

Introduction

One of our ladies shared a story recently about a Bible study she led. She tried to get the group to go a bit deeper, to acknowledge some of the difficulties of following Jesus. No matter what she did or said they refused to personalize any of the teaching and acknowledge any real difficulties in their lives. Finally, one of them said what they all had been thinking, and she said it out loud.

She said this is all really easy. Following Jesus isn't hard at all. She said all you have to do is spend time with your Christian friends, "attend church" regularly, put something in the offering plate, listen to Christian music, and frequent your favorite Christian doughnut shop. Nothing about that is hard!

She's right. Nothing about that is difficult at all. The problem is it is not the life Jesus calls us to. The Lord Jesus calls us to a very different life. This woman's emphasis was entirely misplaced as she seems to have completely misunderstood what the Christian *life* even is.

As we begin our series in 1–2 Peter, we're going to see the life the Lord calls us to is a life of witness. This witness begins with knowing the One for whom we are called to be witnesses. Only when we begin to know him can we begin fulfilling the mission of God and only then can we truly begin to experience eternal life—not some concept of eternal life that is entirely in the future, but eternal life that has begun in the reign of the crucified and resurrected Savior of the world.

This morning let's take a look at Peter's backstory. In it we will see we're not all that different from Peter and the other apostles. We're in Acts 4.

Acts 4:13 Now when they saw the boldness of Peter and John, and perceived that they were uneducated, common men, they were astonished. And they recognized that they had been with Jesus.

Acts 4:13

Three Years

This verse is one of the most remarkable in Scripture. Peter and John were, as Luke indicates, "uneducated, common men". They were "unlettered". This doesn't mean they were illiterate; it means they did not have advanced education. They had not been trained as scribes. They didn't attend college, let alone graduate school. No one heard either of these men speaking and thought, "Wow...they're pretty sharp guys!" The Greek word for "common" is ἰδιῶται—idiots. It doesn't mean *idiots*, but something like ordinary, unskilled laypersons. *Amateurs*. Those who had no business doing what they were doing.

Remember, they also had funny accents. They were from Galilee. We know from Matthew 26 that Peter was recognized as being one of the Twelve because of his accent. The

Galilean accent is mocked in the Jewish Talmud as being unsophisticated. They sounded rough and uncultured to more sensible Jewish ears. They were country folk, with a simpler way of speaking.

It's a lot like that Jeff Foxworthy bit about southern accents. Jeff Foxworthy, of course, is a southern comedian known for his "redneck" jokes. He once said that no one, not even southerners, want a brain surgeon with a southern accent. Here's a close approximation to what he said: "Aight, here's what we goin' do: after we cut the top of yer skull off, we're gonna root around in 'ere with a stick and see if'n we can't find that dadburn clot!" He said if your brain surgeon said that, you'd be like, "No, thanks, Doc. I'll just die."

This is how Peter and John were perceived, based on their speech and mannerisms. And yet! Luke says they—the Sanhedrin—recognized their boldness, their ability to speak forthrightly and clearly, on account of having *been with Jesus*. Let's take a closer look at what's happening here in Acts 4.

The apostles had been preaching and teaching about the resurrection of Jesus. In chapter 3 Peter and John were in the temple and saw a beggar who was unable to walk. He was born this way and was over 40 years old at this point. In the name of Jesus they healed him and the man jumped to his feet and began walking around, praising God. Then Peter preached the gospel in the temple. The priests and the temple guard and the Sadducees were really annoyed by all this and arrested them. Luke shares this:

Acts 4:7 And when they had set them in the midst, they inquired, "By what power or by what name did you do this?"

Acts 4:7

What they want to know is what gives them the right to publicly preach and teach in the temple. "Who do you think you are" is the real question they're asking. Who gave you the authority to do this? Where did you get the power to heal a man, and what makes you think you're qualified to teach publicly? Here's Peter's response to this.

