



Peter ... Taking His Stand
Acts 5:12-42

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“Silence in the face of evil is itself evil. Not to speak is to speak. Not to act is to act.” Those were the words of German pastor Dietrich Bonhoeffer as Adolf Hitler and the Third Reich dominated Germany.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer was a Lutheran pastor who witnessed the Nazi takeover of the country and the church, and the declaration of the Führer as the head of the church. The Nazis even edited the Bible to suit their propaganda. The Old Testament, the Jewish Scriptures, were removed from the Bible. It was also rewritten to make Jesus an Aryan instead of a Jew. They added two commandments to the Ten Commandments – “Honor your Führer and master” and “keep the blood pure.” Only those churches supporting the Reich were government-approved, all others were considered illegal.

In 1939, Bonhoeffer came to New York to study at Union Theological Seminary. But after two weeks he said, “I have come to the conclusion that I have made a mistake by coming to America. I must live through the difficult period of my nation’s history with the Christian people of Germany. I shall have no right to participate in the reconstruction of Christian life in Germany after the war if I do not share the trials of this time with my people.”

Bonhoeffer mourned that Germany had been “invaded from within.” So he returned to oppose Hitler and the Nazi regime. He was fiercely vocal against the persecution of Jews and the Nazi euthanasia program, which extended to the disabled and mentally ill. In one famous radio address, Bonhoeffer openly criticized Hitler, whom he feared was becoming a cult leader of the German people. He was arrested in 1943, accused of conspiring to assassinate Hitler, and later hanged on April 9, 1945, one month before Germany surrendered to Allied Forces.¹ Dietrich Bonhoeffer was only 39 years old.²

In his classic book *The Cost of Discipleship*, he contrasted “cheap grace” versus “costly grace.” In his mind, cheap grace sits in the pew, while costly grace takes a stand. He believed the church must preach the Gospel and lift the teachings of Jesus. He believed Christians must not retreat from the world but dare to enter the fray and take a stand.

And what does it mean to take a stand? Bonhoeffer answered that question, when he said, “Who stands firm? Only the one who is ready to sacrifice and only the one whose sole allegiance is to God.”

This morning, we come to Acts 5. The story of Peter taking his stand.

The book of Acts records the birth of the Church and the thirty-year period following the resurrection of Jesus. The book is filled with dramatic events and incredible stories of faith. Those who were there heard His teaching and witnessed His miracles. They saw Him die and they saw Him alive again. They believed Jesus was the Son of God. They were convinced it was true. They were compelled to talk about it. And they were courageous to take a stand.

Following the resurrection, Peter boldly preached on the streets of Jerusalem and faced opposition and threats for doing so. He was arrested and tortured, yet Peter said, “*We cannot stop speaking what we have seen and heard*” (Acts 4:20, NAS). And if Jesus means as much to us as He meant to Peter, we too will say, “We cannot stop speaking what we have seen and heard.”

There is so much noise in our culture. There is so much distraction. There is so many divisive and debated issues. And in the midst of it all, this is what it means to be a Christian. This is the mission. “We cannot stop speaking what we have seen and heard.”

A BIOGRAPHICAL SURVEY OF PETER’S LIFE

To understand how Peter came to a place of such conviction and courage, we need to take a quick survey of his life.

- Peter and his brother Andrew were fishermen. And when Jesus said, “Follow Me,” the Bible says, “they immediately left their nets, and followed Him” (Matthew 4:20, NAS). There was something so compelling about Jesus that Peter dropped everything to follow Him.
- Peter was the first to recognize that Jesus was no ordinary man. He “fell down at Jesus’ feet” and said, “Go away from me Lord, for I am a sinful man!” (Luke 5:8, NAS).
- When Jesus asked, “Who do you say that I am?” Peter was the first to declare, “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God” (Matthew 16:15-16, NAS).
- It was Peter who had faith to get out of the boat and walk on the water.³
- Peter witnessed the supernatural transfiguration of Jesus, an event which revealed Jesus as divine, as the bridge between heaven and earth.⁴
- Peter vowed his allegiance to Jesus on three occasions, saying, “Even if I have to die with You, I will not deny You” (Matthew 26:35, NAS).
- When Jesus was arrested, Peter was the one who pulled a knife and cut off the soldier’s ear.⁵

And it was Peter who denied knowing Jesus! The same man who vowed he would die for Jesus was the same man who denied even knowing Him.⁶ The night Jesus was arrested, the Bible says, “Peter followed at a distance. And the guards lit a fire in the middle of the courtyard and sat around it, and Peter joined them” (Luke 22:54-55, NLT).

