

ADAM HAMILTON

Author of *The Call* and *Moses*

SIMON
PETER

FLAWED BUT FAITHFUL DISCIPLE

CONTENTS

Introduction	9
1. The Call of the Fisherman	13
2. Walking with Jesus in the Storms	41
3. Bedrock or Stumbling Block?.....	59
4. “I Will Not Deny You”	89
5. From Cowardice to Courage.....	109
6. The Rest of the Story.....	127
Epilogue: The Silent Years	163
Notes	171
Acknowledgments	173

1

THE CALL OF THE FISHERMAN

One day Jesus was standing beside Lake Genesaret when the crowd pressed in around him to hear God's word. Jesus saw two boats sitting by the lake. The fishermen had gone ashore and were washing their nets. Jesus boarded one of the boats, the one that belonged to Simon, then asked him to row out a little distance from the shore. Jesus sat down and taught the crowds from the boat. When he finished speaking to the crowds, he said to Simon, "Row out farther, into the deep water, and drop your nets for a catch."

Simon replied, "Master, we've worked hard all night and caught nothing. But because you say so, I'll drop the nets."

So they dropped the nets and their catch was so huge that their nets were splitting. They signaled for their partners in the other boat to come and help them. They filled both boats so full that they were about to sink. When Simon Peter saw the catch, he fell at Jesus' knees and said, "Leave me, Lord, for I'm a sinner!" Peter and those with him were overcome with amazement because of the number of fish they caught. James and John, Zebedee's sons, were Simon's partners and they were amazed too.

Jesus said to Simon, "Don't be afraid. From now on, you will be fishing for people." As soon as they brought the boats to the shore, they left everything and followed Jesus.

(Luke 5:1-11)

Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, composing their Gospels in the second half of the first century, each sought to lead their readers to faith, or to a deeper faith, in Jesus Christ. In literary terms, Jesus is the protagonist of the Gospels—the heroic central figure around whom the entire story, and I would add the Christian faith, revolves. He came to draw the world to God, and to reveal God to the world.

While Jesus is the protagonist of the Gospels, in each of them Simon Peter serves, to borrow another literary term, as a “foil” to Jesus. A foil is a supporting character whose part contrasts, highlights, and even exalts the qualities of the lead character. Often it is the foil's *shortcomings* and *missteps* that magnify the protagonist's virtues. In the case of Simon Peter, the Gospel writers portray bumbling, fumbling, and stumbling again and again. Each time, Peter's blunder serves to reveal some dimension of Jesus' character or to make clear some aspect of Christ's message.

But Simon Peter's role is not only as foil to Jesus. The Gospel writers also lift up Simon Peter as representing those

of us who believe in and seek to follow Jesus. Like Peter, you and I have chosen to follow Jesus. We've given up something to answer his call. At our best we would, like Peter, boldly proclaim that we would die for Christ if necessary. Yet we've all at times lost our courage, taken our eyes off of Jesus, misunderstood his teaching, and even denied him. Just as Jesus reveals and represents God, Simon Peter represents all who seek to follow Jesus.

What is amazing about the Gospels' portrayal of Simon Peter is that Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John let us see Peter's missteps, even highlight them. Peter was, after all, the leader of the Twelve. His leadership of the early church was profound. And, by the time the Gospels were written, he'd been put to death by the Romans for his faith in Christ. It would have been understandable if they had sanitized his story, as we do in the eulogies of our loved ones, telling only the good and lovely things about them and leaving off their list of shortcomings. But instead, each of the Gospels allows us to see Simon Peter "warts and all." As I noted in the introduction, I believe they did this because Peter himself must have done this in his preaching across the thirty-plus years between Jesus' death and his own. It was this that gave Simon Peter's preaching such power—his ability to tell of his shortcomings in a way that connected with ordinary believers, which in turn magnified the Christ he proclaimed.

Peter was a flawed, yet ultimately faithful, disciple.

There is much that is unknown about Simon Peter's background, but I'd like to explore what little we do know about Simon's early life as a fisherman on the Sea of Galilee before we begin to explore the story of his initial encounter with Jesus.

The Sea of Galilee

It's quite a stretch to call the Sea of Galilee, also called the Kinneret Lake, a "sea." Thirteen miles from north to south, and eight miles east to west at its widest, it is a modest-sized lake



Top: A view from the Sea of Galilee looking toward (from left to right): Mount Arbel, Magdala, and Ginosaur.

Center: Sunrise over the Sea of Galilee.

Bottom: From Tabgha on the north shore of the Sea of Galilee, looking south as the sun was preparing to set.



compared with many others. But this lake has always played a critical role in the lives of those who have lived in the Holy Land over the millennia that human beings have inhabited this area.