Acts 4:8 Then Peter, filled with the Holy Spirit, said to them, "Rulers of the people and elders, ⁹ if we are being examined today concerning a good deed done to a crippled man, by what means this man has been healed, ¹⁰ let it be known to all of you and to all the people of Israel that by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom you crucified, whom God raised from the dead—by him this man is standing before you well. ¹¹ This Jesus is the stone that was rejected by you, the builders, which has become the cornerstone. ¹² And there is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved."

Acts 4:8–12

Peter was filled with the Holy Spirit. This is after the resurrection and after Pentecost and the coming of the Spirit in fulfillment of the new covenant. He boldly declares by what power and in what name they do these things: the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth—yes, *that* same Jesus they had crucified, the very same Jesus God raised from the dead. That is the authority by which they healed the man and by which they were teaching publicly.

The authority to do these things came from outside the Sanhedrin, the ruling body over Israel. In a real sense they didn't need the Sanhedrin's permission to heal the man, nor did they need the Sanhedrin's approval to publicly proclaim the gospel of Jesus, to which they were *eyewitnesses*. This is the point when the Sanhedrin marveled that a couple of uneducated, common men could be so bold. *And they recognized that they had been with Jesus.*

We read this and we think, "Of course Peter was bold; he was one of the Twelve Apostles!" Duh. Obviously Peter and John would have great skill to preach the gospel and the ability to heal the lame. Of course. I've never seen Jesus. I believe God raised him from the dead, but he didn't appear to me one day and call me to be an apostle. Peter had been with Jesus *for three years!* None of us have!

It seems obvious that apostles like Peter and John should be so bold and so very capable, but let's think about Peter after those three years. John records the following in his Gospel, and this came at the end of the three years Peter had spent with Jesus.

Jn 18:15 Simon Peter followed Jesus, and so did another disciple. Since that disciple was known to the high priest, he entered with Jesus into the courtyard of the high priest,¹⁶ but Peter stood outside at the door. So the other disciple, who was known to the high priest, went out and spoke to the servant girl who kept watch at the door, and brought Peter in.¹⁷ The servant girl at the door said to Peter, "You also are not one of this man's disciples, are you?" He said, "I am not."¹⁸ Now the servants and officers had made a charcoal fire, because it was cold, and they were standing and warming themselves. Peter also was with them, standing and warming himself.

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Jn 18:25 Now Simon Peter was standing and warming himself. So they said to him, "You also are not one of his disciples, are you?" He denied it and said, "I am not."²⁶ One of the servants of the high priest, a relative of the man whose ear Peter had cut off, asked, "Did I not see you in the garden with him?"²⁷ Peter again denied it, and at once a rooster crowed.

John 18:15–18; 25–27

After three years of *being with Jesus*, Peter is still *Peter*. This bold apostle who could heal a man who was lame in his feet and could preach the gospel in the temple before thousands and who could boldly respond to the questions of the Sanhedrin found himself standing by a charcoal fire one night because it was cold. After three years of walking with Jesus, of sitting at his feet and learning, of witnessing incredible miracles—including raising Lazarus from the dead, Peter...*denies even knowing Jesus.*

Peter had been with Jesus. After three years with Jesus, this was Peter. How do we get from this Peter to the Peter in Acts 4? Something happened in between. Of course there was the crucifixion and the resurrection, but even this wasn't *the thing*. It's what made "the thing" possible! We read this a few chapters later.

Jn 21:9 When they got out on land, they saw a charcoal fire in place, with fish laid out on it, and bread.

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Jn 21:15 When they had finished breakfast, Jesus said to Simon Peter, “Simon, son of John, do you love me more than these?” He said to him, “Yes, Lord; you know that I love you.” He said to him, “Feed my lambs.” ¹⁶ He said to him a second time, “Simon, son of John, do you love me?” He said to him, “Yes, Lord; you know that I love you.” He said to him, “Tend my sheep.” ¹⁷ He said to him the third time, “Simon, son of John, do you love me?” Peter was grieved because he said to him the third time, “Do you love me?” and he said to him, “Lord, you know everything; you know that I love you.” Jesus said to him, “Feed my sheep.
John 21:9; 15–17

When Jesus asks him the same question a third time Peter knows exactly what Jesus is getting at, and it’s Peter’s biggest failure. John wants us to see the connection, too. Notice John again refers to a charcoal fire. There are only two references to a charcoal fire in the New Testament, and the other was in John 18, where Peter was warming himself. John intends for us to connect these two events. First, Peter denies knowing Jesus three separate times, though he had been with Jesus for three years. Here in John 21 he’s out fishing some time after Jesus rose from the dead.

