

July/Aug 2025

Today

refresh, refocus, renew

The Shepherd Still Leads Us

ALSO: PETER THE APOSTLE

Dear Friends:

It's probably no surprise that surveys show Psalm 23 is the most popular psalm in the Bible. Its striking picture of the Lord tenderly caring for us like a shepherd leading his flock offers deep comfort, assurance, and the promise of God's abiding presence. In the month of July, Lesli van Milligen, director of the Thrive ministry of the Christian Reformed Church in North America, explores Psalm 23 in view of God's care and leading of us, his flock, his people.



And for the month of August, I've had the privilege to explore the life of the apostle Peter, reflecting on his triumphs and tragedies. Throughout the gospel accounts of Jesus' ministry, Peter stands out among Jesus' disciples for his bold questions, statements, and actions. Yet Peter also stumbles in his faithfulness as a follower and friend of Jesus. Peter even denies knowing Jesus when he is threatened. From the life and ministry of Peter, however, we learn that God sticks with us through thick and thin and can use even us to build his church and share the love of Jesus with the world.

May you be refreshed, refocused, and renewed in God's Word!

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Kurt Selles". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long horizontal stroke at the end.

Kurt Selles

Today

July/August 2025

refresh, refocus, renew



**“The Shepherd Still
Leads Us”**
Lesli van Milligen



“Peter the Apostle”
Kurt Selles

Managing Editor: Jeff Bulthuis
Executive Editor: Kurt Selles

TODAY (USPS 185-140), Volume 75, Number 4, published bimonthly by ReFrame Ministries, formerly Back to God Ministries International, at 300 East Beltline Ave NE, Grand Rapids MI 49506-1208. Periodicals postage paid at Grand Rapids, Michigan, and at additional mailing offices.

Postmaster: Send address changes to Today, 300 East Beltline Ave NE, Grand Rapids MI 49506-1208.

Copyright © 2025, Reframe Ministries. Printed in U.S.A.

Unless otherwise noted, Scripture quotations in this publication are from The Holy Bible, New International Version®, NIV®. Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984, 2011 by Biblica, Inc.™ Used by permission. All rights reserved worldwide.

Photo by Daniel Burka on Unsplash



**ReFrame
Ministries**

is the new name of
Back to God Ministries International

The Shepherd Still Leads Us

Lesli van Milligen

july

Psalms 23 is one of the most widely known passages in the Bible. A favorite of many believers, this psalm is even mentioned in some popular movies. I have wondered, though, if hearing a favorite psalm many, many times can make us less curious about it and the insights it offers. This month let's explore what it means that the Lord is our shepherd and that we are his sheep. I'm hoping that a deep dive into this familiar psalm and some other Bible passages will refresh us and give us confidence in the Lord's call on our lives.

Rev. Lesli van Milligen is the director of Thrive, a ministry of the Christian Reformed Church in North America focused on equipping and encouraging churches and ministry leaders. She lives near Toronto, Ontario, and enjoys traveling, exploring new cuisines, and spending time with her husband, Tom, and her two daughters.

Peter the Apostle

Kurt Selles

august

As one of Jesus' closest disciples, the apostle Peter is a major figure in the New Testament. Peter is an interesting character who asks Jesus lots of questions, makes some of the boldest declarations, and often takes the boldest actions. His weaknesses at times also topple him in defeat. Through Peter we learn a lot about Jesus and about ourselves, and we learn that Jesus loves us in our victories and even in our defeats.

Kurt Selles is the director of ReFrame Ministries, which publishes these devotions. Kurt has served as a missionary in Taiwan and China and has also taught missions. Kurt and his wife, Vicki, have three adult children.

ROCKY

Jesus looked at him and said, "You are Simon. . . . You will be called Cephas" (which, when translated, is Peter). —John 1:42

"Buster," "Scout," "Ace," and "Sunshine" are all great nicknames. Some nicknames are humorous, some are affectionate, and some reveal character traits. Jesus gave Simon a nickname that we could translate as "Rocky."

In the book of John we meet Andrew, who began following Jesus after John the Baptist called him "the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world" (John 1:29). Filled with excitement, Andrew later brought his brother Simon to meet Jesus as well. And when Jesus met Simon, he looked at him and gave him a new name: Cephas. This Aramaic word means "Rock," or "Rocky," and in Greek it translates to Petros ("Peter").

This nickname carries a lot of weight, and Peter becomes a major figure in the New Testament. Sometimes he speaks

with courage and faith, like when he says Jesus is the "Son of the living God" (Matthew 16:16). At other times, though, Peter shows that he can be remarkably weak, like when he denies even knowing Jesus (John 18:15-27).

What should we make of this towering yet flawed figure in Jesus' inner circle and in the early church? All of Jesus' followers are a bit like him—sometimes strong and other times weak. The good news for Peter, though, is that Jesus never abandoned him but called him to serve despite his flaws. The good news for us, too, is that Jesus will never leave us and that he equips us to serve despite our failures.

Lord Jesus, thank you for your faithful love. Help us to serve you in all we do. Amen.

FISHERS OF PEOPLE

Jesus said to Simon, "Don't be afraid; from now on you will fish for people."
—Luke 5:10

Do you like fishing? I do, although I often return home with an empty bucket. Unlike me, Simon Peter didn't fish for fun; his life depended on it. In this dramatic story, Peter not only catches a boatload of fish, but he is called by Jesus the Messiah to follow him.

After an unsuccessful night of fishing, Simon and his crew were washing out their nets when Jesus came by. He asked if he could use their boat for speaking to the people by the lakeshore, and then later he told the fishermen to take their boat out for a catch of fish. Simon wearily complied. He was soon overwhelmed, however, with hauling in a catch of so many fish that his nets nearly broke. Simon fell at Jesus' feet. He knew he was in the presence of the Lord, whose authority over creation was overwhelmingly clear.

