

Character Changes Through Encounters With God Series

Contributed by Dr. Madana Kumar, Phd on Jun 20, 2022

Scripture: John 1:40-42, Luke 5:1-8, Matthew 16:13-22, Matthew 26:33-35, John 13:1-17, John 21:15-20, Acts 3:12-16, 1 Peter 5:5-6

Denomination: Evangelical/Non-Denominational

Summary: When we have an encounter with God several things change in our. We categorised them into three, Vision, Character and Relationships. In this part of the series we look at the Character Changes that happen when we have an encounter with God.

Encounter with God Series

Part 4

Encounter Changes our Character

For a video version o this sermon visit <https://youtu.be/L6RdiwW-bnU>

Good morning. We are digging into the aspect of Encounters with God. In the first message on this series, we saw that there are four biblical perspectives on God encounters that we need to remember

1. If we are not watchful, we might miss the encounter with God altogether
2. It is entirely up to us to have the encounter. As the first party is always present and always ready
3. God encounters are for everyone. It does not depend on your qualifications or level of spirituality
4. God encounters are not a one time affair, we need to seek and have it periodically

In the second part of the series, we saw that God encounters are intensely personal. So it does not matter whether you are part of a mega church or a small congregation, when you have an encounter, it always one on one with the maker. We also saw that every encounter brings in changes in us. An encounter will change us. We put these changes in three categories of Vision, Character, and Relationships. This is described as the three imperatives in my book Not-So-With-YOU (https://www.menorahleadership.com/not-so-with-you_book/)

In the third part of the series, we saw how encounter with God changes our vision and gets it aligned to the vision God has for us. We saw how God orchestrates the circumstances around us in such a manner that His vision is fulfilled for us.

This is the fourth part of the series and this time we are going to look at the changes in Character that an encounter with God will bring in us. For this we are going to primarily look at the transformation of Peter through the Bible.

Peter's first encounter with Jesus is described in John 1:40-42. One of the two who heard John speak, and followed Him, was Andrew, Simon Peter's brother. 41 He first found his own brother Simon, and said to him, "We have found the Messiah" (which is translated, the Christ). 42 And he brought him to Jesus. Now when Jesus looked at him, He said, "You are Simon the son of Jonah. You shall be called

Cephas" (which is translated, A Stone (John 1:40-42, NKJV). It is his brother Andrew who brings him to Jesus, and the introduction is interesting. We have found the Messiah. One of the things we will notice is that Jesus know who Peter is , because he immediately calls him by his name, Simon, and then changes his name to Cephas or Peter (a rock).

We don't know much about Peter at this time but as we proceed further into the Gospels, we can very well understand Peter's initial character. Bossy, Proud, Impulsive, Self-reliant, outspoken, blunt, unstable, insecure at times... we can go on with the list.

