

## THE BREAK POINT

How did Peter get into Phase Three? The same way anybody does: it is THE BREAK POINT – the breaking of the heart, the will, the soul.

A young boy was studying for his bar mitzvah. The text that day was Deuteronomy 6. The young lad asked, “Rabbi, why does it say we should keep all these words and statutes *on* our hearts? Why are we not instructed to keep them *in* our hearts?” The rabbi smiled with appreciation and replied, “It is not in our power to put God’s Word *in* our hearts. We put it *on* our hearts so that when the heart breaks, God’s Word will drop in.”

Phase Three is the story of when Peter’s heart broke and the Word dropped in. Phase Three is Peter’s second conversion. Peter’s story has gone FROM FISHERMAN TO DISCIPLE, FROM DISCIPLE TO APOSTLE, FROM APOSTLE TO SHEPHERD OF SOULS. Note that we do not lose what we gained from earlier phases. Peter never ceases to be *disciple* – learner and follower. Jesus is his Teacher, his Master. Peter never stops being *apostle* – Message-bearer and spokesman. Jesus is his Lord. But at the Break Point, Master and Lord are not enough. Jesus is our Savior, or we do not make it.

The second conversion changes Peter far more than the first one did. The content and meaning of Jesus’ mission move beyond the appeal of an earthly kingdom ... to the grace and forgiveness of God, and to an awareness of a Kingdom beyond this world. Peter’s pride is shattered. Not nicked – shattered. His dreams and ambitions are scrapped, to return later on levels most earthlings either do not see or would not want. As he enters Phase Three, instead of an overt joy and delighted enthusiasm, Peter is on the brink of despair and near suicide. The joy that finally comes is out of range to Phase One and Phase Two perceptions, and it is so deep that no earthly sorrow can destroy it. In all ways, the second conversion is devastation and awakening; dying and resurrection; being born anew – transformation. It is Moses so long on the mountain that they think he has perished. It is Elijah asking permission to die in a desert cave on Mount Sinai. It is Paul blinded on the road to Damascus. It is Peter during a night so bitter that if he emerges at all, it will no longer be as a child of this earth. He will never again be mere headhunter – interested in the statistics, how many came to the meeting, how many joined the Movement.

He will truly care about people and their inner spiritual journey. He will be a nurturer, a spiritual mentor, an under-shepherd of the Great Shepherd. Words are slow and poor. Let us come back to it in context.

Follow it with me as Peter comes to “point zero” and the end of his own strength. It begins with the incident we spoke of last week. Jesus says to him, *“Get thee behind me, Satan! You are a hindrance to me; for you are not on the side of God, but of men.”* Peter knows himself to be Jesus’ right arm and strongest supporter. Now Jesus, with some fierceness, is declaring that Peter is the enemy. And it happens right while Peter is trying his hardest, and even declaring Jesus’ true identity.

\* \* \*

Now I need to ask, because so many people never do: Is Peter devastated because he did not feed the hungry or speak out against racial prejudice? Because he voted for the wrong candidate? Because he did not recycle? In Phase One we tend to be clear and certain that we know all about the Christian Life and what we should and should not be doing. But that is before we hear the rooster’s cry. That is before we have seen Jesus looking at us from across a room full of His persecutors and wondering: Do we still love Him, honor Him, believe in Him?

What is your own personal relationship and level of loyalty to Jesus? Do we really think we can save the world without knowing or loving the Savior? Peter has a personal relationship with Jesus. Everything comes from that. That is where the meaning comes from. That is what matters. And that is what happened to the Apostle Paul on the Damascus Road. It is not about just being around to walk with Jesus in one generation, in the flesh. It is the heart and core of the Christian Life.

Finding that personal relationship is what we keep trying to mute in our time – it is what we think we can do without. No wonder the church is dying! It is necessary for us as Christians to pray every day – to keep maintaining the relationship. If we do not love Jesus in the first place, we will never hear the rooster’s cry.