Simon's encounter with Jesus that day echoed the call of prophets like Moses, Isaiah, and Ezekiel, who knew they were in the presence of the living God. And, like the prophets, Simon Peter was called by the Lord to serve him. And what would that service be? Jesus told Peter that from now on he would "fish for people" by drawing people around him to the love of Jesus.

When we meet Jesus, the living God, we do well to fall to our knees too. Jesus calls each of us to follow him and to share in the glorious task of drawing others to his love.

As with Peter, Lord Jesus, you call us to follow you and to share your love with others. Please give us strength, wisdom, and courage to share your love. Amen.

FAMILY AFFAIR

The fever left her and she began to wait on them.

—Mark 1:31

Though we don't know much about Simon Peter's life, we discover here that he was married (since he had a mother-in-law). We also learn that Peter's call to follow Jesus touched the lives of his loved ones.

Jesus had begun teaching people about the kingdom of God, and he had also healed a man who was possessed by an impure spirit (or demon) that identified him as "the Holy One of God" (see Mark 1:21-28). News about him was beginning to travel fast.

After teaching in the local synagogue in Capernaum that day, Jesus and his disciples went to the home of Simon (Peter) and his brother Andrew. There they found Peter's mother-in-law in bed with a fever. Taking her hand and helping her up, Jesus cured her—and she soon began to serve the family's guests.

This story shows us that while Jesus was certainly concerned with his mission of teaching about God's kingdom and bringing relief by casting out spirits that opposed God, he also cared about the family members of his followers. This helps us see that Jesus loves and cares for the people we love too.

And Peter's mother-in-law's response reminds us that when we have met Jesus and know that he has made us whole, the right thing to do is to serve him in whatever ways we can.

We thank and praise you, Jesus, for your love for us and for our loved ones. Help us to extend your love to others who need you. Amen.

JESUS' COTERIE

When he arrived at the house of Jairus, he did not let anyone go in with him except Peter, John, and James, and the child's father and mother.

—Luke 8:51

Yesterday my daily dictionary app sent me the word coterie. This word comes to us from the French language and refers to an “inner circle of friends.” Luke’s story of healings in this passage introduces Jesus’ coterie—his inner circle of disciples.

News had spread about Jesus’ teaching and healings, so a crowd gathered as he and his disciples returned to Capernaum. Jairus, a local religious leader, came and pleaded with Jesus to heal his dying daughter. Then, on the way, Jesus was delayed by a woman who desperately needing healing from chronic bleeding. And by the time they reached Jairus’s home, the young girl had died. Undaunted, Jesus entered her room anyway, followed by her parents and Peter, John, and James.

Why does Jesus choose only Peter, John, and James to see him raise the little girl from death? Although Jesus’ purpose isn’t entirely clear, we see Peter, John, and James playing important roles later as they bear witness to the identity and power of Jesus, the risen Lord. Indeed, their testimony about Jesus in the New Testament helps to provide the foundations of the good-news message of God’s love and salvation in Christ.

Jesus has chosen each of us too to share about his amazing love and power so that people everywhere can have new life in him.

Lord Jesus, strengthen our faith so that we too can be your witnesses in the world. Amen.

KEEP YOUR EYES ON JESUS

Immediately Jesus reached out his hand and caught him. "You of little faith," he said, "why did you doubt?" —Matthew 14:31

Have you ever walked on water? I have, but only in the dead of winter, when the ice on a pond has been thick enough to hold my weight. Even then, I've always felt uneasy, especially if I hear an ominous cracking sound.

Miraculously, Peter did walk on water. But when he took his eyes off Jesus, he began to sink.

After reaching out and catching Peter, Jesus seems to scold him, saying, "You of little faith. . . . Why did you doubt?" But is Jesus really scolding here? After all, Peter had enough faith to begin walking out on the water—and none of the other disciples even got out of the boat. In this story Peter's walking on and then sinking into the water captures the highs and lows of his faith in Jesus.

In some ways, we who follow Jesus have had similar experiences, haven't we? In our daily walk with the Lord, we all have moments of faith and moments of doubt. Peter began to sink when he took his eyes off Jesus and noticed with horror the howling wind and the rolling waves. We too begin to sink when we focus on the dangers of life's storms.

When Jesus and Peter climbed into the boat, however, the wind and waves died down. Only Jesus, the Son of God and Lord over creation, can do such amazing things.

Keep your eyes on Jesus. He will never let you sink.

When life's storms overwhelm us, Lord, help us to keep our eyes on you, trusting that we are secure in your hands. Amen.

WORDS OF ETERNAL LIFE

Simon Peter answered him, "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life."
—John 6:68

Crowds can be fickle, switching quickly from enthusiasm to rejection and even violence. Sometimes these dramatic swings are triggered by just a few words. Jesus' hard teaching in John 6 shows that his words can trigger rejection or lead to life.

As Jesus' reputation grew, the crowds of people around him dramatically increased. Why? Because he was a wonder worker. Just a day or two earlier, Jesus had fed a huge crowd of several thousand people (John 6:1-15). But while the crowds were drawn to his miraculous works, they didn't always like his surprising teachings. At the synagogue in Capernaum, he had told the crowd that if they wanted to have eternal life, they had to eat his body and drink his blood (6:53-59). Turned off by

that imagery, many people rejected Jesus and left.

Jesus asked his closest disciples if they wanted to leave too. Speaking on behalf of them all, Peter asked, "Lord, to whom shall we go?" And then he made this bedrock confession: "You have the words of eternal life."

When the Holy Spirit softens our hearts and opens our eyes to faith in Christ, we can see Jesus for who he really is, just as Peter did. Jesus is the Son of God, our only truth for faith and life. And then, like Peter, we can also trust him as we live and serve.

