

# THE DISCIPLES OF JESUS

*A Bible Study*

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THE FOUNDRY  
PUBLISHING\*

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The Foundry Publishing®  
PO Box 419527  
Kansas City, MO 64141  
thefoundrypublishing.com

ISBN 978-0-8341-4158-2

Printed in the  
United States of America

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Cover design: Caines Design  
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### **Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data**

A complete catalog record for this book is available from the Library of Congress.

The internet addresses, email addresses, and phone numbers in this book are accurate at the time of publication. They are provided as a resource. The Foundry Publishing® does not endorse them or vouch for their content or permanence.

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# INTRODUCTION

❖ Before they were apostles, they were disciples, living alongside each other and in the presence of Jesus. Often people in churches come to know the disciples through a kind of larger-than-life vision of the men and women of Scripture. Christians often forget just how their own lives as disciples often mirror the day-to-day dispositions and reactions to life from long ago.

We need to remember that the disciples did not come to Jesus with some special set of qualifications. If they lived today, they would probably not have stellar résumés, wonderful social media profiles, or even seats in the front pew of the church. If we take a moment to contemplate the lives of the disciples, we find everyday people just like us coming to Jesus to be received and transformed by his presence. Often when we study the disciples, we begin by scrutinizing their humanity—perhaps even their fragility—if only to consider what they have in common with us. However, in and through the presence of Jesus, their everyday lives were transformed so that they became servants of the kingdom of God—and this is something that can happen to us as well.

What is more, the disciples also came *together*. Most writing, as well as preaching, tends to focus on each disciple as an individual. But do the disciples reveal more when considered in relationship to each other? Stopping long enough to consider the disciples in relationship, even in pairs, creates a different understanding and appreciation for what Jesus might have seen not only *within* each disciple but also *across* relationships.

This study looks at the disciples in their relationships with each other, mostly in pairs. Taking this side-by-side approach may provide a fresh appreciation of how we ourselves interact as disciples today. As the travelers discovered on the road to Emmaus (Luke 24:13-35), something radical can happen when Jesus appears in the middle of our relationships, during a journey, and when breaking bread together. Our study relies on both Scripture and early church tradition.<sup>1</sup> However, the accounts also include a bit of “scriptural imagination” that reflects the creativity of early church preaching. While there may be some biblical scholars who will wince at the material, my hope remains that the approach used here will make the disciples appear more accessible, more available, to our lives today.

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1. Information from Christian tradition adapted primarily from the following sources: Paul J. Achtemeier, ed., *The HarperCollins Bible Dictionary*, rev. ed. (New York: HarperCollins, 1996); F. L. Cross and E. A. Livingstone, eds., *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, 3rd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997).

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# ACTION HEROES

## Simon Peter and Andrew

❖ Our journey begins with two of the best-known disciples, Simon Peter and his brother Andrew. Sibling relationships shape the four most prominent disciples: Peter with Andrew, and James with John. All four disciples appear early in the Synoptic Gospels: Matthew 4:18-22; Mark 1:16-20; and Luke 5:1-11.<sup>1</sup> Andrew and Peter also appear early in John's Gospel (1:35-42).<sup>2</sup> Three disciples—Peter, John, and James—form what might be called Jesus's inner circle, with Andrew as a close associate.

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1. M. Eugene Boring, "The Synoptic Problem," in *HarperCollins Bible Dictionary*, 1082. "Synoptic" means "as one view," which describes how the first three gospels tend to mirror each other in many accounts, though not always arranged in the same manner.

2. Laura S. Holmes and George Lyons, *John 1-12*, New Beacon Bible Commentary (Kansas City: Beacon Hill Press of Kansas City, 2020), 34-40.

## Simon Peter

Outside the life and work of the apostle Paul, perhaps no disciple gains as much attention in the New Testament as Simon, son of Jonah, whom Jesus would call Peter (John 1:42). This is especially so in the Gospels, and in fact, many believe the gospel writer Mark was a close friend of Peter.<sup>3</sup> Where does one begin to understand who Peter was and what he offered as a person?

I love the story of Peter *after* the resurrection of Jesus. Peter, in John 21, decides to go fishing (v. 3). After a fruitless night, Jesus appears and provides the kind of advice you might hear from an old-time fisherman, with dramatic results. When the disciple John recognizes Jesus, he shouts, "It is the Lord!" (v. 7). Peter then puts on his clothes and jumps into the sea, leaving the other disciples to do the work of hauling their catch of fish to shore. The scene is actually kind of humorous. Just imagine Peter wrestling on his outer garment as he walks off the edge of the boat while the rest of the disciples plead for help. You could almost see Peter wading out of the water to the shoreline, dripping from head to toe.

This view of the "all wet" Peter really reminds us of the disciple's impulsiveness. Peter always seems to be the one person who lives by the motto "Leap before you look." Peter was the one who tried to follow Jesus by stepping out onto the stormy waves of Galilee but then needed Jesus to rescue

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3. Kent Brower, *Mark*, New Beacon Bible Commentary (Kansas City: Beacon Hill Press of Kansas City, 2012), 26-31.



him (Matt. 14:28-30). One can find Peter accompanying John into Jerusalem to help prepare the upper room for the Last Supper (Luke 22:8), but Peter also falls asleep during Jesus's anguished prayer in the garden of Gethsemane (Matt. 26:40-46). Later Peter is the one who strikes out in anger at temple guards during Jesus's arrest (John 18:10-11).