John says he and the others saw a charcoal fire and Jesus was using it to make fish tacos. In the story, John tells us Peter jumped out of the boat and swam to shore to be with Jesus. Jesus then has a conversation with him in which he asks him three times if Peter loves Jesus. Each time Peter declares his love for Jesus, Jesus tells him to feed his sheep.

This is Jesus’ restoration of Peter. Three times Peter denies him; three times Jesus commissions him. Shortly after this Jesus ascended into heaven. Ten days later he sent the Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost. This changes *everything*. This is the thing that changes Peter from the John 18 Peter to the Acts 4 Peter. Only Jesus could qualify a man like Peter. Only the Spirit of God could empower a man like Peter.

Changed

On the day of Pentecost Peter immediately began proclaiming the gospel of Jesus. Though he had been with Jesus for three years, this was not enough for Peter’s courage and boldness. Peter needed to experience first-hand the grace and mercy of the Lord Jesus in forgiving him his sins and calling him to serve him. Then Peter needed to be filled with the power of the Holy Spirit. This is where his boldness came from. This is where his authority came from. He and John were able to heal a man and preach the gospel in the temple because of what Jesus had done, not because of anything they had done.

Peter had come to understand his fundamental identity had changed. He was no longer Peter the denier. Think of it this way: within a span of hours, both Peter and Judas had betrayed Jesus. Judas had sold him into the hands of the chief priests and scribes and Peter had denied even knowing him, and this was after Peter’s bold claim to protect Jesus even at the cost of his own life!

Jn 13:37 Peter said to him, “Lord, why can I not follow you now? I will lay down my life for you.” ³⁸ Jesus answered, “Will you lay down your life for me?”

Truly, truly, I say to you, the rooster will not crow till you have denied me three times.

John 13:37–38

Jesus knew this all along. He knew what he was getting when he called Peter to be his disciple. He knew what he was getting when he said he sent Peter and the others out as his apostles. He also knew about Judas. Just before this scene took place, at the very same meal, Jesus told the Twelve one of them would betray him and then he gave bread to Judas and told him to get on with it.

So Jesus knew both Peter and Judas would betray him, though in different ways, yet Peter went on to become something quite different from the man who denied knowing Jesus while Judas' life ended tragically. What was the difference? Peter *had been with Jesus*. Judas was merely *around Jesus*. Peter, for all his faults, trusted Jesus and received mercy and grace and forgiveness. Judas died in unbelief.

It wasn't that Peter simply had more to offer and so his life ended up better than Judas' life. The Peter we see in the temple preaching the gospel of Jesus boldly is not the Peter we see in the Gospel of John. This means it wasn't that God had so much to start with that he could simply tweak a little here and polish a little there and, Boom! You get the great apostle Peter! No, Peter needed to be rebuilt, from the ground up, so to speak—just like you and me.

Both men betrayed the Lord Jesus. In this way both Peter and Judas stood as equals before the Lord. The real difference is one experienced forgiveness and the other did not. This is the difference. Peter experienced the fullness of salvation and Judas rejected it.

The Eleven all had been with Jesus. They had received his mercy and forgiveness. They were there on the day of Pentecost when Jesus sent the Spirit to dwell among his people. This is why the Sanhedrin marveled that Peter and John—uneducated, common men!—were so bold: they had been with Jesus.

Not long after the events in Acts 4 the apostles were once again in trouble with the officials.

Acts 5:40 ...and when they had called in the apostles, they beat them and charged them not to speak in the name of Jesus, and let them go. ⁴¹ Then they left the presence of the council, rejoicing that they were counted worthy to suffer dishonor for the name. ⁴² And every day, in the temple and from house to house, they did not cease teaching and preaching that the Christ is Jesus.