Jesus, only "you have the words of eternal life." Help us to follow you faithfully as we live and serve in your name each day. Amen.

QUESTIONS, QUESTIONS

Peter said, "Explain the parable to us."

—Matthew 15:15

When children are small, they pepper us with questions: Why? Where? How? What does that mean? Although at times this may feel annoying to us, it shows that the children are listening. Peter asked Jesus lots of questions.

As Jesus wrapped up a harsh critique of the people's religious leaders, who were often more concerned about dietary laws than about how they treated people, Jesus told a brief parable that ended with these words, "If the blind lead the blind, both will fall into a pit."

Peter was confused about Jesus' meaning, so he asked for clarification. And in response Jesus asked, "Don't you see that what makes you impure is not what you eat but what is in your heart?"

Like faithful Jews of that day, Peter and the other disciples

paid close attention to the religious dietary laws of their time. But keeping those laws while letting sin into their hearts would be a terrible mistake, Jesus asserted. He was also pointing ahead to when he would fulfill the law and become the people's true source of righteousness.

At the risk of embarrassment, Peter was right to ask Jesus for clarification. Traditions and our own understandings can fail us. And when we turn to the Lord for understanding, he will provide what we need to keep our hearts in line with his plan for our lives.

Do you need guidance? Never stop asking Jesus to lead and guide you.

Thank you, Jesus, for the gift of your Spirit to lead and guide us as we trust and follow you. Amen.

THE BEDROCK TRUTH

"Blessed are you, Simon . . . for this was not revealed to you by flesh and blood, but by my Father in heaven." —Matthew 16:17

Peter was a person who would often just blurt out what he was thinking. Sometimes he was right, and other times he was embarrassingly wrong. But in this passage he spoke the absolute truth about Jesus.

In the region of Caesarea Philippi, Jesus asked his disciples, "Who do people say the Son of Man is?" Hearing that people were saying he was like one of the great prophets, Jesus asked, "But what about you? . . . Who do you say I am?" And Peter blurted out a confession for the ages: "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God."

How did Peter know this, and what did it mean? Considering some of the things Peter blurted out in other settings, we can be confident that this was not from his own wisdom. Instead, it was revealed to him by God. As Jesus himself said, "Blessed are you, Simon . . . This was

not revealed to you by flesh and blood, but by my Father in heaven." Only God, through the Holy Spirit, could reveal Jesus' divine identity.

Though Peter spoke the truth, he didn't fully understand it. The full meaning was revealed later, after Jesus gave up his life to save us from sin, and when he rose from death to give us eternal life. Only the Son of the living God could do all that, as God himself had planned (Acts 2:22-36).

And what about us? Only as we grow in faith and walk with Jesus do we begin to see God's love and what it means for us.

Jesus, thank you for revealing yourself to Peter and to us. Help us to keep growing in our faith and trust in you. Amen.

GROWING IN FAITH

We ourselves heard this voice that came from heaven when we were with him on the sacred mountain. —2 Peter 1:18

Some events in our lives can take on deeper meaning as the years pass. Especially when it comes to matters of faith and encounters with Jesus, we can find that our understanding can sharpen and grow over time. That certainly was the case with Peter and his understanding of Jesus over the years.

After Jesus had ascended to heaven (Acts 1:9-11), Peter continued to reflect on the meaning of Jesus' time on earth. And he recalled a key moment when God had revealed Jesus' true identity on the mount of transfiguration. There Jesus had been revealed as the Son of God in dazzling glory, and God had said about him: "This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased. Listen to him!" (Matthew 17:5). As the years passed, the truth of this intense

moment grew clearer and expanded in Peter's mind and life, leading him to act boldly and powerfully in faith and service for the Lord. And in all of this Peter was guided by the power of the Holy Spirit.

In a variety of ways this can be true for us too. By recalling God's grace to us, meditating on his Word, and engaging with God in prayer through the work of the Spirit, our faith will grow and deepen. As the Lord teaches us in his Word, this is what it means to be a follower of Jesus.

Lord Jesus, may our faith and knowledge continue to grow so that we can serve faithfully as your true disciples. Amen.

AN AMAZING CATCH!

"Doesn't your teacher pay the temple tax?"

"Yes, he does," [Peter] replied.

—Matthew 17:25

Though I'm no expert at it, I love fishing. When I cast my line, I just long to catch something. In this fishing story, Peter goes out to catch a specific fish—one with a coin in its mouth!

When the tax collectors ask Peter if Jesus pays the temple tax (a voluntary "donation" expected of adult men), Peter answers, "Yes, he does."

Later Jesus speaks with Peter about this at his house. While noting that the children of kings are not expected to pay taxes, Jesus indicates that he and Peter should pay the tax so that they will not "cause offense." So he tells Peter to cast his line into the lake and that he'll catch a fish with a coin that he can use to pay both his and Jesus' temple tax.

What does this striking story suggest? Jesus' answer points ahead to the time when he, as

the Son of God, will replace the Jerusalem temple himself as the focus of true worship and righteousness (see John 2:19-22; 4:21-16). Jesus' response also shows that he will provide all that his followers will need. In addition, Jesus offers some sound advice for all who share the good news about him—don't cause unnecessary offense.

Though we might wish we could pay our taxes by fishing, we can be assured that in Christ all our needs will be taken care of and that we will have opportunities to invite the people around us to worship him freely.

May you alone, Lord, be at the center of our worship, as we trust in you to provide for all our needs and to help us share your love. Amen.

THE HEART OF THE MATTER

Peter came to Jesus and asked, "Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother or sister who sins against me? Up to seven times?"
—Matthew 18:21

Sometimes when I'm alone and driving long distances, I listen to "golden oldies" on the radio. One song I occasionally hear has this refrain: "I've been trying to get down to the heart of the matter. . . . I think it's about forgiveness." This is exactly what Jesus was getting at in our passage for today.

