

DAY 1

JESUS IS HOLY

Peter Followed Jesus (*Matthew 4:18-20; Luke 5:1-11*)

Have you ever followed a map or road sign, confident of the directions, only to be turned onto a road where you never intended to go? If so, you likely felt frustrated. There are times in all our lives that we can look back and remember with certainty a path or direction in life that we were following with confidence, only to be derailed by an unexpected encounter.

In today's Bible story we meet Peter, a fisherman by trade who probably had very clear expectations of his path and direction in life. One day, Peter had been fishing all night and was washing his nets near the shore where Jesus was teaching crowds of people. Perhaps Peter was listening to Jesus with curiosity at a distance as he cleaned his nets, unaware of the twist he was about to encounter.

After teaching the crowds from a boat that belonged to Peter, Jesus turned to Peter and asked him to go out to catch fish. Peter responded that they had fished all night and caught nothing. Yet, at Jesus' request, Peter obeyed, and he caught more fish than he could have ever imagined.

"When Simon Peter saw this, he fell at Jesus's knees and said, 'Go away from me, because I'm a sinful man, Lord!'" (Luke 5:8)

Peter sank to his knees in repentance and worship, recognizing that this miracle of fish was something only someone with God's power could do. Encountering Jesus changes everything.

This week, you will introduce kids to Jesus, perhaps for the very first time. Some of the kids you encounter will be new and curious about who this Jesus is, like the crowds on the shoreline. Some may be listening more intently, questioning if this Jesus is worth following. You will meet kids who are beginning to understand foundational truths about Jesus. Others will have already believed and trusted in Jesus and are taking their first steps toward growing in their faith. No matter where the kids you teach are in their spiritual journeys, Jesus has something to teach them this week about who He is—and He is going to use you to help kids encounter Him.

As you prepare to lead, ask God to speak His truth through you, so children may encounter Jesus as Peter did, recognizing that He is truly the Son of God. As we will learn this week, Peter's life did not come without twists and turns along the way. Nevertheless, Peter followed because he met Jesus, and that changed everything.

REFLECT

- What twists and turns in your life have brought you to where you are today?
- Think about circumstances that have helped you know who Jesus truly is. What have you learned?
- How can you help the kids you teach know that Jesus is real and that He loves them?

DAY 2

JESUS IS TRUSTWORTHY

Peter Walked to Jesus on the Water (*Matthew 14:22-33*)

Immediately. A word I've passed over time and time again in this passage, yet one that stuck out to me as I read it this time. And then, I couldn't stop seeing it!

In fact, the Day 2 passage begins with it. "Immediately he made the disciples get into the boat and go ahead of him to the other side, while he dismissed the crowds." Intrigued, I decided to find out what Jesus had been doing prior to this. It seems like this was a busy day for Jesus and the disciples. They had just fed five thousand men plus their families with only five loaves and two fish! So, when Jesus told them to get in the boat while He dismissed the crowds, I'm thinking they were exhausted and happy to oblige.

What I'm pondering, though, is why immediately? I know God's timing is perfect—but why in such a hurry? Was it because Jesus wanted to be alone to talk with the Father? Maybe. Or could it be that He knew just when that storm was going to hit and exactly when the disciples needed to leave so they could see and experience this miracle? Maybe both!

The next time we see our word for the day it is more dramatic. The wind was blowing furiously, and the waves were crashing against the boat. A boat—not a ship! The disciples were terrified because in addition to the wind and the waves, they thought they saw a ghost! But here it is again: "Immediately Jesus spoke to them. 'Have courage! It is I. Don't be afraid.'" (Matthew 14:27) Jesus was quick to comfort. I love that. He knew exactly what they needed to hear to alleviate at least part of their fear. I picture a child crying out in fear of a monster under her bed. Dad hears her cry, steps into the darkened room, and the fear subsides. Sometimes just knowing someone bigger and stronger is with you makes you feel better—even though the "supposed danger" is still there.

Peter, being "blown away" by what he was seeing, asked to join in! Jesus said, "Come," so Peter climbed out of the boat. (By the way, it looks as if this happened immediately as well. We don't read that Peter asked again. I think we need to credit Peter, who didn't hesitate when he was called.) Peter began walking toward Jesus. Unfortunately, that's when Peter took his focus off Jesus and focused on the storm surrounding him instead. Just as we often do, Peter began to sink, but Jesus immediately reached out His hand and rescued Peter.

Jesus could have calmed the storm while He was walking on the sea or when Peter got out of the boat. He could have calmed the storm as His hand caught Peter's. But He didn't. Instead, He walked through the storm with Peter. You might think that was enough. But still, there was more the disciples had to learn.

When Jesus and Peter got into the boat, the wind ceased. This is when the disciples finally said, "Truly you are the Son of God." It was neither when He walked on the water nor when He rescued Peter, but it was when He quieted the storm they were going through. The disciples seemed to miss everything else that had just happened right in front of their eyes before they declared it!

