

CHAPTER ONE



*A Meeting on the Seashore*

JOHN 1:40-43



So much of both their lives would be spent within the sight of that lake. Simon had spent most of his life on it, and the lake had given a measure of life to him. At least once it had almost taken both their lives. They would meet, and three years later, they would part ways beside this same lake, known as the “Sea of Galilee”—that body of water at the heart of green and beautiful Galilee. This was the nexus of Simon’s world.

Galilee is the most fertile part of what is sometimes referred to as the “green bridge” between Asia and Africa. Major crossroads, some of the chief highways of the world in fact—roads to and from the sea, from Tyre and Sidon, the “Way of the Sea”—passed directly through Simon’s homeland.

It was a good location for a small fishing business. This was the world of Simon bar-Jonah and his brother Andrew. And so it was not in the high and holy place of Jerusalem but in green and

obscure Galilee that Jesus and Simon's life together began.

Andrew, Simon Peter's brother, was one of these men who had heard what John said and then followed Jesus. The first thing Andrew did was to find his brother, Simon, and tell him, "We have found the Messiah" (which means the Christ).

Then Andrew brought Simon to meet Jesus. Looking intently at Simon, Jesus said, "You are Simon, the son of John—but you will be called Cephas" (which means Peter). (John 1:40-42)

It is truly remarkable to me that in the Gospel of John we have a record of their very first meeting, of perhaps the first time they laid eyes on each other. Andrew is curiously identified as Peter's brother, though we have not met Peter as yet. Andrew draws near with the same confession on his lips that his brother will later become famous for affirming. Standing there, seeing for the first time the man who will become his closest friend, Peter experiences the intent gaze of Jesus. John's record uses the same Greek word here (*emlepo*) that Luke will later use to describe Jesus' piercing glance from across the high priest's courtyard when he hears Peter's final denial (Luke 22:61). But for now that scene is a world away.

John will later tell us that Jesus did not need to hear any testimony about a person. He knew what was in a person's heart and was able, before meeting them, to understand who they were (John 2:25). So what might this penetrating, understanding gaze have told Jesus about who Simon was?

Before Jesus stood what we should assume was an ordinary looking man, perhaps about his same age. No one in Scripture or

any other ancient writings seems to feel the need to describe the physical appearance of either Simon or Jesus. The common device for presenting Peter in later medieval times was to show a tall, strong man with gray, curly hair and beard. He inevitably holds a ring of keys to further identify him to the largely illiterate masses that would throng to the cathedrals. But the person standing before Jesus this particular morning was centuries away from being the revered icon he would become. Like his future Friend, what is so amazing about Simon is how unamazing he is!

We might imagine what he smelled like that morning, having fished all night, as was his custom. The pungent smell of the lake mixed with his sweat and the strong smell of fish—earthy, organic, common, repelling and somehow attracting all the same, like Simon himself. He would no doubt have had a fisherman's rough hands as well, though handshaking would not become customary for another thousand years.

The understanding gaze of Jesus was not focused on the externals of the curious fisherman that morning. He looked into and saw the heart of who Simon was and what he would become.

"You *are* Simon, the son of John," Jesus said. "But you *will be* called Cephas" (John 1:42).

He was a simple fisherman, the son of a fisherman, with the most commonly given name of the day. "Simon" was the most popular name in Palestine. The Greek "Peter" was not known before the time of Tertullian in the second or third century. *Cephas*, the original Aramaic, was never known as a name. So Jesus takes a man with the most ordinary name in the land and gives him a new title. He will indeed experience a future transforma-

tion not unlike that of Abraham, for in the Bible a new name signifies a new identity, a new life.

We need to examine the new title of Simon in the context of the three separate situations in which Jesus bestows and affirms the name. Our current passage in John represents the first incident, but there are two more passages which, together with John's story, paint the entire picture. The second is found in Luke's Gospel:

One day soon afterward Jesus went to a mountain to pray, and he prayed to God all night. At daybreak he called together all of his disciples and chose twelve of them to be apostles. Here are their names: Simon (he also called him Peter). (Luke 6:12-14; see also Mark 3:13-19)

### *Chosen an Apostle*

We have no way of knowing how large the pool of disciples was from which Jesus finally chose the Twelve. Only Luke will tell us later of the choosing of seventy more representatives. Note that this was a special appointment, coming after the call to become a disciple (Luke 6:17). This smaller group, the Twelve, will become Jesus' *apostles*, his "sent ones," authoritative representatives speaking his word and doing his work.

