

WEAKNESS & POWER

There is a dimension to Phase Four that I will only mention in passing. Peter's spiritual power keeps increasing. He heals, he teaches, and he preaches with greater and greater impact. His influence becomes enormous. No follower of Jesus has greater stature in the first century of the Christian era than the Apostle Peter. At the same time, Peter is weak and vulnerable in the political and material world of his time. Often arrested, imprisoned, whipped, ordered to keep silent – Peter has no stature at all in the outer, physical realms. He is a strange contradiction – a study of weakness and power. I am not wise enough yet to do a really good sermon on the subject. But I will hand you the hint: Phase Four, I believe, is always some kind of contradiction between weakness and power. It is why the Christian Life is never comfortable to us here. Only, you can never tell how the weakness and power will manifest, or in what proportion, or in which areas of life. But enough. Back to Peter.

We cannot tell Peter's story unless we see that there was much going on which was a lot bigger than Peter. Pray that this be true of your story – and our story – as well. In any case, I have been told from time to time that the Book of Acts is rather boring in comparison to the Gospels. An amazing comment. The dynamism of the early church literally exploded onto the world scene after Jesus' death and resurrection. It is surely one of the most compelling and astounding occurrences in all the annals of humankind. Can you imagine some human group of entrepreneurs designing and choreographing a movement that would start with a handful of Jewish peasants and end up converting the Roman Empire in under three hundred years? And this was not just a minor adjustment of Roman views and values. It went from Polytheism to Monotheism – a vast switch in moral and ethical norms; a growing realization that all humans are valuable, not just a few elite rulers. Jesus' parables of the yeast and the mustard seed were true. What He started swept through the known world like a gigantic tidal wave.

Peter was a highly visible influence in this new movement. Yet nobody in Peter's time realized just how dynamic and far-reaching it would turn out to be. Or rather, they expected the action to come from God, and that he would close down the world as we knew it –

and they thought humans would have nothing to say about it. They did not yet realize that the action would come from the Holy Spirit of Jesus Christ, and that it would spread through the world as we knew it – transforming all those willing to be touched by it, and allowing everyone else to go on in whatever manner they chose. It is the great difference between the Messiah we got and the Messiah we expected: that Jesus insists on working with us – on inviting us to be full participants in the drama – no matter how long it takes. Those still waiting for a Second Coming – a time when God will do it all for us and despite us (or to spite us) – have not figured out yet what Jesus is really like, or what He is about.

So here is Peter, having come through Phase Three – the Second Conversion, the Break Point. He has awakened to the grace and love of Jesus in dimensions beyond anything he had imagined during Jesus' earthly ministry. Peter is reinstated as apostle and friend – by Jesus – *after* the crucifixion and resurrection. Clearly, Jesus is the High Prince of Heaven. Never mind, for the moment, what *you* think or believe – this is what Peter knows, and it is all quite a lot for Peter to assimilate. I mean, it's one thing to pal around with a guy you think the world of, and even realize is a gifted Messenger of God with amazing powers and purpose. It “ups the ante” a long way when this guy comes waltzing back after being crucified – and still acts as personal and caring toward you as He did before! What do you say? What can you think? How do you wrap your mind and your life around such a thing?! The point is that Jesus will go on using Peter in dramatic and powerful ways, but Peter is not the initiator of any of it. Peter is not in charge of any of it. Peter is just trying – desperately sometimes – to respond and stay faithful to what Jesus, and the Holy Spirit of Jesus, keeps initiating.

So Peter is not the only actor in this drama, not by a long shot. The movement cannot explode into the world unless Jesus can break His followers loose from a lot of old assumptions and expectations – from a lot of old ways of thinking and believing. That is what the Book of Acts starts talking about right from the beginning. The disciples are confused, disorganized, and enthralled that Jesus has appeared to them, but nobody has the faintest notion what to do next. So, typically, they elect officers. Then they find a replacement for Judas – picking a man we never heard of before, and will never

hear of again. Nothing. Nothing is happening. No human can make it happen. Then vroom! Pentecost. The Spirit strikes.

Today we like to get sidetracked into the details of the Pentecost story. Are people speaking in tongues of ecstasy, or are they understanding the message in their native language? Are they drunk? Who is speaking? What is really happening? But let us not miss the real point! *“Parthians, Medes, Elamites, inhabitants of Mesopotamia, of Judaea and Cappadocia, of Pontus and Asia, of Phrygia and Pamphylia, of Egypt and the districts of Libya around Cyrene; visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes.”* (Acts 2:9) They are ALL hearing the message. And as the names of all the nations roundabout are tolled off, the hair on the back of your neck starts to stand up straight and salute.