Peter asks Jesus, "How many times shall I forgive my brother or sister?" And Jesus responds with the parable of the unforgiving servant. This servant, who has been forgiven much, refuses to forgive someone who owes him only a little. Jesus shows there is no limit to the number of times we should forgive others. Why? Because we should forgive as God forgives.

Our forgiveness of others actually shows that we realize how much God has forgiven

us. God's transforming mercy enables us to show mercy to others out of love for God.

Some psychologists say that forgiveness is a personal option, suggesting a kind of permission structure for not forgiving people who have wronged us. In some cases, of course, it may not be wise to fully embrace or trust someone whom we have forgiven. And forgiving some injuries may take hard work and may not completely resolve the hurt. But forgiving is the right thing to do.

For Jesus, for Peter, and for us, forgiveness is the heart of the matter.

As you have forgiven us all of our sins, Jesus, help us by your grace to forgive others. Amen.

WHERE TO TURN?

*Peter answered him, "We have left everything to follow you!
What then will there be for us?"* —Matthew 19:27

Often in life we are taught that we will be rewarded for certain behaviors and actions—especially if we try hard and work at something with all our heart. In our reading for today, Peter speaks for the others around him and asserts that they've given up everything to follow Jesus. Can they expect a reward?

In his teaching here, Jesus indicates that there is a cost in following him. When a rich young man asks how he can "get eternal life," Jesus speaks of keeping God's commandments, and he calls on the young man to give up his wealth to the poor and to follow him. Unable to do that, the rich young man turns away disappointed.

Jesus explains to his disciples how hard it can be for a rich person to be saved. In fact, he says, "It is easier for a camel to

go through the eye of a needle" than for a rich person to enter God's kingdom. Gaining salvation for ourselves is impossible, but, thankfully, God has provided a way for us. If we turn to Jesus, he will save us and give us new life.

Like Peter and the other disciples, we should turn to Jesus, recognizing that all that we have has been given by God. And we should seek to honor God first by serving him and others. Though our rewards in this life may not include wealth or status, the Lord will bless us with all we need and with the assurance that we will have eternal life with him "at the renewal of all things."

Help us, Lord, to follow where you lead, serving you and others as we await full life in your presence. Amen.

A FRUITLESS TREE

Peter remembered [the fig tree] and said to Jesus, "Rabbi, look! The fig tree you cursed has withered!" —Mark 11:21

There's a small tree in our yard that needs to be removed because of its inconvenient location. It seems a shame to chop it down, though. When Peter noticed a tree that was withered because Jesus had cursed it, he expressed his surprise.

Peter's surprise is not surprising. Why, indeed, would Jesus—who cares for children, feeds the hungry, and heals the sick—kill a poor little fig tree? The key to understanding this puzzle has to do with what happens after Jesus first sees the tree and when he sees it again.

After cursing the tree, Jesus and the disciples enter Jerusalem and go into the temple courts. There, to his dismay, Jesus finds a bustling market filled with merchants hawking sacrificial animals for profit. With some of the harshest words that he ever says, Jesus

drives out the merchants and money changers for turning God's temple into "a den of robbers." And the withered tree that they see the next day illustrates Jesus' point: Fruitless faith is no faith at all.

Through the sacrifice of Jesus' death and resurrection, all who turn to Jesus are made right with God. And with this new life God wants us to do the good works he has already prepared for us to do (Ephesians 2:10). If we fail to do them, we will be acting like that fig tree, withered and producing no fruit.

Jesus, you have made us to be like trees planted beside the waters of eternal life. Make us fruitful, producing the fruit of righteousness for your glory. Amen.

DINNER PARTY

Jesus sent Peter and John, saying, "Go and make preparations for us to eat the Passover."
—Luke 22:8

At our house, busyness swirls as we prepare for big meals at Thanksgiving and Christmas-time. Wrestling a big meal onto the table requires lots of planning.

That was undoubtedly true for Jewish families looking forward to Passover as well. In our story today Jesus sends his trusted disciples Peter and John to make arrangements for the Passover meal they would share together.

Many details had to be arranged in preparing this meal: securing a large room in Jerusalem; clearing all of the yeast out of that room; and buying wine, cakes of unleavened bread, and bitter herbs, among other things. Most important, they also needed a lamb that had been sacrificed at the temple. How could they do all that in so little time?

Amazingly, Jesus had already foreseen every detail. Just as Jesus had said, Peter and John met a man carrying a jar of water in Jerusalem, and he led them to a house where they could take care of all their Passover preparations. The miraculous logistics of this story emphasize Jesus' divinity and power, as well as his attention to detail.

Like Peter and John, we can be confident when Jesus gives us an assignment. No matter how difficult or complicated it may seem, he has already been working ahead of us, preparing the way and graciously providing an opportunity for us to be involved in his work of salvation.

In your invitation to trust and follow you, Jesus, you provide all that we need for serving you in the world. Amen.

PETER'S WASHING

"No," said Peter, "you shall never wash my feet."

—John 13:8

In summertime I often wear sandals. If I walk on sidewalks and pavement, my feet stay relatively clean. But when I venture onto a dirt path, my feet will quickly get dirty, and they'll need washing when I get home. At the Last Supper, foot washing was necessary.

In Bible times, foot washing was standard hospitality before a meal or a banquet. Typically it was performed by a servant. So we can easily picture Peter's surprise and disapproval when Jesus—their host and esteemed teacher—got up, took off his cloak, and began to wash and dry his disciples' feet. "No," Peter declared, "You shall never wash my feet." But when Jesus explained, Peter said Jesus should wash his hands and his head as well.

