will bring us across in His own good time.

As believers, it is also common for us to momentarily lose confidence and sight of our faith in God. Examples of this are Elijah’s flight, Peter’s denial & Job’s eventual loss of patience with God — all three of these men were exceptional believers, and all recovered from their lapses fairly quickly; nevertheless, they all did suffer a “momentary crisis of faith.” If such a thing could happen to men such as these, then we need to accept the possibility that we too are also vulnerable to such lapses; especially since suffering and testing are part of the normal course of the Christian life. Therefore, when we find our faith under heavy pressure

we must remember that we are neither the first to carry this burden (whatever it may be), nor will we be the last... so “do not lose heart” (Heb 12:3). Without “sharing the sufferings of Christ” we cannot accomplish the tasks God has set for us to do during our short stay in this world (cf. 2 Cor 1:3-7; Phil 3:7-11; 1 Pet 4:13). To be a genuine disciple of Christ in this life, we must “pick up our cross and follow Him” (Mt 16:24)... this means life is not a self-indulgent passage of time (as many believers insist on making it), but a mission given to us by God; the successful completion of that mission necessarily involves hardship, heartache and suffering. As Peter said, “The time which has already past is sufficient for you to have sampled the vanities the world has to offer” (1 Pet 4:3). Now is the time for us to claim those precious moments we have left... we who have been redeemed by Christ must diligently strive to “redeem the time” with which we have been entrusted (Eph 5:16; Col 4:5).

Closing Admonition...

For unknown eons of time, the universe existed without mankind. Satan’s treachery brought an end to angelic creation’s unique position as God’s only morally responsible creatures, as man was created to demonstrate to all the angelic realm His power and His mercy. Therefore, our creation was a response to angelic disobedience to God — for a fuller understanding of this reality, read my study on “Sin & Man’s Eternal Purpose” (see my website). From our limited earthly perspective, we humans tend to develop spiritual myopia (deficiency of sight) in the face of the challenges, confusion and testing of life. The truth of the matter is, our existence and spiritual progress are of great concern to the angelic realm. As Peter says, we would do well to humbly acknowledge angelic creation as we traverse this world (2 Pet 2:10-11). Though we as mankind start out “a little lower than the angels” (Ps 8:5; cf. Heb 2:6-7), in resurrection we will actually “judge angels” (1 Cor 6:3). God is using mankind, at least in part, to make a point to His other creatures, a point that involves faith out of weakness (on our part) and mercy in spite of our sin (on God’s part). We should not forget that “we are continually being watched,” not only by God but the entire host of heaven — “there is more joy among the angels of God when a sinner repents” than for the continued fidelity of many righteous believers (Lk 15:10). Peter tells us that angels are very desirous of know about the working out of God’s plan in human history (1 Pet 1:12). So angels are not disinterested observers — just as the devil and his minions are always trying to destroy our faith and drag us down into unbelief and disobedience to God (1 Pet 5:8), so the angels of heaven are our compatriots and help us navigate our journey (Heb 1:14; Dan 10:10-14). Jesus tells us that an angel stands guard over each of the seven churches of Revelation (Rev 1:20). When we remember that the galleries of heaven are filled to capacity with angels cheering us on, elated by our successes and disappointed by our setbacks... how should we then live? Such should be an encouragement for us to take heart, and discipline ourselves for the purpose of godliness. We need to open the eyes of our hearts to the reality that “we are not alone” — God is with us, and His messengers are watching us. No test, no trial, no struggle lacks its heavenly spectators; “Let us therefore run with endurance the race that is set before us” (Heb 12:1), in full knowledge that our angelic brethren are cheering us on from heaven’s sidelines. Thus, we persevere in our faith, enduring with patience the testing which it is our honor to receive as those who “share the sufferings of Christ” (1 Pet 4:13), waiting expectantly for the time when our faith shall be “proven genuine in the crucible of life,” and ultimately shall “result in praise, glory and honor for us at the glorious return of Jesus Christ” (1 Pet 1:7); when He shall then say to us, “Well done, good and faithful servant... enter into the joy of your Master” (Mt 5:21, 31-40; 24:45-47).

Abandon the self-life as Peter did.