Acts 5:40–42

Peter is transformed from a man who betrayed Jesus into a man who rejoiced that he could suffer for the very same name he had once denied knowing. Peter had been with Jesus. He had experienced his mercy and grace and was transformed by him.

As we begin our journey through Peter's two letters to Christians in Asia Minor, this is the background we must have. This is the understanding that helps us frame everything Peter has to say in these two letters. We must understand the change in Peter and in his readers in order to understand what it means for us today.

Miroslav Volf wrote a marvelous journal article about 1 Peter. He wrote this of the recipients of Peter's letter, and it's just as true of Peter himself.

Before conversion, they were much like their neighbors (see 4:3ff); after conversion they became different, and this was the cause of their persecution.

Miroslav Volf, *Soft Difference: Theological Reflections on the Relation Between Church and Culture in 1 Peter*. Ex Auditu, 10, 15–30.

Peter and his readers became alien—strangers—but not because they were strange. Their encounter with Jesus, their salvation through faith and repentance, changed them and they realized they were not the same. Their fundamental identity had changed. Volf goes on to explain this more fully.

The root of Christian self-understanding as aliens and sojourners lies not so much in the story of Abraham and Sarah and the nation of Israel as it does in the destiny of Jesus Christ, his mission and his rejection which ultimately brought him to the cross. “He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him” (John 1:11). He was a stranger to the world because the world into which he came was estranged from God. And so it is with his followers.

Miroslav Volf, *Soft Difference*

It wasn’t that Jesus was strange. The world was estranged from God and so he stood out as one who was not estranged from God. As Peter puts it in chapter 4 of his first letter, the world finds Christians strange because Christians “do not join them in the same flood of debauchery” (1 Pet 4:4). He says in chapter 1 they were “ransomed from the futile ways inherited from” their forefathers.

Peter emphasizes Christians are “sojourners and exiles” living in a foreign land. Yes, we may well be citizens and as Volf emphasizes in that article we may well be the ultimate cultural insiders, yet because our identity is rooted in Jesus and because Jesus was rejected by the world, we are treated as outsiders. We, too, are rejected for being so different from the world.

Peter writes these two letters from this perspective. He was a Jew in every way, yet he was treated like an outsider, an intruder, even when in the land of his birth. In this he was like Jesus who, in John’s words, “came to his own, and his own people did not receive him”. Peter urges his readers to not be surprised at the fiery trials they will find themselves in from time to time. If the world was created by Jesus and when he came to his own people, those same people rejected him, surely we ought not be surprised when we receive the same response. He writes to Christians in Asia Minor to encourage them to live as exiles who are faithfully present in a foreign land.

To be faithfully present in a foreign land is to live life as those who belong, yet as those whose ultimate loyalty is not to this world, but to the Lord himself. We’re not opposed to culture. “Culture” is simply the ideas and practices and artifacts of a people group, whether traditions or language or food or art or social norms or music or architecture. We don’t reject these things *wholesale*. Again Miroslav Volf is helpful.

Notice the significance of the new birth for Christian social identity. Christians do not come into their social world from outside seeking either to accommodate to their new home (like second generation immigrants would), shape it

in the image of the one they have left behind (like colonizers would), or establish a little haven in the strange new world reminiscent of the old (as resident aliens would). They are not outsiders who either seek to become insiders or maintain strenuously the status of outsiders. Christians are the insiders who have diverted from their culture by being born again. They are by definition those who are not what they used to be, those who do not live like they used to live. Christian difference is therefore not an insertion of something new into the old from outside, but a bursting out of the new *precisely within the proper space of the old*.

Miroslav Volf, *Soft Difference: Theological Reflections on the Relation Between Church and Culture in 1 Peter*. *Ex Auditu*, 10, 15–30.

Christians don't seek to become just like those who are still estranged from God by embracing the values of the world so as to be accepted and "relevant". Christians don't seek to reshape the world into one that is more comfortable to them. We're not trying to create a Christian *culture*. Christians don't isolate from the world in their little enclaves that remain separate from the world. Christian life isn't about making sure you only spend time with other Christians and you only listen to Christian music and you only watch Christian movies and you "attend" church regularly-ish and you put a little bit in the offering plate and you support your local Christian doughnut shop.