I don't know about you, but when I'm waiting for the miracle I want to see, I often fail to notice all the miracles in the background. My prayer for you and for me is that we'll take notice of all that God is doing around us and know that truly, Jesus is the Son of God and that He changes everything!

REFLECT

- Peter did not wait for the storm to stop before getting out of the boat. What are you hesitant about doing that God has called you to do?
- When Peter focused on the storm instead of Jesus, he was scared. Who or what are you focusing on?
- Jesus didn't stop the storm immediately. He walked through it with Peter. What are storms you see kids facing now? How can you help them know that they are not alone, that Jesus is walking with them?

DAY 3

DAY 3: JESUS IS FORGIVING

Peter Denied Jesus and Was Restored (*Luke 22:31-34,54-62; John 21:1-19*)

God knows everything that is happening all the time. We know that. However, during the excruciating hours between Jesus' arrest and final breath on the cross, my mind wants to think everything else stopped. However, even as Jesus was stepping in to be our Redeemer, He was fully aware of the falling away of Peter. Even then, Jesus had plans to redeem and restore this soon-to-be church leader.

Jesus prayed for Peter and told Peter so. Peter declared that he would follow Jesus to prison or even to death. Jesus said Peter would deny he knew Jesus that very night before the rooster crowed.

As Jesus stood before the high priest, Peter tentatively followed and stood near a fire in the high priest's courtyard. Three times Peter was asked if he was one of the men who traveled with Jesus. Each time Peter's "no" was issued with increasing vehemence. The rooster crowed. Peter looked up and met Jesus' eyes. Peter left, weeping bitterly.

Based on Scripture, it appears Peter was not around as Jesus was led away to be crucified or when Jesus breathed His last breath. He didn't follow to see where Joseph and Nicodemus placed Jesus' body, though he raced to the tomb when Mary told the disciples that Jesus' body was missing.

Peter was one of the people to whom Jesus appeared the day of His resurrection. Twice more, Peter was in a locked room with the disciples when Jesus appeared. Still the memory of his emphatic, "No, I don't know Him!" must have rung in his ears.

Sometime later, Peter and six of the other disciples decided to go fishing. They fished all night but caught nothing. Early the next morning, a man on the shore called out the question most fishermen who have caught nothing hate to hear, "Got any fish?" Then the man said, "Toss your net on the right side of the boat." Suddenly the net was so full that seven grown men, many of whom had experience with this type of fishing, could not pull the net in. That's when John recognized the man. It was Jesus!

All the disciples in the boat shared this experience, but let's focus on things that may have been impactful for Peter. First, the miraculous catch of fish had to create immediate flashbacks to the first catch of fish when Jesus called Peter to be His disciple. Peter may have remembered his overwhelming sense of unworthiness and Jesus' promise that Peter would become a fisher of men.

Then, this same Peter who boldly stepped out on stormy seas to walk to Jesus but sank due to fear now plunged into the water in his rush to get to Jesus on the shore.

John's gospel explains that when the disciples got to shore, they saw a charcoal fire there with bread and fish. Interestingly, when John described the fire in the high priest's courtyard the night Jesus was arrested, he called it a "charcoal fire." (John 18:18) Sights and smells are often memory triggers. Could the sight of the charcoal fire and the smell of the smoke have triggered guilt in Peter as he remembered the moments when he denied knowing Jesus?

Possibly the most significant parallel happened after breakfast when Jesus spoke directly to Peter. Peter had denied Jesus three times. Now Jesus asked Peter three times, "Do you love Me?" Peter affirmed his love for Jesus all three times. The grief Peter felt may have been evidence of Peter's repentant heart. After each affirmation, Jesus gave Peter the command to take care of "My" sheep. Jesus recommissioned Peter as group leader and under shepherd.

Jesus is just as interested in the details of the lives of the kids you teach. What a privilege to have this opportunity to help kids know Jesus wants a personal relationship with each of them, and He has unique plans for each of their lives.

REFLECT

- Even when you're failing, Jesus has already written the story of your restoration. What things hover in your thoughts that make you feel unworthy of Jesus?
- What moments cause you to rush to Jesus?
- If Jesus looked you in the eye and said, "Do you love Me?" what would be your honest answer?

DAY 4

JESUS IS WORTH FOLLOWING

Peter Spoke Boldly about Jesus (*Acts 3:1–4:24*)

What's your usual response when God doesn't seem to make sense? Maybe, like the man in today's story, your child was born with a disability you know will affect her for life. Maybe you are living with a health concern that has altered your life. Maybe your family has fallen on tough financial times. Maybe you're dealing with depression or anxiety or a broken relationship. Maybe, like Peter and John, you're facing persecution for your faith.

In this broken world, there's something you've asked God to change, and He hasn't seemed to act.

My theory is everyone has a go-to reaction in these situations. Some people jump straight to anger. Some resort to a curled-in-a-ball-can't-get-up-in-the-morning grief and sadness. Some people topple in anxiety: "Is God still in control?" Some people try to take over. "God won't do this for me? OK, I'll jump in and do it myself." Some people (ask me how I know) do all four and more.