As Jesus was being interrogated and ridiculed, Peter blended in with the crowd and hid in the shadows. When a servant girl pointed at him saying she had seen him with Jesus, Peter said, “I don’t know Him.” When another recognized him as one of Jesus’ disciples, Peter lashed out, “No, I’m not.” And when a third person insisted that Peter was a follower of Jesus, he cursed and said, “I do not know what you are talking about.” Immediately, a rooster crowed, and the Bible says, “The Lord turned and looked at Peter” (Luke 22:61, NAS). And Peter remembered what Jesus had

said. “Before a rooster crows today, you will deny Me three times” (Luke 22:61, NAS). Then Peter “wept bitterly” (Luke 22:62, NAS).⁷

But that’s not the end of his story.

- It was Peter who saw his beloved Jesus on the cross. He saw his master beaten and bloodied, mocked and humiliated. Peter watched Jesus die.
- He also witnessed the miracle. That Sunday morning, Peter went inside the empty tomb.⁸ And that Sunday evening, he saw Jesus alive again!⁹
- It was Peter who, after the Holy Spirit fell at Pentecost, preached the first sermon of the church.¹⁰ Declaring, “This Jesus whom you crucified God has raised up from the dead!”¹¹ To which the Bible says, “They were pierced to the heart” and 3,000 believed in Jesus that day.¹²
- And years later, Peter was martyred for this faith, asking to be crucified upside down because he felt unworthy to be crucified in the same way as Jesus. The historian Clement wrote that Peter was forced to watch his wife be executed first, and he called out her name and said, “Remember Jesus.”

Add it all up and that’s why Peter said, “We cannot stop speaking what we have seen and heard.”

THE ACTS 5 STORY

Acts 5 is the story of Peter taking his stand, and here’s what happened.

The Holy Spirit was moving, and the apostles were performing “many miraculous signs and wonders.”¹³ Crowds gathered to see what was happening, and more and more people believed in Jesus. People came from the villages outside Jerusalem, bringing the sick on beds and mats, and placing them on the street so Peter’s shadow might fall on them as he walked by. And the religious leaders were “filled with jealousy” with the popularity of the apostles. So they arrested them and put them in jail.¹⁴

But during the night, an angel came and “opened the doors of the jail.”¹⁵ And the angel said to the apostles, “Go, stand in the temple, and tell people the whole message of this life.”¹⁶ So they left the jail and at daybreak started teaching about Jesus all over again. When the guards told the religious leaders what happened, they were stunned and did not know what to do.¹⁷

So, on the one hand, the Spirit was moving, the disciples were performing miracles and healings, and hundreds of people believed in Jesus. On the other hand, opposition was increasing. Tension and hostility were brewing.

So the guards brought the apostles back to the Council to be questioned. And the Council growled at them, “We gave you strict orders not to continue teaching in this name, and yet, you have filled Jerusalem with your teaching” (Acts 5:28, NAS). And here is Peter’s response. Here is Peter taking his stand. “We must obey God rather than men. The God of our fathers raised up

Jesus, whom you put to death by hanging Him on a cross. He is the one whom God exalted to His right hand as a Prince and a Savior, to grant repentance to Israel, and forgiveness of sins. And we are witnesses of these things ... We must obey God rather than men!" (Acts 5:29-32, NAS).

"When the Council heard this, they were furious and wanted to put them to death" (Acts 5:33, NIV).

But one member of the Council cautioned them to reconsider. Gamaliel reminded them that in the past other charismatic leaders had attracted a crowd and made a lot of noise in the city, but each of them had come and gone.¹⁸ Gamaliel wisely said, "Leave these men alone! Let them go! For if their purpose or activity is of human origin, it will fail. But if it is from God, you will not be able to stop them, and you will find yourselves fighting against God" (Acts 5:38-39, NIV).