Though Peter and the other disciples didn't understand this foot washing at the time, they

later grasped Jesus' deep, spiritual meaning in this lowly action. All who belong to Jesus need his washing—not from dirt but from their sins. And just as people's feet needed washing every day, sinners need daily forgiveness. In this humble, selfless act, Jesus demonstrated our need for forgiveness, his power alone to provide this washing, and what it means to love—by sacrificially serving others.

When we share the love of Christ with the people around us, they will know that Jesus loves them too.

Lord Jesus, thank you for washing our sin away. May we too serve others selflessly, sharing your love and inviting them to know you. Amen.

FAILURE

Peter replied, "Even if all fall away on account of you, I never will."
—Matthew 26:33

There's wisdom in the saying "Never say never." But when we are determined not to do something, we can easily say, "I'll never do that!"

After the Last Supper, Peter passionately declared that he would never betray Jesus. But Jesus knew Peter better than Peter knew himself.

After the Passover meal they had shared, Jesus made a dramatic announcement: "This very night you will all fall away on account of me. . . ." But Peter asserted confidently that he would never leave Jesus. "No, Peter," Jesus said, in effect, "before daybreak you will disown me three times."

Though Peter's heart was in the right place, Jesus knew Peter's weakness. And, true to Jesus' words, Peter failed miserably (see Matthew 26:69-75).

Yet there's grace and hope in this story. Jesus prayed for Peter and the others, that they would be faithful and kept safe, despite the hardships and failures they would face. And did you know that Jesus prayed for us as well? (See John 17.)

I fail often. Even in my most determined moments, I stumble and fall. What about you? Jesus knows us and our weaknesses, and he still loves us. Though we sometimes fail to be faithful, Jesus—our faithful Savior—restores us and entrusts us with his work.

Thank you, Jesus, that you have promised never to leave us or forsake us, even though we will fail you in our weakness at times. Show us the way to follow and serve you. In your name, Amen.

IN THE GARDEN

Jesus commanded Peter, "Put your sword away! Shall I not drink the cup the Father has given me?"
—John 18:11

I sometimes carry a small pocket knife—not for protection, but for small tasks like slicing apples to eat. Peter, however, carried a sword for protection on the night that Jesus was arrested.

Anticipating a deadly trap, Peter concealed a sword in his cloak. And when some soldiers came along with several religious leaders to arrest Jesus, Peter drew out his sword and cut off the ear of the high priest's servant. When Jesus saw Peter's violent act, he rebuked him, healed the servant's ear (Luke 22:51), and challenged Peter, saying, in effect, "Shall I not do what the Father has given me to do?"

Strangely, in an earlier passage in Luke, Jesus seems to advise his disciples to carry swords (Luke 22:36-38). Was Jesus speaking figuratively there about swords for spiritual war-

fare, as Paul does in Ephesians 6:10-18?

Though that passage in Luke is a bit unclear, we can be certain of one thing: Jesus never condones physical violence in order to spread the good news of his salvation. Submitting to God's will, Jesus gave himself as a humble sacrifice to demonstrate his love for us all.

And he invites us to do the same for others.

Jesus, Prince of Peace, help us to submit our will to you, and with acts of humble obedience may we love and serve you in the world. Amen.

RUNNING FOR JESUS

Peter and the other disciple started for the tomb. Both were running, but the other disciple outran Peter. . . . —John 20:3

I'm not much of a runner. I prefer walking. In an urgent situation, though, I would run if I had to. When Peter and John heard that Jesus' tomb had been opened, they raced there urgently to see for themselves.

Significantly, Jesus' first post-resurrection appearance was to Mary Magdalene and several other women who had come to his tomb. But the disciples did not believe them at first, dismissing their account as "nonsense" (Luke 24:10). Yet despite their doubts, John writes that he and Peter ran to the tomb. John, the younger man, got there first and peeked in, but Peter was the first to go into the empty tomb. Later, Peter is reportedly the first of the disciples to see Jesus risen from the dead (Luke 24:34).

Though Mary Magdalene is the first person to see Jesus alive (John 20:14-15), why is

Peter the first among the disciples? Maybe this distinction shows that Jesus has forgiven Peter's denial. In addition, this could point to Peter's central role as a leader among the apostles, who established the church, Christ's body on earth. Broken and flawed, yet willing and eager to serve, Peter and Mary and all of Jesus' other disciples are chosen to spread the good news of his salvation to others—and eventually to the world.

Though we, too, are broken and flawed, Jesus can use us as we join the urgent race to share in his mission.

Lord, you have set the race before us. Give us the strength and courage to endure till we meet you face to face. Amen.

TWO FIRES

Jesus said, "Feed my sheep."

—John 21:17

This passage echoes a couple of earlier scenes in the story of Jesus and his disciples.

On the night Jesus was arrested, while Peter crouched for warmth by a fire in the high priest's courtyard, he was asked three times by some of the people there if he was one of Jesus' disciples. And he denied Jesus each time (John 18:15-27).

In our reading today we find another fire—this one for cooking a breakfast of fresh fish. And here, as Jesus had done when he had first met Peter and the others fishing (Luke 5:4-7), he has just directed the disciples to catch a boatload of fish. Like bookends, these two catches of fish and two fires highlight Peter's calling and his being forgiven.

And the story doesn't end with forgiveness. After breakfast, Jesus challenges Peter with a razor sharp question: "Peter,

do you love me more than these [other disciples]?"

"Lord, you know I do," Peter insists.

Jesus asks and Peter answers three times. Three affirmations for three denials. And with each one Jesus tells Peter to care for his sheep.

As it was with Peter, our being made right with God is not our happy ending. It's our new beginning. Do you love Jesus with all your heart? If you do, Jesus calls you to feed his lambs and take care of his sheep. Wherever we live, we can help with tending God's flock, his people bought with the precious blood of Jesus.