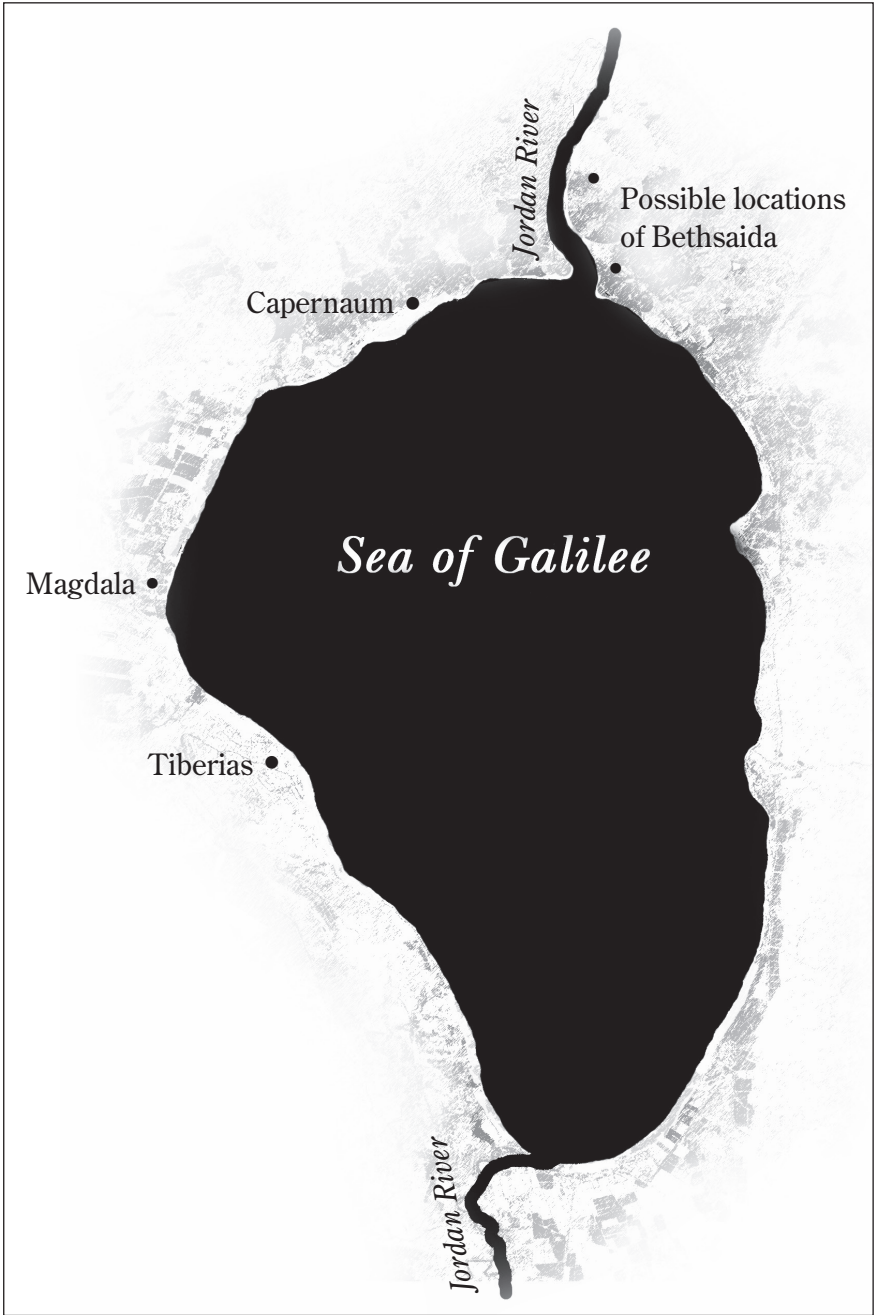
The lake is beautiful, surrounded by dormant volcanoes that rise as high as 1,600 feet from its banks. Sitting 700 feet *below* sea level, it is the lowest freshwater body in the world and the second lowest lake on earth, after the Dead Sea ninety miles to the south.

Surprising to most who visit the Holy Land, there is very little development along the shores of the sea today. Tiberias is the largest city; located on the western shore of the lake, it has a population of about forty-five thousand people. There are a number of much smaller communities dotting the shoreline, but by and large, the lake looks as it did two thousand years ago when a handful of small fishing villages dotted the lakeshore.

In the time of Christ, an imaginary dividing line separated the eastern and western sides of the lake. That line began from the point the Jordan River entered the Sea of Galilee to the north, and extended to where it exited the sea to the south. West of the Jordan River, the region was called Galilee. The fishing villages on that side of the lake, as well as the land continuing for another eighteen miles to the west, were governed by Herod Antipas, son of Herod the Great. The eastern part of the lake and the land beyond—Gaulanitis, Trachonitus, Batanea, and Auranitis—was ruled by Antipas's half-brother, Herod Philip. (Our modern word, *Golan*, comes from the ancient Gaulanitis, and Gaulanitis consisted of much of the area we call the Golan Heights today).