Christians, he says, are those who have been transformed. While they remain right where they were in terms of culture and language and such, they are so transformed from the inside out that something new bursts forth into the existing space they continue to occupy. Christians exist as little outposts of the kingdom of God. Whether you were called as an American living in Grand Rapids or you were called as a Congolese living in a village in the Congo with the nearest paved road being many miles away, you don't cease being an American or a Congolese, but you are a *new* American living in Grand Rapids or a *new* Congolese living in Ktindi.

You and I live as those who represent the kingdom of God while remaining firmly fixed in this world. We don't continue on as we were, living and acting exactly like those around us, continuing in the sins we were rescued from. We don't seek to change the world so as to make it—the world—like God's kingdom, reflecting our values and our ideas of how things ought to be. We don't withdraw from the world God has placed us into. Instead, we remain faithfully present in the world, living as faithful witnesses of a greater kingdom, one that is not of this world.

What you and I are called to is this: we live in such a way that we show others what they would look like if they, too, followed Jesus. When we live as faithful followers of Jesus within our particular cultural contexts, we show others what they would look like if they also followed Jesus. You live in the "space" you were assigned, and you show that "bursting out of the new" into that same space. We live as those who are *changed*.

Application

Our culture has been rapidly changing. The veneer of a Christian nation has quickly been vanishing. It was only ever a veneer. The founders of this nation declared in a treaty in 1797—just ten years after the Constitution was ratified—that the United States is not

founded upon the Christian faith. This myth of a Christian nation came about in the 1950s in response to communism, which was officially atheist. To show how much greater our system of government was, our nation decided to add things like “under God” to our Pledge of Allegiance and “In God We Trust” to our currency—in the 1950s.

As our culture changes and casts off the vestiges of *cultural* Christianity, hostility toward Christian faith increases. We must remember that we are called to be *witnesses* to the Lord Jesus. This means we are not called to change the culture, as much as that idea is firmly ingrained in the psyche of American Christianity. We are not called to enact “Christian laws” or make America “Christian”. We are called to be witnesses to the risen Lord Jesus.

This means we are called to show others what life in his kingdom is like, and therefore what sort of King he is. We do not do this by accommodating the culture and just going along with it, allowing the world’s values to shape our own. We do not do this by trying to reshape the world into something we want through legislative power and control. We do not do this by withdrawing from the culture into our tiny, private little spheres. We do this by living transformed lives. We do this by being faithfully *present*.

We certainly need to be present in each other’s lives, but hanging out with Christian friends is not what *faithful presence* means. We certainly need to think pure thoughts and fill our minds with good things, but only listening to Christian music is not what *faithful presence* means. We certainly need to participate in the life of the church, but focusing only on “attending church” regularly is not what *faithful presence* means. To be faithfully present means in every sphere of life, whether work or play, whether relationships in the church or outside, whether choosing what to watch or what to listen to, whether determining how to spend the resources the Lord has entrusted to us, in every area of our lives, we recognize and understand we are witnesses to the Lord Jesus and so our decisions in these areas ought to reflect him and his kingdom.

Here is what I’m getting at, New City. You do not have to have a fancy education to be faithfully present. You do not have to be particularly gifted at anything to be faithfully present. You do not need a big vocabulary or have letters behind your name or be able to wow a crowd with your wit and eloquence in order to be faithfully present. You do not need to have a lot “to offer” the Lord in terms of your own abilities in order to be faithfully present. What you need is to be faithfully present with Jesus. That is, you must be *with Jesus*. Here’s how one African scholar put it.

The rulers and elders were amazed at *the courage of Peter and John*, who were uneducated and should have been intimidated by the powerful, educated men who sat to judge them. Being with Jesus, the master teacher, had changed them and learning from him had compensated for any lack of formal education. Peter and John now spoke like people with education and training. All those in the church of Christ should share this experience, for they too are in contact with Jesus.