For two thousand years now, more and more of us have been trying to understand the secrets of the Christian Life on the basis of outer behavior. All this does is deaden the mystery and make it seem

more and more boring. Strangely enough, we can only do that by paying less and less attention to what Jesus Himself teaches, reveals, and shows us. “*I will be with you always.*” Oh yes, write that down, catalogue it, study the Greek, make sure we get the syntax right and that we know which passage it comes from – so we can ignore it again later someday. (Matthew 28:20, by the way.)

What did Peter do wrong? Did he stop loving his neighbor? Did he abscond with company funds? Did he break one of the Ten Commandments in any way more glaring than usual? Peter’s devastation is very real, but his sin is *relational* – not touched by any outer code. The Ten Commandments never mention how much we have to love, or even what love really is. And indeed Peter is ready and willing to offer up his life to defend and support Jesus, until Jesus Himself orders him to put away his sword. It is not until hours later that the cock crows. Announcing what? Announcing that Peter is so disoriented and demoralized that he denies to a servant girl that he is one of Jesus’ band of followers. Does every servant girl have a right to know our inner allegiance and love for Jesus? It doesn’t matter what the servant girl knows. But it *does* matter that Peter no longer knows.

\* \* \*

In the outer story, the resistance to Jesus has been increasing. Threats and opposition have risen to serious proportions. Many former supporters have become so alarmed or frightened that, as Scripture says, they no longer “go about with him.” But Peter just gets more loyal and more determined. He assumes that Jesus trusts him totally. If Jesus can trust anybody, He can trust Peter. And that, of course, is precisely true – at this point, Jesus is unable to count on anybody.

Then, at the Last Supper, Jesus states outright that He expects Peter to deny Him. The second blow! First he is called “Satan.” Now he is accused of desertion. What has Peter done or failed to do to provoke such hurtful statements from Jesus? Lots of us would have packed it up right there. “We don’t need this,” we would have said. “After all our hard work and sincere efforts and personal friendship? I’m out of here!” We hear it all the time. “I didn’t get my toy train ... my mommy died ... I lost my job ... my friend got cancer ... your church hurt my feelings – I’m out of here.”

Some say I have a bad attitude toward people who leave the church. Well, my attitude is not what some people think it is, but in some ways that's true. I do not get to quit the church, so why should I be understanding when others do? I do not know of any way to stop loving Jesus, so why would I be a source of comfort when others do? In any case, Peter is not easily dissuaded. He protests Jesus' judgments emphatically. He swears they are not true. He will gladly lay down his life for Jesus.

Then Jesus is arrested. Shall we please notice that Peter has not been kidding? If we jump to shallow conclusions about the level of Peter's denial, we will never understand his story. Peter *is* ready to fight and die, just like he promised. Peter grabs his sword and wades into the temple police despite the impossible odds. (John 18:10) There is no trace of cowardice; it is Jesus' rebuke that stops him: "*Put your sword back into its place. For all who take the sword will perish by the sword. Do you think that I cannot appeal to my Father, and he will at once send me more than twelve legions of angels?*" (Matthew 26:52-53) One legion of angels could have taken on the entire Roman Empire with one hand tied behind its back – no problem. Jesus just means that if He wanted to play it this way, the entire host of Heaven would be at His disposal. But the great rift between Jesus and Peter is front and center once again: you cannot serve or defend God's Kingdom with this kind of earthly methodology. So for the third time, Peter is rebuked. Even the wound he has inflicted is healed. (That's probably the only thing that saves Peter's life right then.) At this point, all the disciples flee, and Jesus is carried away by the temple police.

Peter's bubble has burst. But we can go on noticing things. Peter is the only disciple to track Jesus into the house of the High Priest, right into the heart of the enemy camp. It is sad that Peter denies knowing Jesus three times. None of the other followers do this – because they all run away before they get the chance. Dangerous as it is, Peter does not want to run. He stays there for hours, despite the fact that several people accuse him of being a follower. Clearly Peter does not want to leave Jesus all alone. What if he can still find some way to be useful – some way to help? Roosters do not crow until the early morning hours. Peter has stayed all through the night. It has been worse for Jesus, to be sure, and it will get worse and worse. But Peter would never have had the chance to deny knowing Jesus three times if he had not been braver and more stalwart than most of us have ever been.