Along with all these actions, Peter, perhaps most significantly, was also among those who immediately "stepped out" and left everything when he heard Jesus's invitation to follow him (Luke 5:11). Peter's first inclination was always to move—to step out. Maybe that is why Jesus acknowledged that walking would characterize the end of Peter's life, even though it would mean being led by others to a place he least wanted to go (John 21:18-19). Most poignantly, though, among Jesus's final words to Peter is the same invitation that Peter heard when he began his walk with the Lord: "Follow me" (v. 19).

When he wasn't moving his body, Peter was moving his lips. Peter's second motto seems to have been, "Speak first and listen later." However, Peter's words sometimes reveal a man willing to confess his limitations and sinfulness before the lordship of Jesus (Luke 5:8). This is surprising when we consider that Peter was probably one of the more self-sufficient disciples. Not only was he married (Matt. 8:14; Mark 1:29-34; Luke 4:38-39), but he also could maintain (by the standards of the time) a household. Yet he remained aware not only of his sinfulness but also his calling to join Jesus, whom he later confessed to be "the Messiah, the Son of the living God" (Matt. 16:16-19).

Peter's confession of Jesus's messiahship and sonship serves as the rock<sup>4</sup> on which Peter would stand alongside the rest of the church. Yet Peter, soon after this confession, rebukes Jesus for predicting his impending death and receives Jesus's rebuke in return: "Get behind me, Satan!" (v. 23). Even Peter's response to Jesus's encounter with Moses and Elijah on the Mount of Transfiguration was subject to rebuke (17:1-13). Peter, taken up in the moment, proposes to turn a transforming vision into a shrine honoring all three leaders. God the Father intervenes to instruct Peter concerning Jesus, who is truly the Lord, the true Son of God (v. 5). Although Peter was quick to confess Jesus as the Anointed One, his understanding of that confession took much longer to develop.

Not only did Peter misunderstand Jesus as Lord, but he especially misunderstood Jesus as Suffering Servant. When confronted by Jesus's desire to wash Peter's feet, Peter at first resists but then goes too far and asks to be washed from toe to head, for which he again is gently reproved (John 13:3-11). Later that same night, Jesus foretells his own death and Peter attempts to block the way by asserting that he will sacrifice his own life for Jesus's. Unfortunately, this declaration receives in return Jesus's painful pronouncement that Peter will betray him three times (vv. 36-38). Jesus's pronouncement becomes all too true as Peter later does indeed finally deny his Lord and

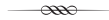
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4. Scholars disagree about whether Peter the man or Peter's confession of Jesus as Messiah provides that rock or foundation. In this book we will give consideration to both possibilities. Both Peter and his confession can be conceived as rocks and as foundational for the church.

suffering Savior three times (Matt. 26:69-75; Mark 14:66-72; Luke 22:54-62; John 18:25-27).



When confident, and even  
when in doubt, Simon Peter would  
*do* something.



It is not surprising that Jesus, following his resurrection, lovingly confronts Peter in John 21 with a clear question, asked three times: “Simon son of John, do you love me?” (vv. 15-17). Much is made of Jesus’s admonitions (feeding and tending sheep and lambs) following Peter’s responses, but the repetition of the question probably assured, in contrast to the earlier denials, that Peter’s first word would indeed be his final word. Jesus guides Peter, a man who would speak first and then sometimes do an about-face, to painfully think through his heartfelt love for the Savior.

We may think this view of Peter is very unflattering. What could Jesus see in this impulsive disciple? What is it about Peter that caused our Savior to call Peter the rock, the foun-

dition, on which the church would be built?<sup>5</sup> Perhaps Simon Peter's actions provide a clue. Understanding Peter includes acknowledging his bias toward action. When confident, and even when in doubt, Simon Peter would *do* something. If impulse implies a commitment to act, Peter seemed more than willing to act out his faith and follow Jesus. Peter stepped out onto water, into fights, and into following Jesus regardless of the circumstances. Faith for Peter could not be separated from action, from conduct, from even proclamation (Acts 4:8-12; 5:27-30). Peter did not see faith as a private possession but as a commission, a response to the core invitation to follow Jesus and live a life of discipleship every moment of every day.

Peter also acted and spoke as he thought. Rather than taking the time for reflection, Peter verbalized his thoughts, making them transparent before Jesus. This approach brought both moments of deep insight ("You are the Messiah") and provided moments of deep insecurity ("You cannot be crucified"; "I do not know this Jesus"; "What about John?").<sup>6</sup> Peter's trust of Jesus allowed for Peter's transparency before Jesus. Perhaps Peter's ability not only to speak freely but also to receive admonition undergirded his first address to skeptics and believers in Acts 2. Who else would have had the inclination, if not the Spirit-filled ability among the disciples, to immediately take up the challenge?

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5. Ibid.

