

THE MAKING OF A MAN

John 21:15-19

In this age of uncertainty and insecurity, a man of courage and confidence is admired greatly. Doubtless each of us would like to be this kind of person —one who knows where he is going and who is able to stand up against all kinds of pressure. This is the kind of man we meet walking across the scene in the early pages of the book of Acts. His name is Simon Peter, and he stands out like the Rock of Gibraltar. He is the one who preached the marvelous and mighty sermon at Pentecost. He is the one who proved to be such a powerful proclaimer of the gospel of Christ. And he is the one who, time after time, looked his opponents squarely in the eye and said: "You cannot intimidate me. I must obey God rather than men." Here is precisely the kind of strong personality that we would all like to be. Therefore, I really believe it will be helpful for us to study this rock-like character, and ask how he achieved such strength. Of course, behind it all is the hope that by so doing we can and will profit from his example. Let us focus our attention, then, on Simon Peter, and ask by what process he came to be such a man.

Simon Peter had not always been such a tower of strength. It is so easy for us to assume that strong and impressive character are born and not made. One way of evading our responsibility is to conclude that from the moment of birth, "some people have it and some people do not," and therefore there is nothing that one can do about himself. However, such an idea is not found in the life story of Simon Peter. In fact, when we first see him in the gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke, he is anything but a stable person. The name "Simon" literally meant "a flittering dove," and this characterized fairly well this fisherman when Christ first met him. A typical Galilean, he was emotional, impulsive, and erratic. No figure in the Scriptures was given to more violent extremes. Simon could rise higher and descend lower than almost anyone. At one moment he could be uttering a revelation from God, and then the next minute be talking like Satan wanted him to speak. He was the epitome of vacillation, ever proposing more than he could produce, and venturing further than courage would follow. Simon was frequently the incarnation of the saying, "The spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak."

Simon Peter's characteristic of instability was never more in evidence than on the last night of our Lord's earthly life. You will recall that series of events. At the Last Supper, Christ warned of the coming crisis, and of how all of the disciples would desert Him. But Simon would not pay any attention to such talk. He boldly declared himself wiser than our Lord and stronger than the other disciples. He was very confident of himself, so that, no matter what the others did, he was sure he could stand fast. Even after Christ mentioned the crowing of the cock, Simon's voice rang out in protest: "I will not deny you. To prison and even to death, I will not fall." This absolute confidence only heightens the pathos of the next scene. For here, in the courtyard of Caiaphas, is that same voice, the same high pitch of emotion, still protesting, only now he is screaming: "I do not know him. I am not one of his followers. I have never heard of this Nazarene." Yes, the very thing that Simon was sure he would not do is exactly what he wound up doing. This is why we know that Peter was not born a strong and stable character. Whatever he became, he started out where most of us are right now — uneven, at times willing, but by no means at all times able to see things through. Thus, there is urgency to the question, How did he become such a man? What changed Simon "the flittering dove" into Peter "the Rock"?

The answer can be given in one sentence, namely, he came to terms with the truth — the truth about himself, the truth about the kind of world in which he lived, and the truth about the kind of God he had. You see, it was a failure at these very points that accounted for his instability. If you look behind the way Simon vacillated up and down, and back and forth, you will note that it all roots back to this one cause, he simply

was not realistic about the fundamentals of life. He miscalculated at every crucial juncture -- he overestimated his own strength; he underestimated the power of Satan; and he ignored the power of God.

All three of these flaws stand out sharply in the process of Simon's denial. His response to the sober warning of Christ was one of overconfidence. The Lord had said: "Simon, Simon, behold, Satan hath desired to have you, that he may sift you as wheat" (Luke 22:31). Hitherto, he had sifted him with a gentle agitation. Now, he was seeking permission to shake him violently, as wheat was shaken in the sieve. Christ very frankly warned him of his danger in order to induce him to watch and pray. Christ knew all of Peter's infirmities, but He also knew how ardently he could love, how devotedly he could serve, and how much he could do. He knew that he had something in him that was worth working on and preserving. Christ told Peter things about himself against which the soul of the disciple was in revolt. Peter had not yet accepted the reality of his own limitations, or the fact that he was vulnerable to every sort of temptation.

Simon placed himself in the most dangerous position in the world -- thinking that a certain act was impossible for him. Many a person has found such pride to be the immediate prelude to disaster. Any temptation that has brought about the fall of any person is a live possibility for everyone. To grow careless and forget this in life is just as dangerous as a soldier getting careless on a battlefield. Remembering that at any moment he could be killed is a soldier's best way of staying alive. And so it is with us. One reason that Simon failed so miserably is because he thought he could not fail. His example gives flesh and blood to the warning: "Let any man who thinketh that he stands take heed, lest he fall."