So instead of executing them, the religious leaders "flogged Peter and the apostles and ordered them not to speak in the name of Jesus, and released them" (Acts 5:40, NAS).

And what did the apostles do? "They left the high council rejoicing that God had counted them worthy to suffer disgrace for the name of Jesus" (Acts 5:41, NLT). Bruised and bloodied, they "rejoiced" that they had been considered worthy to suffer for the name of Jesus. And then, "every day, in the temple and from house to house, they kept right on teaching and preaching Jesus as the Christ ... and the word of God kept on spreading, and the number of disciples continued to increase greatly in Jerusalem" (Acts 5:42, 6:7, NAS).

TAKING A STAND

Peter, and the other apostles, made a choice. In the face of threat, they took their stand. "We must obey God rather than men" (Acts 5:29, NAS). A statement like that defines a person. It defines who a person is, what a person believes, and what a person is willing to stand for. At some level, every one of us must come to that place where we decide who we are, what we believe, and what we're willing to stand for.

But here's a question worth asking. How did Peter go from denying knowing Jesus to being flogged for preaching Jesus? What changed? He saw Jesus alive again! He saw Him. He touched Him. He hugged Him. He believed He was the Son of God.

Peter took a stand because he was *convinced it was true*. On the streets of Jerusalem, opposing both religious and political leaders, he declared, "There is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name ... by which we can be saved" (Acts 4:12, NAS).¹⁹ Jesus is the message. Jesus is the good news. He is "the way, the truth, and the life," and no comes to the Father except through Him (John 14:6, NAS).²⁰ He is the only way to God. He is the only way to be forgiven.²¹ He is the only way to heaven.²² He is the only hope for the world.²³

Peter took his stand because he was convinced that "there is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name."

And Peter was *compelled to talk about it*. In the face of threat, he was compelled to speak up. “Whether it is right in the sight of God to give heed to you rather than to God, you be the judge, for we cannot stop speaking about what we have seen and heard” (Acts 4:19-20, NAS).

Peter walked with Jesus for three years. He heard every word and witnessed every miracle. He saw Jesus die and he saw Him alive again. Peter knew Jesus personally. He was real to him. And he loved Him so much that they could not stop talking about Him. And that’s how it should be for us. Jesus is more than a character in a novel. He’s more than a theological concept. He is a person. He is the Son of God. He is our Savior. And if we know Him personally, if He is real to us, if we love Him, then like Peter, we will not be able to stop talking about Him.

And at great risk, Peter was *courageous to take a stand*. He was arrested three times, ordered to stop preaching three times, and three times, he stood his ground. “We must obey God rather than men” (Acts 5:32, NAS).

Peter took a stand and paid a price for it. The religious leaders “flogged” Peter and the rest of the apostles. Acts 5 says, “They left the high council rejoicing that God had counted them worthy to suffer disgrace for the name of Jesus” (Acts 5:41, NLT).²⁴ Bruised and bloodied, they “rejoiced” that they had been considered worthy to suffer for the name of Jesus.²⁵ Peter would later write in one of his New Testament letters, “If you are insulted for the name of Christ, you are blessed, because the Spirit of glory and of God rests upon you ... If anyone suffers as a Christian, let him not be ashamed, but let him glorify God in that name” (1 Peter 4:14, 16, ESV).

How did Peter go from denying knowing Jesus to being flogged for preaching Jesus? He was convinced it was true. He was compelled to talk about it. And he was courageous to take a stand.

What does taking a stand look like for us?

Most often it will be *a casual conversation*, a neighborhood dinner, a chat in the cul-de-sac, or a round of golf with friends. Taking a stand may require us to clarify something about Jesus, or correct a misunderstanding a person may have, or it may require us to challenge someone who rejects Jesus. And when the moment comes, we must be ready.²⁶ We must decide ahead of time what we will do and what we will say when that moment comes.

Other times taking a stand may be *a tense situation* that is awkward or intimidating. It may be a situation that requires you to speak up in a group with several people. It could be at work, at school, or at a party.