We don't always leave room for this kind of talk. We're afraid we'll sound like "bad Christians," like we don't have enough faith. We hear that the early church members in Acts prayed for boldness and rejoiced to be persecuted. We think that means they didn't feel afraid or sad or angry. I think the fact that they had to pray for boldness means they didn't have anything close to boldness going into these situations. Just look at all the twists and turns Peter's faith journey has taken already this week in VBS. I think these early Christians were probably more like David.

"How long, LORD? Will you forget me forever? How long will you hide your face from me? How long will I store up anxious concerns within me, agony in my mind every day? How long will my enemy dominate me?" Psalm 13:1-2

God can handle these kinds of questions. The Bible shows us that. He doesn't turn away from hard moments. And, He proves again and again that He's worth following, even when it gets tough. That's why the man in our Acts 3 passage could immediately praise God when he was healed instead of crediting Peter and John with the miracle. That's why Peter and John could stand boldly before the Jewish leaders and speak the words God gave them.

Jesus is worth following because He has the power to heal.

Jesus is worth following because He gives us the words we need when we need them.

Jesus is worth following because He died to save us.

Even if Jesus had never done anything for us, He is still worth following because of who He is. A relationship with Him is a treasure greater than any silver or gold. Even when He doesn't seem to act, we can rest safely in that relationship like David did, knowing the truth of His character means that we can know that He is always working to make all things new.

"But I have trusted in your faithful love; my heart will rejoice in your deliverance. I will sing to the LORD because he has treated me generously." Psalm 13:5-6

REFLECT

- How has Jesus proven Himself worthy through His work in your life?
- Do you have any questions about tough situations in your life you've been avoiding asking Jesus? Make a list and take some time to walk through those with Jesus.
- Spend some time thanking Jesus for who He is and for the relationship you have with Him.

DAY 5

JESUS IS FOR EVERYONE

Peter Told Cornelius about Jesus (*Acts 10*)

As we've followed Peter's journey with Jesus this week, we have seen him move from fishing for fish to fishing for people. His life changed when he recognized the holiness of Jesus. He had faith to walk on water—at least for a little while—and even though he feared for his life in the midst of unimaginable trials, twists, and turns, He loved Jesus deeply. Peter took Jesus' challenge to "feed my sheep" (John 21:17) very seriously. On Day 5 we get to walk beside Peter while he not only learned that Jesus is for everyone but also while he confidently shared what he had learned.

Until recently I had always skipped over the fact that Simon, who Peter was staying with at the time of today's story, was a tanner. It just seemed like a normal thing to say about someone when you're introducing him, "Hey, this is Simon. He's a leather-maker." However, this introduction would certainly translate differently to a Jewish person in the 1st century than it did to me—a Gentile in the 21st century. Being a tanner, working with animal hides, was an unclean profession. So then why was Peter even staying at Simon's house? Could God have been working in Peter's heart to help him understand "What God has made clean, do not call impure?" (Acts 10:15)

After all, God had already been working on Cornelius' heart. He was already interested in God and did a lot of "good" things. God heard his prayers and made a lot of things happen to make sure Cornelius and his family clearly heard the message of salvation.

- Cornelius had to recognize his vision was from God.
- He had to obey the message and send men to Joppa.
- The men had to go and find Peter.
- Peter had to go up to the roof to pray.
- God had to give Peter a vision for him to understand why he should go with the men.
- Peter had to understand and believe the vision.
- Peter had to go with the men to Caesarea when it was forbidden by the Jewish custom to associate with foreigners.
- Cornelius had to gather his friends and family.
- The friends and family had to accept the invitation and listen to Peter's message.
- Peter had to be bold and share a message that went against popular Jewish belief. At this point, many Jews believed that salvation was only for them. (See Romans 3:29.)
- Everyone gathered had to listen, allow their hearts to be open, and make decisions to place their faith in Jesus alone for salvation.

In God's perfect goodness, He arranged for all these things to happen so Cornelius could do more than just pray to God and give to charity. He did these things so he could understand how to have a personal relationship with God. If God made so many things happen for Cornelius to have a personal relationship with Him, God can do the same for you. He can do the same for your family, for your kids at VBS, and even for the people society wants to tell us aren't good enough. Jesus is for everyone.

Can you imagine what a privilege it must have been to share, for the very first time, that freedom from sin and the gift of eternal salvation are freely available to ALL people? Believers in Jesus still have the very same privilege that Peter had that day in Caesarea. For the person you share with today, it could be the very first time that he's ever heard the message of salvation too. What are you waiting for? Go tell someone!

REFLECT

- Take a few minutes to praise God for the miracle of your salvation. Write down some key things that took place for you to understand the gift of salvation.
- Thank God that the forgiveness of sins is available to anyone and everyone. Ask God to reveal at least one person you can share this amazing truth with this week.
- Think about the beautiful variety of kids you will lead at VBS. How can you best help them understand that no matter what their differences are, salvation in Jesus is for every single one of them?