Jesus, our good shepherd, you have provided all that we need. Lead us to love and serve everyone around us. Amen.

THE PETER PRINCIPLE

In those days Peter stood up among the believers (a group numbering about a hundred and twenty). . . . —Acts 1:15

Have you heard of the “Peter Principle”? It’s a management theory by Laurence J. Peter suggesting that employees will rise to the level of their incompetence. In other words, people can be promoted into roles for which they don’t even have the necessary skills. And people at the top are often not the best suited to fill those top positions.

What about Peter in the Bible? Was he suited for his position at the head of the early church?

Though Peter’s heart was often in the right place, he was prone to extreme ups and downs, from boldly proclaiming Jesus as the “Son of God” to denying that he even knew his Lord. But before Jesus ascended to heaven, Jesus gave Peter the charge to take care of his sheep.

So in the opening chapter of Acts, we see Peter speaking as the leader of the disciples and Jesus’ other followers in Jerusalem. He leads the process of selecting Matthias to replace Judas, who had betrayed Jesus to the religious leaders. From this time on, Peter stands at the head of the founding and growth of the church in its early days.

Was Peter suited for this role? In truth, no. Nevertheless, Jesus chose him, despite his flaws and failings, for a pivotal role in nurturing the early church.

Are we suited for serving Jesus? In truth, no—but he will use us, if we listen to him.

Before you, Jesus, we all fall short. Thank you for loving us and calling us to enjoy life in you. Help us to honor and serve you faithfully. Amen.

THE MOST IMPORTANT KEYS

“Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins.” —Acts 2:38

How many keys do you have? I have several keys that I use often, and we have lots of old or unused keys at home.

Jesus gave Peter the most important keys in the world. When Jesus asked, “Who do you say I am?” Peter declared, “You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God” (Matthew 16:15-16). Jesus affirmed Peter’s declaration, saying it was revealed to him by his Father in heaven, and then Jesus promised to give Peter the “keys of the kingdom of heaven” (16:19).

What are those keys?

Speaking to a flash mob on Pentecost morning, Peter used the keys of the kingdom. In a ringing speech citing Old Testament proofs that Jesus is the Son of God, Peter proclaimed that Jesus came to save sinners. He died to pay the

price of our sin, and he rose from death so that we could have new life in him, through the power of the Holy Spirit.

Peter’s listeners were cut to the heart and asked, “What shall we do?” Peter responded by offering the keys of the kingdom of heaven: “Repent and be baptized . . . in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins.”

In addition to your house keys and car keys, do you have the keys of the kingdom? If not, ask Jesus to reveal himself to you and to forgive your sins. And as a forgiven sinner, thank Jesus and ask him to use you to share those keys with the people around you who don’t know him.

Help us, Lord Jesus, to share the keys of your kingdom with all who need you. Amen.

WHAT TO SAY?

“When they arrest you, do not worry about what to say or how to say it. At that time you will be given what to say, for it will not be you speaking, but the Spirit. . . .” —Matthew 10:19

Are you ever at a loss for words? I am, at times, in difficult or sensitive situations, where the cost might be high. In our reading for today, we see Peter and John living out a promise that Jesus had given them—that the Holy Spirit would provide them with words in difficult situations.

Jesus had commissioned his disciples to continue his ministry (Matthew 28:18-20), and now they were doing as he had taught them. They were healing people and proclaiming his forgiveness of sins and his resurrection from the dead.

But Peter and John were arrested and brought before the religious authorities in Jerusalem, and those leaders wanted to know how the disciples had the authority to heal a lame man. The critical moment had come, and Peter, “filled with

the Holy Spirit,” proclaimed boldly that they had healed the man in the name of Jesus Christ, who had risen from the dead, and that salvation is found only in him.

Unlike Christians in parts of the world that are hostile to the church today, most of us have not been called to account for our belief in Jesus. We can be grateful, though, for the faithful witness of Jesus’ followers. And we can trust that the Spirit will give us what we need when we too may be called on to share the truth about our Lord and Savior.

Jesus, help us to trust you and the Spirit to help us speak with love and boldness when are called to do so in your name. Amen.

A SOBERING MOMENT

Peter said to her, "How could you conspire to test the Spirit of the Lord?"
—Acts 5:9

"Kill the chicken to scare the monkey," says a Chinese proverb. In other words, put the fear of punishment into people, and they will not break the rules. Is that what Peter does in this unnerving story about Ananias and Sapphira?

In the early chapters of Acts, the writer Luke includes progress reports on the growth and character of the early church. At the end of Acts 4 we read that the believers were "one in heart and mind" and "shared everything they had." We also read of a generous donation by Barnabas, who sold some land and gave all the money to the church.

The story of Ananias and Sapphira, however, reveals a web of deceit. The couple sold some land and kept some money for themselves while pretending to give all the proceeds to the church. Peter

harshly condemned them—not for keeping some of the profit but for lying and thinking they could deceive the Holy Spirit.

What should we make of this story? Is Peter making an example of this deceitful couple? Well, this story isn't mainly about Peter. The Holy Spirit, who lives and moves within us and the church, is carrying out Jesus' plans for redemption. Ananias and Sapphira's story reminds us that we should rely only on the Spirit for growth and blessing—and we should never forget that the Spirit is the Lord Almighty.

Lord Jesus, thank you for the promise and presence of the Holy Spirit, our comforter. Help us to trust and honor the Spirit in all things. Amen.

A DIVINE APPOINTMENT

"Surely no one can stand in the way of their being baptized with water. They have received the Holy Spirit just as we have."

—Acts 10:47

Have you heard the saying "The more things change, the more they stay the same"?