What had the Chosen People been chosen for? *“Thus says God, the LORD, who created the heavens and stretched them out, who spread forth the earth and what comes from it, who gives breath to the people upon it and spirit to those who walk in it: ‘I am the LORD, I have called you in righteousness, I have taken you by the hand and kept you; **I have given you as a covenant to the people, a light to the nations**, to open the eyes that are blind, to bring out the prisoners from the dungeon, from the prison those who sit in darkness. I am the LORD, that is my name; my glory I give to no other, nor my praise to graven images. Behold, the former things have come to pass, and new things I now declare; before they spring forth I tell you of them.”* (Isaiah 42:5-9)

*“And now the LORD says, who formed me from the womb to be his servant, to bring Jacob back to him, and that Israel might be gathered to him, for I am honored in the eyes of the LORD, and my God has become my strength – God says: ‘It is too light a thing that you should be my servant to raise up the tribes of Jacob and to restore the preserved of Israel; **I will give you as a light to the nations, that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth.**’”* (Isaiah 49:5-6)

Jesus is more Jewish than Judaism. All the early followers see Him not as a break from Judaism, but as the fulfillment of Judaism. Judaism had gotten sidetracked – bogged down in its own personal problems, which were considerable. Sound familiar? We understand that one. But now, what greater proof of Messiahship than the realization that God’s purpose is back on track? *“Parthians, Medes,*

*Elamites, inhabitants of Mesopotamia, of Judaea and Cappadocia, of Pontus and Asia, of Phrygia and Pamphylia, of Egypt and the districts of Libya around Cyrene; visitors from Rome.... **I will give you as a light to the nations, that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth.***” It is starting to happen, right before their eyes.

Only, it is not just about territory. God’s grace is often limited by nationalism, to be sure, but it is also frequently limited by type and kind. We are the good guys, and you are not included unless you become like us. Philip the deacon is directed by the Spirit (Acts 8:26) to go walking on the road from Jerusalem toward Gaza. On that road, Philip encounters an Ethiopian eunuch, the Queen’s steward and treasurer. He is returning to Ethiopia from a pilgrimage to Jerusalem. As Philip comes up to the carriage, he hears the man reading from the Book of Isaiah: *“He was led like a sheep to the slaughter; like a lamb that is dumb before the shearer, he does not open his mouth. He has been humiliated and has no redress. Who will be able to speak of his posterity? For he is cut off from the world of the living.”* (Isaiah 53:7-8)

If you concentrate really hard for a while, you can probably figure out why these words would be especially poignant for a eunuch. So Philip and the Ethiopian have a heart-to-heart conversation. The man is enthralled by Philip’s account of Jesus and the Gospel Message, and at the end of the conversation he asks, “What is to prevent me from being baptized?” So Philip baptizes the Ethiopian eunuch in some nearby water. But this is scandalous! Why do you think this story is in here? When the Ethiopian asks, “What is to prevent me from being baptized?” – what he fully expects is to hear Philip say, “Gosh, I’m really sorry, but you know very well that Torah forbids us to allow eunuchs into our membership.” (*“He whose testicles are crushed or whose male member is cut off shall not enter the assembly of the LORD.”* (Deuteronomy 23:1))

Yet Philip baptizes him without a qualm. Scandalous! The Ethiopian is a foreigner, he is doubtless black, he is definitely eunuch, and he is IN – all the way in one play. Hey wait a minute! Who is changing all the rules?! It is rocking the world – especially the world of Judaism. The New Testament takes a dramatic stance about God’s grace and acceptance made known in Jesus Christ. It will end up driving a wedge between Jew and Christian that will create two

world religions where there should have been only one. Some of you are possibly realizing that we have enormous controversy in our own time, with people quoting Old Testament texts to prove that certain types of people are not welcome in the church or cannot have full membership rights within the church – almost as if they have never heard of the Book of Acts. It is a huge and terrible problem. How do you let people into your faith family if you think it will dilute or destroy everything you believe in and care about? On the other hand, if what you believe includes the notion that God loves *all* of his children – and that your very purpose is to be a light to the nations which draws all people to God – then what?

Well, Peter is Apostle at the very beginning of this explosion and controversy. He does not design it or ask for it, but he is quickly caught up in it. I could not figure out how to go on with his story without reminding you of this context. The hottest battles of the New Testament – of the early church – are not between the church and the world. They are between the church and the church. They are controversies *within* the church – as always. In this case, it is between that portion of the church which believes it must keep all of the precepts, laws, and customs of former days or it will be unfaithful and probably end up rejected by God – and that portion of the church which believes that Jesus came for everyone, and that Jesus' grace and love supercede old precepts, laws, and customs. By the way, heresies go off the deep end in both directions. But we cannot say it all. So let's get to Peter's Third Conversion – Phase Four.

Like most of us, Peter does not get past his old attitudes easily. Remember that he had long since given his life to Jesus – way back in the First Conversion. That was *not* enough – contrary to popular, simplistic views on the subject. That was not enough. Then Peter hit the end of his own tether – the end of human pride and confidence. He died with Christ and was born anew – turning will and life and plans and purposes over to his Lord. *That* was not enough either. Now he is to become a major leader and evangelist and witness in this new movement we call Christianity – only, not by his own wisdom or light alone. And that means the Holy Spirit has to break Peter out of some prejudices and narrow ways of thinking, or Peter cannot be helpful to a lot of the people that Jesus wants to reach and bring in.