Paul Mumo Kisau, Africa Bible Commentary

Being with Jesus—experiencing the *fullness* of salvation—is what changed them, transforming them into bold witnesses to Jesus. We’ve seen the sort of man Peter was, yet because he was with Jesus he was no longer that man. He had been changed and transformed into

something else entirely. Oh, he was *Peter*, but he was Peter *who had been with Jesus*. He had received the grace and mercy of God. He was filled with the Spirit of God. This is what transformed him.

You and I need to be with Jesus. If we will be faithful witnesses to the resurrected Christ, we must sit with Jesus. We must spend time with him. Since he is most fully present in his church, we must participate in the life of the church. When we do this we are being disciplined—made to be more like Jesus. This is the transformation Peter experienced. This is the transformation the other apostles experienced. This is the transformation you and I are experiencing.

We are not called to create Christian culture. If we were, then following Jesus would be simple. We could just spend time with Christian friends and listen to Christian music and attend whatever church happens to capture our fancy on a given Sunday. The truth is we already have a culture. Our mission is to live within that culture, be faithfully present, and live as witnesses for Jesus.

Have we been with Jesus, or have we been with Christian culture? Peter had been with Jesus, while Judas was content to be merely *around* Jesus. This is what “Christian culture” seeks. It creates the veneer of being with Jesus while merely being *around* him. Near him. *-ish*.

How we live our lives reveals what we truly believe. Is Jesus Lord? Is he worthy of all honor and glory and praise? Do we, in fact, live for him? Or do we merely seek to live around him, fitting him in wherever we find space? There are signs indicating whether we’re merely pursuing cultural Christianity or we’re seeking to be with Jesus.

Being with Jesus leaves evidence. Are you filled with joy? I don’t mean happiness, which is entirely rooted in circumstances. Do you have that deep-seated contentment in the Lord even when you don’t know how things are going to turn out? Do you have that soul-satisfying joy in the Lord when other Christians disagree with you or even criticize your politics? When your world seems to be falling apart, is there that inner confidence that the Lord will walk with you through it, that he will never leave you nor forsake you?

Are you filled with grace toward others? You know you are Peter in the garden, warming yourself by a charcoal fire. If you are being with Jesus, you also know you are Peter walking on a beach with Jesus, receiving grace and mercy. Is this causing you to be more patient and kind and forgiving to others? If you are content merely being *around* Jesus, a critical spirit will form and you will not give grace to others.

Merely living in a Christian cultural bubble cannot bring about this transformation. Such a cultural bubble creates pride, that “Hey, look at me! Look how I’m living!” It creates self-righteousness on account of the things you keep in your bubble—and the things you keep outside, like certain kinds of *people*. Following Jesus, after all, isn’t that hard if you ignore what’s in your heart and focus instead on your outward appearance, on how others perceive you.

Church, you don’t need formal education to be a faithful witness! *You need to be with Jesus*. You don’t need to be highly gifted or talented or skilled. You don’t need to be all that special in any way. *You need to be with Jesus*.

The truth is far too many settle for the “easy” Christian life. Far too many are satisfied substituting a Christian-*ish* cultural Christianity for true life in the Spirit, which is a life being with Jesus. We learned over the past few weeks that we have all the ingredients

necessary to live faithfully with Jesus. As Dave said last week, cultural Christianity tells you to become more like the best version of yourself while Christian faith is about becoming more like Jesus.

Jesus isn't looking for Instagram followers, men and women who love posting selfies taken with various cultural filters on so as to make themselves look better than they really are. We have Jesus. Jesus is the only filter we need. When God looks at us through the filter of Jesus, he sees everything he needs to accomplish his purposes because Jesus is God.

We were meant to live like Peter and John and the other apostles. We can only do this by being with Jesus. We, the body of Christ, were meant to live in the Spirit, just like the churches in Pontus and Galatia and Cappadocia and Asia and Bithynia, as we will see next week. We are meant to live as exiles who spend time with Jesus, exiles who are characterized by their faith and obedience. No, the Christian life is not easy. It isn't meant to be. It is possible, though, if we will be with Jesus.