Though Jesus had come to change the spiritual lives of all who would believe in him as Savior, some things in the lives of Peter and others remained the same. But a divine appointment changed everything.

As a leader in the early church, Peter set an example for the Jewish followers of Jesus. He kept the Sabbath with prayer and rest. He kept kosher, carefully minding the strict Jewish dietary rules. What's more, he shunned contact with Gentiles (non-Jews), and, like all Jews, he hated the Romans. But that wasn't how the Lord wanted the church to be.

So the Lord sent Peter a troubling vision and put him on a mission to visit a Roman centurion (Acts 10:1-23). And Pe-

ter learned that he needed to change his mind. And when he saw that the Holy Spirit came on all the Gentiles who had heard the good news of salvation, Peter began to understand the wideness of God's love for all people. So he called for these Gentiles be baptized in Jesus' name.

Here God used Peter's standing in the church to begin a crucial turning point in the history of the church. If you love Jesus, God loves you. It doesn't matter if you're Jewish or not. Jesus calls us to love and serve all of God's children.

Lord, thank you for your love for people of every language and nation. Help us to love as you have loved us. Amen.

A CONFRONTATION

When Cephas came to Antioch, I opposed him to his face, because he stood condemned.
—Galatians 2:11

After his formative, life-changing encounter with Cornelius the centurion, Peter and others led the early church in understanding God's grace for all people (see Acts 10-11, 15). Later, however, Peter tended to favor Jesus' Jewish followers, while Paul continued working for the Lord as a missionary to Gentiles (Acts 9, 13-14, 16-28). Though Peter believed that Jesus' love was for all people, he sometimes slipped back into ethnic prejudices, avoiding eating with Gentiles for fear of offending Jewish believers. In Antioch, Paul confronted Peter (Cephas) as a hypocrite for separating himself from Gentiles.

Though Paul's response may have been excessive, we can thank God that Paul did not go along with twisting Jesus' gospel of love and unity. And, sadly, again we see Peter, "a

pillar" of the early church, showing weakness in the face of peer pressure from Jewish hardliners.

Yet Peter didn't completely collapse here. From his later teaching we can tell that he accepted Paul's reprimand and moved on without holding a grudge. In a letter to Christians in Galatia and other parts of Asia Minor (present-day Turkey), Peter describes Paul as "our dear brother," who had also written to them "with the wisdom that God gave him" (2 Peter 3:15).

Like Peter, we can expect to fail at times. As we grow in becoming disciples, though, we can also, like Peter, humbly accept correction and continue to follow Jesus.

Lord, by your grace, may we continue to follow and serve you. Amen.

RESIDENT ALIENS

In all this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while you may have had to suffer grief in all kinds of trials. —1 Peter 1:6

During the 19 years that our family lived in China, we were “resident aliens.” We were living in one country, but we had citizenship in another. Writing to Christians who were scattered throughout Asia Minor (present-day Turkey), Peter reminds them that they are like resident aliens, citizens of two worlds.

When he wrote his first letter, Peter was likely in his mid-sixties and writing from Rome. According to some Bible scholars, his readers may have been former residents of Rome who were forced to relocate (see Acts 18:2). Drawing from his decades of following Jesus, Peter urges these scattered believers to keep two things in mind. First, they should live with great joy. Through Jesus’ death and resurrection, they have been given a hope that absolutely nothing could spoil.

Second, though they are facing difficulties—even persecution—they should keep trusting in Jesus and living as respectful and faithful residents of their present land.

In a sense, wherever we live, we followers of Jesus are “resident aliens.” In this life our hope is in Jesus while we await our promised eternal life with him in his kingdom, which will culminate in the new heaven and earth. So we too should live with joy, keeping our eyes on Jesus. And although we may face difficulties in our present circumstances, we can live as faithful citizens of his kingdom wherever we are.

Lord Jesus, help us to focus on our citizenship with you while we seek to follow wherever you lead us. Amen.

UGLY PETS

Above all, love each other deeply, because love covers over a multitude of sins.
—1 Peter 4:8

I've heard it said that grudges are like "ugly pets." And if we let them, those ugly pets will sit on our shoulders while we feed and pamper them. Actually, grudges will weigh us down, and eventually they can consume us.

So how do we get rid of a grudge? The apostle Peter offers just the right formula for killing pet grudges.

Throughout his letter to Christians who are facing hardship and persecution in Asia Minor, Peter often refers back to ground zero, his main point of reference: Jesus Christ. As Jesus has forgiven us, we too must forgive people who have offended or hurt us. So instead of nursing grudges against others, we must nurture those people with love.

How do we do that? Reflecting on Jesus' words to put no lim-

its on forgiveness (Matthew 5:43-45; 18:21-22), Peter writes, "Above all love each other deeply, because love covers over a multitude of sins."

Peter then lays out intentional steps for putting love into play: offering generous hospitality and using the gifts that God has given us to bless and serve others. As Peter learned from Jesus himself, when we forgive others, we demonstrate that we have been forgiven and are loved by God.

As you have forgiven us, Lord Jesus, help us to forgive and love others. Amen.

BIG CAT!

Be alert and of sober mind. Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion, looking for someone to devour.—1 Peter 5:8

Appreciation for cats is not universal. Kittycats, like lions, evoke a mixed response.

In the Bible a lion can represent the sovereign strength of God—as in “the Lion of the tribe of Judah” (Revelation 5:5). Or think of Aslan, who represents Jesus in the Chronicles of Narnia.

Peter mentions a different sort of lion, though, at the end of his first letter to early Christians in the New Testament. And he warns that this lion is hunting for believers in Christ. What’s going on?

Though many years had passed since the dramatic events of Jesus’ death and resurrection, Peter continued to reflect on those early days of the church, knowing that Christians in later years would face opposition because of their faith in Christ. The same is true for

many Christians throughout the world today.