Let us see what and how the continuous encounters with Jesus changes Peter's Character. Theologians say that After the first encounter with Jesus, Simon and other disciples were with Him at Cana of Galilee in John 2:2, where they witnessed the first miracle and believed, as the Bible says (John 2:11). The disciples were also at Judea with Jesus and were even baptizing other disciples (John 4:3). So they were already traveling with Him. But Peter has a specific encounter with Jesus in Luke Chapter 5. The first part of the incident reminds me about Leslie's Church that I used to go earlier, where the sermon was followed by samosa and tea. At BBF also the tradition continues. (may be that is why the Lord brought me to BBF). Every sermon is followed by snacks and if there are some celebrity birthdays like what happened a couple of weeks ago, we also get a sumptuous lunch. Basically, food follows the sermon. The story in Luke Ch 5 has a similar ring to it. The only difference is that it is not prepared food, but raw ingredients for food that is the subject of this story. Jesus decides to 'borrow" Simon's boat for a delivering a sermon, and Jesus knows that once the sermon is over, the people need food , just like the BBF congregation. So like some of us send John out to Amma's for food after the sermon, Jesus does the same with Simon. Jesus asks Simon to "Launch out into the deep and let down your nets for a catch (Luke 5:4, NKJV)." Now study Simon's reaction to this command. But Simon answered and said to Him, "Master, we have toiled all night and caught nothing; nevertheless at Your word I will let down the net (Luke 5:5)." This is not an implicit and immediate obedience. Peter sounds a bit offended. Peter has seen Jesus do miracles and do preaching, and he knew that Jesus was good at that. But this is fishing. It was Peter's profession. What could a carpenter know about fishing? What will you feel like if someone who is completely unrelated with your profession tries to tell you how to do your job? As a fisherman, Peter knew what fish come out at night and not during day time. So it is natural if he is a bit offended by Jesus's ask. So his agreement to do what Jesus asked him to do was a reluctant one. It is a because-you-say-so obedience. It is a if-you-say-so obedience. Sounds familiar? When the Lord asks us to do something and we think we know better, even if we obey, it is most of times, like "Lord I know better, but because-you-say-so, I will do it". It is like showing a little concession to the Lord's advice. But the good thing about Peter's story is that he finally obeys, and results are magical. The results make Peter realise his mistake, his self-reliance on his knowledge about his profession, his self-reliance on his talent. This is Peter's first recorded confession. When Simon Peter saw it, he fell down at Jesus' knees, saying, "Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord! (Luke 5:8, NKJV)." Peter's character shifts from being self-reliant to God reliant in this encounter. And that is when Jesus commissions him as a full-time disciple. "Do not be afraid. From now on you will catch men (Luke 5:10, NKJV)." And then along with James and John, Peter leaves his profession and follows Jesus full time. From the because-you-say-so obedience to full obedience.

Peter's confession is so very close to my heart. I have given you glimpses of my conversion story in the past sermons of this series. Let me give you another glimpse. (For a full testimony please visit <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tvpxU6D-asM>). Another not-so-good side of my own character

flaws that God revealed to me through the Bible. As I told you earlier, my conversion happened through the constant encounters God had with me through the Bible over 8 long years. The fact that I started reading the Bible basically to pick up some brownie points with the preachers did not matter. I started reading the Bible and God encountered me through the pages of the Bible. One of the ways He encountered me was to reveal himself as a loving God, who will not stop at anything in getting me back to Him. But before that, God convicted me of the grave nature of sin that I was living in. As you know, the Bible is full of characters who are far from perfect. So, when I read about a liar in the Bible, I could very well identify myself with him. When I met a cheat in the Bible, I would say, oh!! That is me. When I see a person lusting after a woman, I would know that it is me, when I see someone greedy for wealth, I can very well identify with him. Now, these were things that were OK by the worldly standards that I used to live by. But what the Bible did was to change my reference from worldly standards to Godly standards, and when I compared my self to God's standards, I know that I was a completely lost person. That is why after 8 years of struggle, I decided to tell Jesus, just like Peter did, Lord, I am a sinful person, I cannot go on like this, I need you, I surrender to you. That is what an encounter with God will do to your character. It will reveal your chinks in the Armour, it will reveal your rough edges, till we come to the realization that we are sinful people, and we need him to become better.

But we would be mistaken if we think that Peter's conversion was complete at this stage. Further incidents will reveal to us the character flaws he still had. Let us look at just two of them. Pride and fear. It is amazing what a little praise can do to your pride. In Matthew 16:13-17, we see Jesus praising Peter for his correct answer to the question, "Who am I?". Peter is the first one to give the correct answer and gets praised by Jesus immediately. After that in Matthew 16:18-19, Peter is given the best promise and promotion that anyone can get. Jesus confirms to him that it is on him, Peter that Jesus is planning to build the church. It might be that these praises and promises got into Peter's head a little bit. Look at the very next conversation between Peter and Jesus. From that time Jesus began to show to His disciples that He must go to Jerusalem, and suffer many things from the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and be raised the third day. Then Peter took Him aside and began to rebuke Him, saying, "Far be it from You, Lord; this shall not happen to You! (Matt 16:21-22, NKJV)". Just look at the audacity of Peter. He takes Jesus aside and starts rebuking him. He had just been promised the keys to kingdom of heaven by the builder and the builder then says I am going to die. Peter could just not take it. It is too much for him to accept. His pride gets in the way, and he begins to rebuke Jesus.