Simon Peter also had an erroneous concept of evil. As long as the destructive power of evil remained general and abstract and "out yonder somewhere," Simon felt confident about the matter. He thought he could overcome Satan on the big issues, and perhaps he could have. In fact, had he been arrested with Jesus Christ and been standing by His side when the question about being a follower of Christ was asked, he might have been able to stand. But the powers of evil do not work in this way. They are not called "the powers of darkness" without reason. They do not announce ahead of time when and where they are going to attack. Rather, they slip up behind us, on occasions we would never expect, and attack us unaware. For example, who would ever have thought that a little slave girl could have devastated "the big fisherman"? He was probably sitting there by the fire, trying to get up enough courage to pull his sword again and fight the soldiers, when all of a sudden, from a completely blind side, came an assault, not by a sword, but by ridicule. Simon was totally unprepared for this. He did not have any defense erected. Almost before he knew what had happened, he was on that fatal slope of denial that wound up in curses and oaths. The powers that have no other goal but to destroy us are never open and obvious. They single us out at our worst. That is why we should always be on the alert.

Simon's third miscalculation was in ignoring and neglecting the resources of God. If we are vulnerable to all temptations and these temptations are subtle and deceptive, then we should continually be fortifying ourselves and laying up resources. Christ tried to get Simon Peter to do this in the Garden of Gethsemane, when He said: "Watch and pray, lest ye fall into temptation." But Simon was too self-assured to pay any attention to this, and so he went to sleep instead. Right there was where the battle was lost. Simon's denial later by the fire was not a failure of just that moment. It began back there when he refused to prepare. While Christ prayed, Simon slept, and this is why he fell when he was put to the test. He tried to live solely out of his own resources. He never availed himself of the strength that comes only from God.

What was wrong with Simon in his miscalculations about himself and evil and God hits pretty close to home for all of us if we are sensitive and honest enough to admit it. Can't you see yourself in his characteristics? His failure stemmed from not having come to terms with the truth about himself, about evil, and about God. When he finally did so, unstable Simon became a tower of strength.

Simon's transformation did not take place automatically or painlessly. The crash came right after the denials there in the courtyard of Caiaphas. Two events triggered it. One was a sound — the crowing of a cock. This sound unloosed an avalanche of memories — of how Christ had warned and how Simon had boasted. In a flash Simon saw the truth about his own weakness, the power of evil, and his empty self-sufficiency. But then, as if crushed pride were not enough, something else happened. At that moment Christ was led through that courtyard. Nothing was said — just a look. Yet from that pained expression Simon realized the worst — that Christ had overheard everything that he had said. The thought of it was unbearable to Simon. While Christ had been abused by His enemies, the voice of the one who claimed to be His best friend came to His ears, and that voice was saying: "I do not know Him. I am not one of His followers. I have never heard of Him." This was the most cruel cut of all, and as Simon thought of how utterly deserted his Lord must have felt, he could not stand it, but rushed into the darkness of the night and wept bitterly.

Yes, the old Simon was absolutely and completely devastated that night by a sound and a look. The crowing of a cock and the utter loneliness of a look brought Simon face to face with the awful truth about himself. He had to admit what he could no longer evade: he had broken faith with himself, and what was worse, he had betrayed and crushed the One he loved most. This was the heaviest burden of all. For two terrible days and nights he lay in utter humiliation and in doubt about everything — himself, the power of evil, and God.

Then suddenly there came some electrifying news. On entering the tomb where the body of the Lord Jesus had been buried, some women "saw a young man sitting on the right side, clothed in a long white garment; and they were affrighted. And he saith unto them, Be not affrighted: Ye seek Jesus of Nazareth, which was crucified: he is risen; he is not here: behold the place where they laid him. But go your way, tell his disciples and Peter that he goeth before you into Galilee; there shall ye see him, as he said unto you" (Mark 16:5-7).

When told of this, Peter could hardly believe it, but he came running anyway, and there the Denied and the denier met face to face. We do not know what passed between them. Before that meeting Simon was a broken and humiliated man, but when he emerged from that meeting all things had been made new. At long last he had come to terms with the truth about himself, about the world, and about God. It all came to a climax early one morning by the Sea of Galilee when Christ and Peter met by the fire on which was fish and bread. When the meal was over the Lord Jesus turned to Peter and three times asked him: "Lovest thou me?" Instead of the old cocksureness, there was restraint in Simon's answer: "Yea, Lord; thou knowest that I love thee." And then, as if to start all over again, Christ repeated His first invitation to him, "Follow me." And this time Peter did.

This is precisely what Christ had been trying to get Peter to do all along — to stop depending on himself, and to accept the guidance and power that comes only from walking down the road of life with God. This is how the flittering dove became a solid rock — when he stopped trying to go it alone and fell in step with the Lord of life. This is how every truly strong man is made — when he comes to terms with the truth, namely, that he is God's creature and His child. Never forget this fact: we did not create ourselves; we did not save ourselves; we cannot preserve ourselves; we can only entrust ourselves to Him Who gives us true stability of life. Won't you let the Saviour begin this process of making a strong person out of you?