As he wrote from Rome to Christians who faced persecution in Asia Minor (present-day Turkey), Peter warned his readers, “Be alert and of sober mind.” Peter knew that he had failed in the past, and now he better understood why. So he warned Christians to be wary of their great enemy, the evil one, who, like a roaring lion, wanted to devour them.

Knowing his own experience, Peter also offered a promise. God cares for us and will help us resist and stand firm. But when we fail, God will also restore us, as he did with Peter.

Jesus, thank you for standing firm for us. Please help us to stand firm for you. Amen.

USING OUR GIFT OF FAITH

His divine power has given us everything we need for a godly life through our knowledge of him who called us by his own glory and goodness.
—2 Peter 1:3

Have you ever received gifts that you opened but never used? Sometimes the gifts we receive don't have any practical use.

God has given us the greatest gift of all that we can use every day. Are we using it?

In his second letter to Christians scattered across Asia Minor (present-day Turkey), the apostle Peter reminds his readers that the faith that God has given them in Jesus Christ is their most precious gift of all. Moreover, to all who have been called by God's goodness for his glory, we have been given everything we need to live godly lives. The gift of faith has been given to us, and we are called to use it in living to please God.

How do we grow in pleasing God in our lives? Just as our bodies become fit through

exercise, so our righteousness grows through practical use and exertion. In our reading for today, Peter outlines a practical approach to growing in godliness (2 Peter 1:5-7). Without a doubt, Peter's spiritual-fitness program can look daunting. But the good news, once again, is that the gift of faith for spiritual growth has already been given to us. We just need to exercise it. Moreover, Peter notes, the reward for living godly lives includes the promise of abundantly fruitful service for Jesus Christ.

Our faith in you, Jesus, has come as a gift through the Holy Spirit. Help us to exercise our faith by growing in righteousness, for your sake. Amen.

WAITING IS THE HARDEST PART

Do not forget this one thing, dear friends: With the Lord a day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like a day.

—2 Peter 3:8

A line in a popular song says, “The waiting is the hardest part.” Why is waiting so hard? Waiting can bring anxiety and a feeling of helplessness.

Today, nearly 2,000 years after the apostle Peter wrote about this, we’re still waiting for Jesus’ return, when the Lord will make all things new.

Peter’s readers, Christian exiles suffering hardship, are asking, “How long, Lord, until you come again to make the world right?” And Peter, echoing Jesus’ teachings about his coming judgment (Matthew 24:39, 43), adds an insight about Jesus’ return. Instead of seeing the Lord’s delay as “slowness,” we should see his patience—or, in other words, his grace—for Jesus wants everyone to repent and believe in him.

In the meantime, while we continue to wait for our Lord’s

return, we don’t need to live with anxiety or helplessness. Peter encourages us from a posture of eternal security to live holy and godly lives as we look forward to Jesus making all things right.

In the last words we hear from Peter in the Bible, he sums up what it means to wait for Jesus: “Grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. To him be glory both now and forever! Amen” (2 Peter 3:18).

Jesus, Lord and Savior, fill us with a deep longing to grow in your grace and in knowing you. To you be all glory now and forever. Amen.

GOOD AND FAITHFUL SERVANT

"When you are old you will stretch out your hands, and someone else will dress you and lead you where you do not want to go."

—John 21:18

When Peter questioned Jesus' prediction about his death on the cross, the Lord strongly rebuked him (Matthew 16:21-23). Later, on the lakeshore where Jesus restored Peter, directing him to feed his sheep (John 21:15-17), Jesus predicted Peter's death.

Though the details are unclear, Christian tradition has taught that the apostle Peter, while serving as a church leader in Rome, died in A.D. 64. That year a catastrophic fire had destroyed the imperial city. Scheming to shirk his own responsibility for the disaster, the emperor Nero blamed the fire on Christians. As the church's leader, Peter would have been an obvious target for revenge.

When the Roman soldiers led him away to be hanged on a cross, the tradition goes, Peter pleaded to be crucified upside

down, since he didn't feel worthy to die in the same way as his Lord, who had saved him. So the soldiers crucified him upside down.

Though we can't be sure about the details of Peter's death, we can be certain that when Peter was reunited with Jesus in heaven, the Lord said to him, "Well done, good and faithful servant!" (see Matthew 25:23). Despite any of his glaring failures, Peter's service revealed the virtues of faith, courage, patience, and perseverance. In our own service to Jesus, may we also look forward to the Savior's words of praise.

Help us, Lord Jesus, to live each day as your faithful servants. Amen.



GROUNDWORK

— BIBLICAL FOUNDATIONS FOR LIFE —

Build a biblical foundation for your life with *Groundwork*, a half-hour weekly radio program and podcast. Each week hosts Scott Hoesee and Darrell Delaney invite listeners into conversations that dig deep into the substance of God's Word, applying it with insight for life in today's world.



**Listen on our website or your favorite
podcast platform.
GroundworkOnline.com**

Periodicals postage paid at
Grand Rapids, Mich., and at
additional mailing offices.

Today

refresh, refocus, renew



ReFrame
Ministries

is the new name of
Back to God Ministries International

300 East Beltline Ave NE
Grand Rapids, MI 49506-1208
800-626-3060
info@todaydevotional.com
www.todaydevotional.com
facebook.com/todaydevotional



RETURN POSTAGE GUARANTEED
PORT DE RETOUR GARANTI

Today

refresh, refocus, renew



ReFrame
Ministries

is the new name of
Back to God Ministries International

3475 Mainway
Burlington, ON L7M 1A9
P.O. Box 5070, STN LCD 1
Burlington, ON L7R 3Y8
905-336-2920
info@todaydevotional.com
www.todaydevotional.com
facebook.com/todaydevotional