

**April 18, 2021**  
**The Good, The Bad, and the Godly**  
**A Man Called Peter**

In literature, the term “one-dimensional” refers to a character who never grows or changes. They face all sorts of experiences, challenges, and relationships, but never seem to learn or grow. They are always sweetness, light, and innocent (like Forrest Gump). They are always evil (like Voldemort). Or always foolish (like Wile E. Coyote). In real life, none of us is a one-dimensional character. We all have the capacity for great good and for great evil, for love but also for hate. We can all be unpredictable, sometimes behaving nobly and honourably; other times reacting ... poorly.

George Bernard Shaw once said, *"A Native American elder once described his own inner struggles in this manner: 'Inside of me there are two dogs. One of the dogs is mean and evil. The other dog is good. The mean dog fights the good dog all the time.' When asked which dog wins, he reflected for a moment and replied, 'The one I feed the most.'"*

For the next few weeks, we're going to look at some of the people who were involved in the growth of the early church after Jesus' resurrection. There are not many simple, straightforward, one-dimensional characters here. These are real people. Complex characters who are not totally white or totally black but can roller coaster between the two. Just like me. Probably just like you.

Consider Peter. At one point:

***Matthew 16:13-23***

***JESUS:*** *Jesus asked his disciples, "Who do people say that the Son of Man is?"*

***PETER:*** <sup>16</sup> *Simon Peter answered, "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God."*

***JESUS:*** <sup>17</sup> *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. <sup>18</sup> Now I say to you that you are Peter (which means 'rock'), and upon this rock I will build my church, and all the powers of hell will not conquer it.*

Isn't that awesome! Peter is the first person who really "gets it." Who understands who Jesus is. But then immediately ...

***NARRATOR:*** <sup>21</sup> *Then Jesus began to tell his disciples plainly that it was necessary for him to go to Jerusalem, and that he would suffer many terrible things at the hands of*

*the elders, the leading priests, and the teachers of religious law. He would be killed, but on the third day he would be raised from the dead.*

**PETER:** <sup>22</sup> *But Peter took him aside and began to reprimand him for saying such things. "Heaven forbid, Lord," he said. "This will never happen to you!"*

**JESUS:** <sup>23</sup> *Jesus turned to Peter and said, "Get away from me, Satan! You are a dangerous trap to me. You are seeing things merely from a human point of view, not from God's."*

Ouch! That's the harshest rebuke Jesus gives to anyone, anywhere in Scripture! Peter has gone from being the hero to the goat in just a few minutes.

Later, after Jesus shared His last meal with His disciples, we read this:

### **Matthew 26:31-75**

**JESUS:** <sup>31</sup> *On the way to the Mount of Olives, Jesus told them, "Tonight all of you will desert me."*

**PETER:** <sup>33</sup> *Peter declared, "Even if everyone else deserts you, I will never desert you."*

**JESUS:** <sup>34</sup> *Jesus replied, "I tell you the truth, Peter—this very night, before the rooster crows, you will deny three times that you even know me."*

**PETER:** <sup>35</sup> *"No!" Peter insisted. "Even if I have to die with you, I will never deny you!"*

Fantastic. Once again, Peter is the hero. But then ...

**NARRATOR:** <sup>69</sup> *Later that evening, as Jesus was on trial, Peter was sitting outside in the courtyard. A servant girl came over and said to him, "You were one of those with Jesus the Galilean."*

**PETER:** <sup>70</sup> *But Peter denied it in front of everyone. "I don't know what you're talking about," he said.*

**NARRATOR:** <sup>71</sup> *Later, out by the gate, another servant girl noticed him and said to those standing around, "This man was with Jesus of Nazareth."*

**PETER:** <sup>72</sup> *Again Peter denied it, this time with an oath. "I don't even know the man," he said.*

**NARRATOR:** <sup>73</sup> *A little later some of the other bystanders came over to Peter and said, "You must be one of them; we can tell by your Galilean accent."*

**PETER:** <sup>74</sup> Peter swore, "A curse on me if I'm lying—I don't know the man!" And immediately the rooster crowed.

**NARRATOR:** <sup>75</sup> Suddenly, Jesus' words flashed through Peter's mind: "Before the rooster crows, you will deny three times that you even know me." And he went away, weeping bitterly.

What's with this? Peter, the one who promised that "Even if I have to die with you, I will never deny you!" has done the unthinkable. He has turned his back on the his best friend. He has denied the One he had left everything to follow. He abandoned the Person whom he loved above all.