6. Author paraphrases.

## Andrew

But what about Andrew? If Peter portrays an active faith, reflected in his own agency if not his ability, how might Peter's brother fit into this journey? Perhaps the most telling story of Andrew starts at the beginning, since he is often known as the *Prōtoklētos* (Greek for "first called").<sup>7</sup> The Gospel of John tells us the most about Andrew. From John 1:35-42, we know that he was first a disciple of John the Baptist and that he brought Peter to Jesus with the proclamation, "We have found the Messiah" (v. 41). Later, rather than complaining about Jesus's admonition to the disciples to help him feed five thousand people, Andrew brings a young boy with five loaves and two fish, which Jesus turns into a miraculous feast (6:8-9). Finally, Andrew served, along with Philip, as a go-between to inform Jesus that a group of Greeks wished to see him (12:20-22).

Like Peter, Andrew also seems to possess a kind of bias toward action, but more as a catalyst. Rather than being out in front like his brother, Andrew displays a strategic ability to see a need and fill it. When we look at Jesus's journey with the disciples, we begin to see Andrew as an organizer, a quartermaster, a relational networker. Andrew channeled his impulses into other people, encouraging, enabling, and resourcing others to inspire them to action. Ori Brafman and Rod A. Beckstrom, in their book *The Starfish and the Spider*, note that almost all movements require two leaders, often in tandem.

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7. W. Brian Shelton, *Quest for the Historical Apostles: Tracing Their Lives and Legacies* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2018), 96.

One they describe as the “hero,” out in front, providing a vision, compelling people to respond. The other they call the “catalyst,” often working behind the scenes to provide opportunity, direction, and resources as people join the movement.<sup>8</sup> Simon Peter’s natural impulsive action reflects his ability, through Jesus’s instruction and the power of the Holy Spirit, to become the first “heroic” apostle of the church. Andrew possesses the catalytic ability to complement this effort both among the disciples and later as a leader living out his own active ministry.



Andrew channeled his impulses into  
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and resourcing others to  
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8. Ori Brafman and Rod A. Beckstrom, *The Starfish and the Spider: The Unstoppable Power of Leaderless Organizations* (New York: Portfolio, 2006), 85-131.

## Joining the Journey

Ultimately the brothers Peter and Andrew do remind us that discipleship demands action. Their desire to live out their faith in following Jesus served them in their missional efforts later in life. Peter proved willing to stand before the Sanhedrin, with the apostle John, in Acts. Peter's actions also led to his imprisonment for his faith by Herod (Acts 12:3-19). Peter also journeyed to Caesarea to meet with Cornelius and then returned to Jerusalem with a mandate to reach out to the Gentiles (Acts 10). Apparently even Peter's wife journeyed with him on future missionary efforts (1 Cor. 9:5). According to Christian tradition, Peter traveled to Rome and (as Jesus noted in John 21) was crucified, upside down.<sup>9</sup>

We all need to be ready and willing to live out our faith as disciples. You might look at this willingness as an embrace of our calling or vocation before Jesus Christ. Living out this faith may come with fits and starts, as it did with Peter. Those fits and starts often occur when we encounter people in our everyday lives, as well as unexpected successes and challenges. At times, we may feel more comfortable being like Andrew, willing to serve as a facilitator, networker, and resource provider for the church. Yet even Andrew risked telling his brother of the promise of Jesus Christ when the opportunity presented itself, and together, they both left John the Baptist to follow Jesus. For Andrew, that journey, as Christian tradi-

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9. *Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, 3rd ed. (1997), s.v. "Peter, St."

tion tells us, meant traveling to southern Greece, where he was later crucified on an X-shaped cross.<sup>10</sup>

Perhaps when emphasizing discipleship, the church focuses too much on times of reflection and withdrawal. For many people, discipleship remains an active endeavor. Regardless, discipleship is not a spectator sport. We all must be willing to live out our faith and obedience with Jesus. If anything, the brothers Peter and Andrew remind us that the command to follow requires deliberate action. We might not always know where Jesus will lead us, but we must be willing to take to the road and begin walking.

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10. *Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, 3rd ed. (1997), s.v. "Andrew, St."



## Discussion Questions

1. Can you name certain times when people might “leap before they look”? What motivates people to act first and then explain their actions later? When might acting this way be necessary?
2. Some people are known as “verbal processors”—that is, they think out loud by talking to people. How might this approach create problems or provide opportunities?
3. Looking over the life of Simon Peter, why do you think he demonstrated such wide swings between absolute support and complete betrayal?
4. This chapter identifies Andrew as a catalyst or a facilitator-networker. Why are such people important for churches or communities?
5. Are there aspects of Peter’s or Andrew’s life that you see in yourself? How might their lives in the presence of Jesus help you to understand your discipleship?

## **Scripture Studies: Will the Real Peter Stand Up? Positive and Negative Portrayals of Peter**

- Walking on Water: Matthew 14:22-33
- Proclamation of Jesus and “Get Behind Me, Satan”:  
Matthew 16:13-27
- Taking a Bath: John 13:3-10
- Confessing and Denying Jesus: John 13:36-38;  
Luke 22:54-62
- Love Me, Love Me Not: John 21:15-17