It is no accident that in the above passage Luke lists Peter first among the Twelve. In every listing Peter takes the lead. Judas is always ominously named last. The future denier and the future traitor, bookends.

As all the Gospels unfold it will become clearer and clearer that beyond simply being listed first, Peter is the spokesman for

the Twelve. We will see the other disciples in time discovering their corporate identity in him. Here, when Luke tells us of the choosing of the Twelve after an all-night prayer session, the future tense of John (“You will be Cephas”) has become past tense (“He also called him Peter”).

The first miraculous catch of fish has already taken place (Luke 5:1-11). There Peter begged Jesus to depart from him because of his sinfulness. Nevertheless, the call has come to follow, and Simon and his companions have responded. Between the first calling and the appointment as apostles, Mark records that more than ten events, mostly healings, took place. What Jesus said earlier about Simon becoming the rock has become a new, burgeoning reality in his life. The new name signifies his new mission as he is sent out with the Twelve to speak God’s word and to do his work. He has been given the power, along with the others, to speak and act for Jesus, to represent him by gracious deeds and redemptive words.

And so Simon sets out with the new title he has only begun to understand. Called away from his nets and boats, from his large comfortable home in Capernaum, from his wife and her mother, from the only life he has ever known, he is plunged into a life full of daily challenges, discomforts and surprises. In newfound obedience, he pushes out into a sea of humanity to catch men and women for God.

To get the complete picture we must turn to Matthew’s Gospel and the final step in the process of Simon’s receiving his new identity.

Jesus replied, “You are blessed, Simon son of John, because my Father in heaven has revealed this to you. You did not learn this from any human being. Now I say to you that you are Peter, and upon this rock I will build my church, and all the powers of hell will not conquer it. And I will give you the keys of the Kingdom of Heaven. Whatever you lock on earth will be locked in heaven, and whatever you open on earth will be opened in heaven.” (Matthew 16:17-19)

At this point in Matthew’s Gospel we are well into the ministry of Jesus. The transfiguration of Jesus (which we will see was also a transforming moment for Simon!) is just about to take place. John the Baptist has been beheaded by Herod, and Jesus has responded by trying to get away from the crowd—no doubt for a time of grieving and reflection (Matthew 14:13). Jesus has experienced rejection in the synagogue at Capernaum. His mother and brothers have tried to apprehend him, believing he has lost his mind. The Twelve have been sent out on their first mission and have returned rejoicing. Most important, Simon has just spoken his great confession of who Jesus is.

In response, Jesus returns to the original, formal-sounding title, “Simon, son of John,” the same form he used in John’s account of their first meeting. He will use this formula once again, at the end of their earthly time together (John 21:15-17). Three times on the same lakeside.

“You will be . . .” “He called him . . .” And now “You are . . .” The series represents three completely different incidents, a progressive establishing of a new identity for Simon. Upon their first

meeting Jesus made a promise that Simon would in the future become the rock. After some months together Jesus issued the call to become one of the Twelve. And now, because of Peter's great confession, Jesus reaffirms the new title, and (most significant) he explains precisely what it means. So what does it mean?

As we saw, Jesus made a prophetic promise when first he laid eyes on Simon. He is not yet the Rock, but how could he be? Many of us like to believe that the heart of these exchanges between Jesus and Simon had something to do with Jesus recognizing something of Simon's character. Preachers inevitably quote the first part of Matthew 16:18 and then break into the text with adjectives like *strong* or *sturdy*. But this is not a description of Simon as he is. It's what he will become.

Jesus never says, "I give you the title 'Rock' because you are so immovable and strong." The first words that come from Jesus' lips defining what *rock* means are "upon this rock *I will build*." This "rock" is simply something with which you build. Peter will be the first foundational stone in this new edifice called the church. Jesus will be the chief cornerstone (Matthew 21:42; Mark 12:10; Luke 20:17; Acts 4:11).