Simon Peter's story begins along the lakeshore, just east of the Jordan River, in Gaulanitis, in a town called Bethsaida.

John's Gospel tells us that Simon and his brother Andrew (along with their friend Philip) were from a village called Bethsaida—the town's name means "house of hunters," or more likely, "house of fishermen." There are two different archaeological sites that could be ancient Bethsaida, just a few



miles apart. Both are just north of the Sea of Galilee and just east of the Jordan River as it enters the Sea of Galilee. This would have placed Bethsaida just barely inside Herod Philip's domain, while just a few yards away, on the west bank of the Jordan, was Galilee ruled over by Philip's half-brother Herod Antipas.

If you were to visit the Holy Land and you sought to visit Simon's hometown, you'd likely be taken to an archaeological site named Et-Tell. It is located about a mile and a half north of the current coastline of the Sea of Galilee, and again, just east of the Jordan. Some who believe this is the biblical Bethsaida suggest that the shoreline of the Sea of Galilee was much closer to this village two thousand years ago. Walking around the site, you will see the excavated foundations of several large ancient homes, including one called "the Fisherman's home" because weights and hooks used in fishing have been discovered there. You'll also see the "Winemaker's home" where archaeologists discovered an undisturbed ancient wine cellar. You can also imagine, as you look to the north and west, an area where Jesus was said to have fed the five thousand (Luke 9:10-17), or picture Jesus healing the blind man just outside of town (Mark 8:22-25).

A second possible site for Bethsaida, el-Araj, is closer to the Sea of Galilee—so close in fact that the location has, throughout history, often been underwater. On my last visit to the area, I attempted to visit the archaeological site but could not get to it because of the mud. It appears to many a better location for the fishing village of Simon and his brother, but the jury is still out on which of these locations, if either, is Bethsaida where Simon and his brother Andrew would have grown up.

Simon Bar Jonah

Peter's given name at birth was Simon, or Simeon as it appears twice in the New Testament. Yet the biblical names have usually been anglicized in our English translations. In the Aramaic spoken in Galilee in the first century, he would likely have been called Shimon. Shimon is related to the Hebrew

word *shema*, which means “to hear” or “to listen.” It was a very common name in first-century Judaism, with nine different Simons or Shimons mentioned in the New Testament. Two of the twelve disciples bear this name. A sibling of Jesus, too, is named Simon.

The name was popularized by the events Jews celebrate in the festival of Hanukkah. In 167 BC, a band of brothers, priests, and warriors popularly called the Maccabees, led by their father, Mattathias, revolted against the Seleucid Empire. The Seleucid king, Antiochus IV, ruling from Damascus, sought to force Greek customs, religion, and culture on the Jewish people, going so far as to have a pig sacrificed to Zeus in the temple in Jerusalem. The Jewish rebels won a surprising victory over the far more powerful Seleucids, and were able to rededicate the temple in 164 BC. Simon the Maccabee, one of the warrior sons, eventually ruled as high priest and king. A century and a half later, parents were still naming their children after him, perhaps in the hope that their sons, like Simon Maccabee, might help overthrow their Roman overseers and once again see a free Israel.*

Jewish naming conventions typically identified a man by both his given name and his father’s name. In Matthew, Jesus addresses Simon as “Simon son of Jonah” (Simon bar Jonah), though in John’s Gospel he is referred to as “Simon son of John.”† There’s something delightful about imagining Simon’s father, no doubt a fisherman, being named after the biblical Jonah, who spent three days in the belly of a big fish.

Simon’s and Andrew’s earliest experience fishing was likely as little boys, taken by Jonah to fish using fishing line and hook cast from the shores of the lake or the banks of the Jordan River.

* You can read more about this in 1 Maccabees, a fascinating read about these events.

† Various reasons are sometimes given for these two different names and how they might be reconciled, but some scholars are content to note they are audibly similar, which may explain how Matthew’s Gospel reflected one name and John’s another.

I imagine these boys learning about fishing, life, and faith from their father. Jimmy Carter once said, “Many of the most highly publicized events of my presidency are not nearly as memorable or significant in my life as fishing with my daddy.”¹ I imagine something similar was true for Simon and Andrew. This was how Jewish boys grew up and learned to be men.

Later, when they were strong and tall enough to handle the casting nets, they would have learned to cast these nets from the shore or from small boats. These nets were capable of catching dozens of fish at a time. In early adolescence, they would have joined the other men on the fishing boats, using dragnets or trammel nets to haul in much larger quantities of fish.