## THE BREAK POINT

---

Even so, Peter's bubble has burst. Phase One and Phase Two are full of bubbles. Now Jesus is a prisoner, and no heavenly powers have intervened. This is NOT the script for any Messiah that Peter has ever heard of. So what was Peter *supposed* to do? Everything he has tried, every way he has turned, it has all been wrong. Have you ever felt that way? Now Jesus is gone and Peter himself has run away. But what was he *supposed* to do?! Jesus is on some entirely different wavelength, and nothing Peter can do or say or think of will allow him to be faithful or helpful. Peter has hit the end of his tether, and it has not been nearly long enough. His human strength and wisdom cannot follow Jesus any further – not into this crucible. Peter cannot take another step in the power of flesh and blood alone. To get beyond this “wall,” he must die and be born anew. Transcend. Lay it down and turn it over to God – all of it. Then wait some more, until God shows him how to pick it up again in an entirely different WAY.

Peter is not quite there yet, but he is close. He cannot leave it alone. He slinks back to what is happening – to where they are interrogating Jesus. Only now he *is* confused – and frightened – and all the weakness we all hate has descended upon him. He is not ready for the questions; the denials pour out; the rooster crows ... and Jesus looks over at him. Then Peter goes into the deep six and runs into the night – blinded by his tears, deafened by the sound of a heart that is breaking. Remember, Peter's whole life is wrapped up in Jesus and His Movement. He has given the full capacity of his loyalty and love to Jesus. Without that, we never get to Phase Three.

It is unbearable. Peter cannot hold it together any longer. He has not been faithful, but he no longer even knows what it means to be faithful. With little choice at this point, Peter lays it down – his life, his pride, his willfulness, his human aspirations. It all disappears into the night – chasing the cry of a rooster. (Bitter was the night ...) We never want our children, our loved ones, to have to go through such a time – such a dark night of the soul – do we? But is there some other way into the Kingdom? Some easier, softer way?

It is the Break Point. Peter is undone! He has forsaken all that matters most to him. Peter will not process all of this and rally fast enough to gather all the followers and appear before Pilate at Jesus' trial. We never seem to get there in time, do we? To be with Him, to really follow His lead, to do it His WAY. “Hey Pilate, no insurrection here – it's your call. But we are with HIM. Kill Him, kill us – if you insist. Only, He is the only hope – yours, ours, anybody's. So where are you going with our King?” That's what should have happened.

In many ways, Peter will die with Jesus far more than if the soldiers had killed him. He will die in such a way that the fear of death will never again control him. Therefore, the fear of life – success, fame, riches, honor – will no longer control him either. Very shortly, Peter’s life will bear this out. He will *never* deny Jesus again. “Tried it once – didn’t like it!”

We must move now – through how many days or weeks we cannot tell for sure – to the other end of Peter’s second conversion. There is always a second part to the second conversion. We would not last long in the breaking – in the first part of the second conversion – if that was all there was to it.

We go now to THE LAST BREAKFAST, where Jesus helps Peter pick it up again on the other side. For some reason unfathomable to me, the general population and even many Christians are not as familiar with the Last Breakfast as they are with other parts of the story. Let’s review it quickly.