### *So Much More Than a Nickname*

Often commentaries seek to explain the titling of Peter as Jesus merely bestowing a nickname, as he did when he called James and John the "sons of thunder." But Jesus is up to infinitely more. This is not simple camaraderie; it is the call. The new title contains a prophetic promise. It could have only been finally affirmed after Peter's statement of faith in who Jesus is. His

confession was the necessary indication that Peter was indeed the first stone to be laid. Now that this confession has been spoken, Jesus will begin to build.

Though Jesus bestows the new title of “Rock” (*Cephas* in Aramaic), he will never call Simon by that name because it is, after all, not a proper name. He is always Simon to Jesus. Only later, in Acts, will the name Simon give way to Peter, in the same way “Christ” is a title that later became a part of Jesus’ name. Jesus Christ. Simon Peter. So Peter (*Cephas*) is not merely an affectionate nickname but a prophetic title that describes who Simon will, by grace, become, a new name signifying a new life.

This is not the first time God called an ordinary man to an extraordinary future by giving him a new title. “When God looked on Abraham who was to appear, he said, ‘Behold, I have found a rock on which I can build and base the world.’ Therefore he called Abraham a ‘rock’ ” (from an ancient Jewish commentary, called a *midrash*, on Isaiah 51:1-2).

“Consider . . . the rock from which you were cut . . . Abraham,” Isaiah had proclaimed six hundred years before. Abram, the one who was called, renamed and given a promise that he would build a holy nation, provides the true Old Testament background for understanding the new title Simon receives.

Jesus’ pronouncement concerning Simon Peter sounds hauntingly similar to the words of the rabbis when they sought to explain Isaiah’s statement in their commentary. The character of Abram has nothing to do with the reference to the rock. He is not particularly strong or steadfast. In fact, the record will reveal quite the contrary. What is significant about Abram is the God who



calls him. It is all about the fact that God is building something—a new nation—and he has graciously determined to use men and women as building stones. The result was that the nation of Israel eventually found their corporate identity in Abraham. Later they would identify corporately with a series of priests and kings. All the while God would long for them to find their identity in him.

In the same way Simon will become for the followers of Jesus what Abraham was for Israel: a foundational leader for the community by virtue of a divine call and a confession of personal faith. In time the disciples of Jesus will find a corporate identity in Simon Peter. They will come to him to ask Jesus to clarify his sayings. Jesus will speak to the Twelve often by addressing only Simon. When the tax collectors want to collect the temple tax from Jesus, they will come and ask Simon. When the Three fall asleep in the Garden of Gethsemane, Jesus will correct only Simon. Not by any virtue of character or accomplishment but solely because of the call of Jesus, Simon will serve as the representative of the Twelve whose head and leader is always unquestionably Jesus.

After Jesus returns to the Father, Simon will be the vital bridge between two disparate worlds: the world of a physically present, perfect Leader and the other world of diverse and decidedly imperfect leaders.

Like any building, the living structure Jesus proposes to build has a door. That door requires a key, and Peter is promised that someday he will receive that key. Once more we are in Old Testament territory, again in the book of Isaiah. The prophet tells of a divine oracle who promised that his authority (symbolized by

keys) would pass to a man named Eliakim. “I will give him the key to the house of David—the highest position in the royal court. He will open doors, and no one will be able to shut them; he will close doors, and no one will be able to open them” (Isaiah 22:22).

As Simon’s identity becomes solidified in Acts, we will see several instances of his “unlocking” the door of the kingdom. Through his healing people and speaking the word of Jesus, the door of the kingdom will eventually be opened to the Gentiles and to the whole world. The Pharisees, Jesus would say, “shut the kingdom of the heaven in men’s faces” (Matthew 23:13 NIV). Peter and his followers would, by grace, unlock and open wide that door. The process of unlocking and opening the kingdom’s doors will continue on until the end of time (Revelation 1:18; 3:7; 21:25).

But all of that lies ahead of this simple, confused fisherman. For now, he is still standing beside his familiar lake. He is holding not keys but smelly, soggy nets in chapped hands. Before him stands simply a new friend who seems to see him with understanding and sympathetic eyes. It is one of those ordinary, earth-shaking, timeless moments when two lives intersect. Simon Peter has no idea what lies ahead.