Fishermen in the Greco-Roman World

Before we finally consider Simon’s first encounters with Jesus, let’s explore one last bit of background information that might help us know Simon: the socioeconomic place that fishermen and fishmongers occupied in first-century Judaism and in the broader ancient world.

Among the Jewish population there was a class of people, going back hundreds of years before the time of Jesus and Peter, called *am ha’aretz*. The phrase literally means, “people of the land.” The term has an interesting history, but by the time of Simon Peter it meant people who were poor, uneducated, lower class, and particularly people who were not careful in their observance of the Law.

The Galilee region was known for being home to, and surrounded by, large numbers of Gentiles. It was supposed by some Jews that this fact led Jews in Galilee to be less stringent in their observance of the Law. The fishermen who made their living on the shoreline of the lake were among the *am ha’aretz*. There were no doubt exceptions, but generally they were seen as less educated, being lower income, and less devout in their keeping of the Law.

In the Book of Acts, the religious leaders in Jerusalem viewed Simon and the other disciples as “unlearned” or, more literally, “those who could not write.” They were surprised when Peter spoke with such eloquence and power about the gospel of Jesus.

While some of the Jewish religious leaders considered Peter and his companions to be *am ha'aretz*, others would have looked down upon these Galilean fisherman for different reasons.

Fish was a food staple throughout the Roman Empire. Few people could afford beef or even lamb, but they could afford fish. Wealthy people ate fresh fish, which they typically grilled; most others ate salted, pickled, or dried fish. As in modern times, people of the ancient world routinely complained about the price of staples, including fish. That led them, at times, to grouse about fishermen and fishmongers. At least one ancient source described fishmongers as “murderous, wealthy thieves.”² By association, fishermen were sometimes denounced as well.

In contrast, Jesus came to the Sea of Galilee from Nazareth and made the shoreline communities of the lake the focus and home base of his ministry. He called the *am ha'aretz*, including fishermen, to be his disciples. Most of his ministry was devoted to these multitudes. And his response to the religious leaders who looked down upon the *am ha'aretz* was: “Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites!” (Matthew 23:13 KJV).

As we prepare to dive into Simon’s earliest encounters with Jesus, and to make sense of Peter’s call story, allow me to remind you of the three most common ways of fishing on the Sea of Galilee.

Line and hook were not uncommon methods for fishing in New Testament times. At least once in the Gospels, Jesus instructs Peter to cast a line with a hook in order to catch a fish (Matthew 17:24-27), promising that the first fish Peter catches will have a coin in its mouth that Peter should use to pay the temple tax for them both. While someone might catch a single fish this way from time to time, catching one fish at a time was not profitable.

AN ORDINARY FISHERMAN WHO HEARD AN EXTRAORDINARY CALL

He was not rich or educated, but was familiar with hard work. He was quick-tempered and impetuous, but possessed a passion that would change the world. He left everything to follow his teacher, yet struggled with doubt and fear.

Join pastor and author Adam Hamilton in this six-week journey, and take an in-depth dive into the life, faith, and character of Simon Peter.

PRAISE FOR ADAM HAMILTON

“Adam Hamilton has proven to be a faithful guide to applying the Bible to modern life in a sane and balanced way.”

–Philip Yancey

author of *Vanishing Grace* and *The Jesus I Never Knew*

“I love Adam Hamilton. In an age where there are many competing versions of Christianity, Adam brings us back to the basics.”

–Shane Claiborne

author and activist, founder of Red Letter Christians and The Simple Way,
www.shaneclaiborne.com

“Hamilton possesses an extraordinary gift for describing complicated events, relationships, and concepts simply and profoundly. He facilitates accessibility to the wonderful, but at times difficult and remote, depths of Christian faith and practice.”

–Lacey C. Warner

Royce and Jane Reynolds Associate Professor of the Practice of Evangelism
and Methodist Studies, Duke University Divinity School



Adam Hamilton is senior pastor of the United Methodist Church of the Resurrection in Leawood, Kansas, one of the fastest growing, most highly visible churches in the country. *The Church Report* named Hamilton's congregation the most influential mainline church in America, and he preached at the National Prayer Service as part of the presidential inauguration festivities in 2013. Hamilton is the best-selling and award-winning author of *The Call*, *Making Sense of the Bible*, *Love to Stay*, *The Journey*, *The Way*, *24 Hours That Changed the World*, *Revival*, *Not a Silent Night*, *Enough*, *When Christians Get It Wrong*, *Creed*, *Moses*, *Unafraid*, and *Christianity and World Religions*.

 **Abingdon Press™**

www.abingdonpress.com

Jacket Design: Marc Whitaker /MTWdesign.net

RELIGION | Holidays | Easter & Lent US \$19.99

ISBN-13: 978-1-5018-4598-7



9 781501 845987

5 1 9 9 9