Peter no longer thinks of himself as chief apostle. He thinks of himself as an utter failure. The Break Point does not leave *anybody* feeling good about themselves. Yet Peter has been a witness to the Resurrection. How glad that must make him! Jesus is alive, the Kingdom will move forward, and the power of God has come through at last. Jesus is vindicated! But like some of us, Peter is delighted about the Resurrection without feeling himself to be any part of it. Hooray for Jesus – but Peter has failed Him. He is no longer worthy to participate in the Movement. It has passed him by and he has missed his chance. At least that is the way he sees it. Gone are all his noble aspirations. He no longer seeks fame or success. The earthly kind no longer matter, and the New Kingdom coming is not for deserters. So he has failed. He sees himself as unworthy, useless, and unwanted. He is right about the first two, but the third one is not his call to make. One last time, he has misjudged Jesus and misunderstood God. He *is* wanted! The whole thing has been about the grace and love of God. He is about to find out about that. And nobody can find out about that until Phase Three. Before Phase Three, they are only pretty words, and even if we say them, they do not register.

Anyway, Peter is finished, washed out, through. He heads back to his former life. He is not going on vacation or indulging in sport; fishing is his trade. He does not know what else to do. So he goes back to fishing, back up in Galilee – back to his old life.

Then unbelievably it happens again, just like before. Only, it couldn't be – not after all that has happened. Yet the nets are bursting again and there are fish everywhere. As the shock goes through him, Peter knows it can only be Jesus there on the shore. Peter is so consternated with guilt and joy and surprise and eagerness – all at the same time – that he doesn't know what to do. It is really quite humorous. Peter is stripped for work, and he suddenly realizes that he is not supposed to be here, working. These were not his instructions. Quickly he puts on his clothes, like, “Oh, I'm not *really* working.” Then he realizes he cannot fool Jesus. Oh well ... So he jumps overboard. Not to walk on water this time; this time the boat is too slow and he cannot wait to get to Jesus.

Once on shore, everybody is shy and sheepish; you know how it is when there is a lot of unfinished agenda in the air. Jesus suggests some fish for breakfast. You can tell how much tension there is by the way Peter calmly dashes to the boat and hauls the whole net ashore – all 153 fish. Jesus wasn't quite *that* hungry.

A little later, after breakfast when things have quieted down, Jesus deals with Peter's soul-sickness. Three times he had denied. Now, three times he is called to reaffirm. How characteristic of Jesus – simple, direct, profound. “Do you love me?” Each affirmation erases the guilt and shame, and replaces the negation and betrayal with affirmation and reinstatement.

Unmistakably, Peter is “back in.” The content of the Word is grace and mercy and love. The unwanted, unworthy, useless servant is wanted and worthy and useful again. The proof is that the commission is reissued. But there is a difference: It is much deeper now – and so is Peter. Before, it was an invitation. Now it is a command. Do not be offended by that word. Jesus is resurrected now; He has conquered sin and death. He cannot pretend to be a simple rabbi anymore. It is a COMMAND: “*Feed my lambs ... tend my sheep ... feed my sheep.*” The image of netting or hooking or catching people like fish is no longer adequate. Did the church miss this turn somewhere down the backroad?

Without pride or perfectionism, Peter is about to begin a new ministry in response to a second calling and a second conversion. It is no longer for his own glory or success. It is for Jesus and the New Kingdom. Win, lose, or draw is no longer of much importance to Peter. Only one thing matters to him now: God's will, made known in Jesus, the Messiah.

## THE BREAK POINT

---

Peter still has much to learn, as we will see. But he has died to this world, and now he truly belongs to Jesus. He is now an authentic servant/apostle, shepherd-class. Try “mentor,” if you do not like sheep or shepherds. Peter will go when the Lord says “Go.” He will stay when the Lord says “Stay.” He will endure if the Lord says “Endure.” He will not try to make any more grandstand plays. He will not seek success, or fear defeat. He will not seek defeat, or fear success. Those are irrelevant categories to Phase Three. His life no longer depends upon anything in this world. It is *“hid with Christ in God.”* (Colossians 3:3)

Peter may still goof up. But he will not again deny his Lord. He may misunderstand or mistake the Spirit’s instructions from time to time, for a while. But he will not again betray his Lord. The world no longer holds anything Peter wants badly enough to make him do that again. And the world is about to have many of the same problems with Peter that it formerly had with the man called Jesus, who has become Peter’s Lord and Savior. As we might suspect, that’s Phase Four.