When I was planting a church in Washington, DC, I also worked as staff accountant for a law firm on Capitol Hill. One day, the lawyers invited me to go along to lunch at a fancy restaurant in DC. They knew I was a young pastor, and sitting around the table with these high-powered lawyers – two Catholics, two atheists, and two Jews – and one of them asked, “So Monty, what kind of Christian are you? Are you like Jerry Falwell or Joel Osteen?” I was put on the spot, knew I had to say something, and also knew they were not interested in a long answer. So I simply said, “I hope neither. I believe the Bible is true. I believe Jesus died on the cross for us. And I

believe everyone needs Jesus.” And with that, everyone went back to their meal and talking about politics.

Something like that may happen to you as well. You may be in a situation when you’re put on the spot, when you’re required to pick a side, and declare what you believe. And you’ve got to decide ahead of time what you will do and what you will say when that moment comes.

Taking a stand may also require you to *create the moment*, to create an opportunity, to schedule a meeting. God may prompt you to initiate a Gospel conversation with a neighbor or family member or coworker. And again, you’ve got to decide ahead of time what you will do, what you will say, when that moment comes.

And when that moment comes, whether it’s a casual conversation or an intimidating situation, will you take a stand? Will you speak the name of Jesus?

CONCLUSION

As we study the book of Acts, it’s like holding up a mirror and comparing ourselves to the very first Christians. It’s honestly asking, “Do I live the way they lived? Does Jesus mean as much to me as He did to them?”

For Peter, he was convinced it was true – “for there is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name” (Acts 4:12). He was compelled to talk about it – “for we cannot stop speaking what we have seen and heard” (Acts 4:19-20). And facing grave threat, he was courageous to take a stand – “for we must obey God rather than men” (Acts 5:29). Convinced. Compelled. Courageous.

When that moment comes, will you speak the name of Jesus?

NOTES

¹ As he was led to be hanged, Bonhoeffer's last words to a friend were – "This is the end – but for me it is the beginning of Life!"

² On the façade above the entrance to Westminster Abby in London, Bonhoeffer is included as one of ten 20th century martyrs.

³ See Matthew 14:28-29.

⁴ See Matthew 17:1-8.

⁵ See Matthew 26:52-53.

⁶ See Matthew 26:33, 35, John 13:37.

⁷ The Greek word *dakruō* means to shed tears. This word, "wept" (*eklausen*), refers to a loud, audible expression of grief. It was used to refer to the emotion expressed by those in mourning for the dead. The word "bitterly" (*pikrōs*) has as its root the meaning to cut or prick. Emotionally, it refers to sharp, severe pain. The Message reads, "He went out and cried and cried and cried."

⁸ See John 20:6-7.

⁹ See John 21:7.

¹⁰ See Acts 2:14-40.

¹¹ See Acts 2:23, 32.

¹² See Acts 2:37, 41.

¹³ See Acts 5:12.

¹⁴ See Acts 5:12-18.

¹⁵ See Acts 5:19. This happened to Peter again in Acts 12:4-11.

¹⁶ See Acts 5:20.

¹⁷ See Acts 5:21-27.

¹⁸ See Acts 5:34-39.

¹⁹ That verse contains a sobering word – salvation. Salvation implies that people are in peril and in need of saving. Some people realize their need for God and others do not. Yet, it's true of every person who has ever lived. Sin separates us from a holy God and dooms us to an eternal death. Yet, our Creator loves us so much that He sent His Son to come after us. The Gospel is a divine rescue mission, and today, we are a part of that mission.

²⁰ See 1 Timothy 2:5.

²¹ See Acts 10:43.

²² See John 3:16.

²³ See Colossians 1:27, "Christ in you, the hope of glory."

²⁴ Paul echoed what Peter has been saying throughout his letter. "For you have been given not only the privilege of trusting in Christ but also the privilege of suffering for him" (Philippians 1:29, NLT). Paul told Timothy, "All who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted" (2 Timothy 3:12, ESV).

²⁵ See Acts 5:41.

²⁶ See 1 Peter 3:15.