Let us look at the garden of Gethsemane. Jesus tells his disciples that they will stumble and be scattered. And we see Peter reacting to that statement with puffed up chest and bit of chest thumping, may be, Peter answered and said to Him, "Even if all are made to stumble because of You, I will never be made to stumble (Matt 26:33, NKJV)." He doesn't even hold back when Jesus tells him that instead, he is going to deny Jesus. He contradicts Jesus and says "Even if I have to die with You, I will not deny You (Matt 26:35, NKJV)!" He is proud of himself and asserts that the temptations and weaknesses are not for him, but may be for others. Other might stumble, but not I. others might deny you, but not I. I will even die for you. What proud statements. He probably hasn't read Proverbs 16:18 Pride goes before destruction, And a haughty spirit before a fall (Prov 16:18, NKJV).

I would like us to pause for a moment here and examine ourselves . While it is easy for us to sit and critically look at Peter's character flaws, it is even better if we look for signs of a Peter in each one of us. I have plenty of Peter in me. How about you?

But a constant walk with Jesus changes us, and changes us for good. Jesus continued to teach Peter lessons in humility and helped him to replace his pride with humility. In John 13:1-17, where Jesus washes the disciples' feet, Peter was again his old self. When Jesus comes to him, Peter asks a rhetorical question "Lord, are You washing my feet? (John 13:6)". Even after Jesus explains that he might not understand it yet but will understand later, Peter holds his ground "You shall never wash my feet! (John 13:8)". Only after Jesus highlights that fact that unless He washes Peter's feet, he cannot have a part in Christ's plan does Peter agree. Peter learns an important lesson on humility then and there. And then he goes overboard asking for a whole bath rather than just a feet wash.

As I indicated in my earlier messages on the topic, God does not give up on us. God did not give up on Jacob as we saw in the second part of the series. God did not give up on me, even with all my character flaws. Jesus did not give up on Peter even after his denial of Jesus. Instead, Jesus encounters Peter with the three fold question about loving Him in John 21:15-20. Jesus asks Peter three times if he loves Jesus, and all the three times Peter affirms his love for Jesus. The third response is interesting. "Lord, You know all things; You know that I love You (John 21:17)." I want you to note the distinct shift. In several occasions Peter has said that he knew better than Jesus. Jesus says launch out into to sea and let down your nets, Peter says, Lord I know fishing better than you. Jesus says I have to suffer and die, Peter says, No Lord you can't do that. Jesus says you will stumble, Peter contradicts Jesus and says he will never stumble. Jesus says Peter will deny him, Peter disagrees with him and asserts that he will never deny him, even if he loses his life. Jesus says, I have to wash your feet, Peter says no way!!. His past is filled with contradicting Jesus in many ways. Now suddenly on the other side of the cross and the empty tomb, Peter does not argue. Peter says, Lord you know all things. He has learned his lesson on humility and learned it the hard way.

This change gets further cemented with the coming of the Holy Spirit. In Acts Chapter 3 Peter heals a lame man and the crowd is amazed. But Peter humbly ascribes all glory to Jesus Christ. He says to the crowd. "Men of Israel, why do you marvel at this? Or why look so intently at us, as though by our own power or godliness we had made this man walk (Acts 3:12)?". He further endorses this "And His name, through faith in His name, has made this man strong, whom you see and know. Yes, the faith which comes through Him has given him this perfect soundness in the presence of you all (Acts 3:16). Peter is a transformed man. He learned his lessons on humility through encounters with Jesus Christ. And that is why his teaching on humility is perhaps the most authentic one. Yes, all of you be submissive to one another, and be clothed with humility, for "God resists the proud, But gives grace to the humble. Therefore humble yourselves under the mighty hand of God, that He may exalt you in due time (1 Peter 5:5-6). Peter is able to teach us about humility through his own experiences from the encounters he had with Jesus.

Let us examine ourselves this morning. What are the character flaws that we still have that needs to change? When is the last time we had an encounter with God and changed a character attribute of ours? Let us seek a fresh encounter with Him today and every Sunday, and let that be our purpose of coming to the church. To have an encounter with God, and thereby make changes in our Vision, Character and Relationships.

Let us pray.