Soviet dissident, Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, languishing in a Siberian Gulag, an internment camp, wrote, "If only it were all so simple! If only there were evil people somewhere insidiously committing evil deeds, and it were necessary only to separate them from the rest of us and destroy them. But the line dividing good and evil cuts through the heart of every human being."

If only it were all so simple ... but it's not. At least it's not for Peter. It's not for me, either ...

All of us struggles with those two dogs – the mean/evil dog and good dog – fighting with in our own souls. Sometimes the good dog wins. Yay. But sometimes the mean dog wins. And we do things we shouldn't do. We say things we shouldn't say. We don't do things we should do. We don't say things we should say. Like Peter, at times, we all fail our high ideals. We all fall flat on our faces.

"I don't really understand myself," Paul writes, "for I want to do what is right, but I don't do it. Instead, I do what I hate. I have discovered this principle of life – that when I want to do what is right, I inevitably do what is wrong. I love God's law with all my heart. But there is another power within me that is at war with my mind. This power makes me a slave to the sin that is still within me." (Romans 7:15-23).

Paul goes on to say, "Oh, what a miserable person I am!" Peter can identify. I can identify. Can you?

Peter has denied Jesus three times.

The story continues, of course. Jesus was crucified. And He rises triumphantly from the dead. We celebrated that on Easter Sunday. In the following days, Peter and his friends met with Jesus several times. But now Peter and the others have drifted home to the Sea of Galilee. They've gone back to their old homes. They have gone back to their old life of fishing. It's as if the past three years with Jesus have ceased to exist ...

Peter seems to think that he is all washed up. There's nothing more for him. He had his chance and he blew it. He seems to think that Jesus has moved on ...

And we read that,

## **John 21**

**NARRATOR:** *After His resurrection, Jesus appeared to the disciples beside the Sea of Galilee. This is how it happened. <sup>2</sup> Several of the disciples were there—Simon Peter, Thomas (nicknamed the Twin), Nathanael from Cana in Galilee, the sons of Zebedee, and two other disciples. <sup>3</sup> They had gone back to their life of fishing. One morning, Jesus greeted them as they returned to shore.*

**JESUS:** *"Come and have some breakfast!" Jesus said. <sup>13</sup> Then Jesus served them the bread and the fish. <sup>15</sup> After breakfast Jesus asked Simon Peter, "Simon son of John, do you love me more than these?"*

**PETER:** *"Yes, Lord," Peter replied, "you know I love you."*

**JESUS:** *"Then feed my lambs," Jesus told him. <sup>16</sup> Jesus repeated the question: "Simon son of John, do you love me?"*

**PETER:** *"Yes, Lord," Peter said, "you know I love you."*

**JESUS:** *"Then take care of my sheep," Jesus said. <sup>17</sup> A third time he asked him, "Simon son of John, do you love me?"*

**PETER:** *Peter was hurt that Jesus asked the question a third time. He said, "Lord, you know everything. You know that I love you."*

**JESUS:** *Jesus said, "Then feed my sheep." Then Jesus told him, "Peter, come, follow me."*

Peter denied Jesus a first time. Now Jesus says, *"Simon son of John, do you love me more than these?"* The word Jesus uses is "agape" – a Greek word meaning unconditional, unreserved, self-giving love – the kind of love Jesus showed us on the cross. The kind of love described in John 3:16 – "For God so loved the world that He gave His son ..." *"Yes, Lord," Peter replies, "you know I love you."* Peter responds with a different word, "phileo," which means "brotherly love." After his failures, Peter cannot say he loves Jesus unconditionally, unreservedly, and in a completely selfless way. His actions have proven otherwise. Jesus replies, *"Then feed my lambs."* It's as if Jesus is erasing that first denial with a new invitation to be part of Jesus' mission ...

Remember Peter denied Jesus a second time. For a second time, Jesus now asks Peter, *"Simon son of John, do you love me?"* Again, Jesus uses is "agape" – that Greek word for the highest of all kinds of love, that unconditional, unreserved, self-giving love. *"Yes, Lord," Peter said, "you know I love you."* Again, Peter uses "phileo" – brotherly love. He has failed Jesus. He is making no grand promises or wild promises of undying, perfect love this time. *"Then take care of my sheep," Jesus said.* It's as if Jesus is erasing that second denial with a new invitation to be part of Jesus' mission ...