Third Conversion. This is no theoretical exercise. All good theology is experiential at base. There is a Roman Centurion – a real, live person. His name is Cornelius. He lives in Caesarea – the Roman capital of Judea and Samaria – at the heart of the Roman occupation of Israel. A Centurion is a man of some wealth and prominence, and if he is converted, it will have a huge influence. We are not allowed to think in crass or pragmatic ways like this, but the Holy Spirit can. Cornelius is a devout man – a man of good deeds and of prayer. But he needs some human contact if he is to get in on the purpose and mission of Christ. So Cornelius has a vision, and, obedient to his instructions, he sends messengers to invite Peter to come talk to him about the faith. That’s the easy part. Now the Holy Spirit has to find some way to get Peter to accept the invitation. That’s the hard part. Jews can have business transactions with pagans, but they do not eat with them, socialize, or act like friends. It might be less offensive, under special circumstances, for the Jew to invite the pagan – that way at least the Jew could be host and keep a kosher table. But that is beside the point. Nobody makes a genuine convert at arm’s length, with all manner of judgment, disapproval, distaste, and disdain up-front and showing. And stuff like that is harder to hide than we like to pretend.

So Peter has a vision. I know you get it, but let’s say it straight out: The purpose of the vision is to tell Peter to stop being kosher. People are more important than dietary laws. The purpose of the vision is to tell Peter to break from some of the traditions and truths he has been taught from the time of his birth until now. The purpose of the vision is to instruct Peter to defy what he thinks of as the Law of Moses and the authority of Torah – and to go act like a friend and brother to this pagan enemy officer of his people. Conversion means “to change.” This is a mighty change! This is Peter’s Third Conversion.

Peter is greatly alarmed, of course. In passing, we get a hint of Peter’s devoutness. Never in his life has he broken the dietary laws. He is sure there is some mistake. God could not be asking him to go against God’s word and law. “Dear Deity, surely you jest! Didn’t your parents send you to Sunday School?” But the voice insists: “*It is not for you to call profane what God counts clean.*” A little mini-summation of the Gospel of grace and mercy.

This scenario is enacted three times. Peter has already had some experience with threes. It is the code, the earmark – he knows it is Jesus. So he shrugs off a lifetime of training and conviction, welcomes the messengers, and goes off with them the next morning to be the guest of Cornelius. Meanwhile, Cornelius has gathered his friends and relatives together to hear Peter. It ends, of course, with all of them believing, receiving the Holy Spirit, getting baptized. Another very early, very dramatic incidence of the Gospel breaking beyond the borders to bring in people none of the early followers would, of themselves, have thought to bring in. It is the beginning of the explosion. With a couple of hard swallows – and a temporary moment of weakness – Peter will side with that wing of Christendom which includes and accepts the Gentiles. His stance: *“If then God gave the same gift to them as he gave to us when we believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I that I could withstand God?”*

So Peter was changed once again. In the hottest battle of first-century Christianity, Peter went against everything he had formerly considered sacred, and he came down on the side of those who were determined to let people like us – the pagans, the non-Jews – into the church. Peter got into enormous trouble for it, lost a lot of friends and relatives over it – and helped to change the history of the world because of it. Hope you won't let it go for nothing.

Meanwhile, be it noted: In Phase Four, Peter was still being dealt with, taught, changed, and transformed by his Lord. He was into terrain that was not about him specifically or personally. Religion is more than a private affair. Peter's efforts were for the benefit of others, and about issues he would have been happy to leave alone forever. But he was in the midst of things exceedingly important to Christ Jesus his Lord. Incidentally, he made some wonderful friends he would never have known otherwise. And those friends made other friends for Jesus that numbered first into the hundreds ... then into the thousands ... then into the millions. I think that some of you are among them.

PRAYER

It is up to You, O Christ, to bring all the words and thoughts of our minds to life or death. It is up to You to bring all the deeds of our hands to profit or loss. It is up to You to bring all the yearnings of our hearts and souls to fruition or frustration. We do not mean to shirk, or to sidestep, our part in the LIFE You have given us. We are only realizing more and more that beyond our sight and beyond our abilities, You are at work in us, and for us – and You hold wisdom and power we cannot fathom. So we are glad that there are thoughts and deeds and yearnings within us ... or there would be no way for You to work with us.

Send us each into our own Phase Four – where no matter what is happening on the outside, our minds and efforts may be focused on You and Your Kingdom. Teach us to watch and wait constantly for Your Spirit's guidance. And help us to trust You so completely that by the time death comes for us, we will have no stake left here except in those we love.

And speaking of those we love, we are grateful to be able to pray now together, as You taught us to, saying, *“Our Father, who art in Heaven, hallowed be Thy name. Thy Kingdom come, Thy will be done, on earth as it is in Heaven. Give us this day our daily bread, and forgive us our sins, as we forgive those who sin against us. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil, for Thine is the Kingdom, and the power, and the glory, forever and ever. Amen.”*