And, of course, Peter denied Jesus a third time - *"A curse on me if I'm lying—I don't know the man!"* he had blasted. Now, a third time, Jesus asks Peter, *"Simon son of John, do you love me?"* But this time, Jesus also the word "phileo" – brotherly love. It's as if he is accepting that Peter's modest pledge to love Jesus to the best of his ability, but also his honest admission that he has failed in the past and may fail again. We read that, *Peter was hurt that Jesus asked the question a third time. He said, "Lord, you know everything. You know that I love you."* Peter also uses "phileo" – brotherly love. He and Jesus are finally on the same page here. And so, Jesus, a third time, says *"Then feed my sheep."*

In English, we have only one word for love – love is love is love is love. But the distinction in the Greek version of this dialogue is significant.

I can put myself in Peter's shoes. If Jesus were to predict my denial, I would have pledged unconditional, unreserved, self-giving love - agapé – love – I would NEVER deny Jesus. I had sworn that, "Even if I have to die with you, I will never deny you!" But I had failed. Totally. Absolutely. Completely.

I feel devastated. Broken. Awful.

Now Jesus is asking me, do I LOVE Him – with unconditional, unreserved, self-giving love - agapé – love. I know myself too well now. I'm not going to promise what I know I cannot deliver. I'm not going to promise unconditional, unreserved, self-giving love, when I know very well I might blow it once again.

But I do LOVE Jesus. But I want to be more realistic. I will do my best. I will TRY to be that super faithful and super devoted follower of Jesus, but I'm not going to promise that again. Right now, I CAN promise to try to love Jesus as I would love my brother, or my father, or another dear member of my family. With family I try – and mostly succeed at loving them unconditionally and unreservedly.

But I must confess that I'm not perfect. And that's OK. I confess when I fail. I say I'm sorry. I pick myself up. And I try to better next time. And even better the next time. I can pledge that kind of love to Jesus. I'll do my best. But I'll probably fail. But I'll pick myself up. And I'll try to do better the next time ...

So let's see what happens.

Jesus ascends to heaven. The Holy Spirit – the personal presence of God – comes upon Peter and the other believers:

### **Acts 2:1-39**

**NARRATOR:** *On the day of Pentecost all the believers were meeting together in one place. <sup>2</sup> Suddenly, there was a sound from heaven like the roaring of a mighty windstorm, and it filled the house where they were sitting. <sup>3</sup> Then, what looked like flames or tongues of fire appeared and settled on each of them. <sup>4</sup> And everyone present was filled with the Holy Spirit and began speaking in other languages, as the Holy Spirit gave them this ability.*

*<sup>5</sup> At that time there were devout Jews from every nation living in Jerusalem. <sup>6</sup> When they heard the loud noise, everyone came running, and they were bewildered to hear their own languages being spoken by the believers.*

*<sup>7</sup> They were completely amazed. "How can this be?" they exclaimed. "These people are all from Galilee, <sup>8</sup> and yet we all hear these people speaking in our own languages about the wonderful things God has done!"*

**PETER:** *<sup>14</sup> Then Peter stepped forward with the eleven other apostles and shouted to the crowd, "Listen carefully, all of you, fellow Jews and residents of Jerusalem! ... God publicly endorsed Jesus the Nazarene by doing powerful miracles, wonders, and signs through him, as you well know ... Each of you must repent of your sins and turn to God and be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. Then you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. <sup>39</sup> This promise is to you, to your children, and to those far away—all who have been called by the Lord our God."*

Peter – this very human yo-yo of a man – becomes a bold evangelist, sharing his faith fearlessly. He will end up being abused and imprisoned for his faith. He will end up being executed for his faith. He is NOT perfect (far from it). But he keeps picking himself up. He keeps on trying to do a bit better each time. IN that image of the First Nations elder, Peter choose to feed the good dog. And, over time, he becomes more and more like Jesus.

The good news for each of us is that we are not prisoners of our past. The mistakes of the past don't need to define us. The sins of the past don't need to limit us. Jesus can deal with our failures. And He can give us a new beginning.

He knows we will not be perfect. He knows we're not really capable of pure unconditional, unreserved, selfless love. He is willing to simply accept us where we are, right now. Imperfect though we are.

He is more than willing to accept that we want to try to love Jesus, as well as we can. He can accept that we will fail. He will accept us when we confess our mistakes. He will accept it when we pick ourselves up and try again. Our challenge is to keep aiming to be more and more like Jesus. To keep feeding the good dog. To keep on keeping on trying to be the people God created us to be. We will never be perfect. But, by God's grace, we can be better and better.

This is God's amazing grace – for Peter. For me. For you.