

"THOU ART THOU SHALT BE"

"And when Jesus beheld him, he said, Thou art Simon the Son of Jona: thou shalt be called Cephas, which is by interpretation, A stone." John 1:42.

This subject is taken from the words which our Lord addressed to Simon Peter. The occasion was the first meeting of Christ with this rough fisherman who was destined to figure so prominently in the company of the apostles, and in the immensely critical and history-shaping affairs of the early church.

This message is for you, and that makes it interesting and important. It is quite possible that others may not think you are so interesting and so worthy of consideration, but you are definitely an object of great interest to yourself. This is as it should be, for you are the only human being who has any idea as to what is locked up in that personality of yours. You are the only one who can determine how much of what is inside of you will be brought out, and what shall ultimately be made out of the raw material of your life. That is why I want to talk to you not only about what you are now, but especially about what you can become.

It was said of Michelangelo, who was possibly the greatest sculptor who has yet lived, that he could see within a rough block of marble the finished monument before he touched it with chisel or hammer, and that he just went to work upon the stone to bring the character out of hiding. Christ's vision of Simon Peter was something like that.

When Christ first met Simon He looked at him discerningly, and diagnosed his case with unerring accuracy. He observed that he was rough and crude. He saw an impulse that was strong and an energy that was immense and a determination that was selfish. He knew that his main trait was impulsiveness; that he acted according to his feelings rather than on the basis of reason; that he moved first and then thought it over later. He was very unstable; in fact, more like shifting sand, and yet Christ saw in this selfish, weak, cowardly and impetuous man the possibilities of a transformed personality. Seeing all this, Christ spoke, as no mere man could have spoken, with unerring accuracy and authoritative prophecy, not only as One Who could diagnose but also as One Who could deliver: "Thou art Simon the son of Jona: thou shalt be called Cephas, which is by interpretation, A stone." It was as if He had said, "Thou art self-confident, presumptuous and rash, but I propose to change thee. Thou art as unstable as water, but thou shalt become as firm as the granite texture of a stone. Follow Me, and I will then make thee a fisher of men and a pillar in the church of the living God. With illumined mind thou shalt discern and with willing lips thou shalt yet confess the deity of My person. When changed and filled with the Holy Spirit, thou shalt be able to strengthen thy brethren." Christ changed Simon's name as a sign of the fact that He was taking possession of him, as a promise of transforming power, and as a prophecy of his future office in the church.

Christ did not turn Simon down because he was fickle, but set before him an open door into those very qualities which he lacked and gave him a new name to maintain. His name had been Simon, but Christ said, "Thou shalt be called Cephas." He was telling him that his sand-like nature could be solidified. He was emphasizing the fact that, if he would yield himself to Him, the Lord would make him into what he ought to be. That is still our Lord's message of transforming grace to all who will never be able to arise out of the tyranny of their past failures and the paralysis of their present defeats except as they yield themselves to His renewing and purifying energies.

"Thou art! Thou shalt be!" The actual and the possible! Realism and idealism! What is and what ought to be! Between the two is the Lord Jesus Christ, the effect of whose presence is like that of a mighty bridge flung across a vast and forbidding chasm.

I. "Thou Art."

It is important that people accept the verdict of what they are. It is a good plan to take inventory at regular intervals. This is recognized as one of the fundamentals of good business, for only thus can any businessman have any indication as to how things are going with him in a financial way. From the knowledge he gains, he determines what his next move shall be. How many of us take inventory of our lives and discover in which direction we are traveling, and whether or not we are really making progress? Some folks make the sad mistake of thinking that they are all right and that there is no need for improvement. They become thoroughly self-satisfied. The fact that self is satisfied does not mean that God is pleased. The sorriest person imaginable is one who has caught up with his ideals. It is tragedy if he thinks that he has arrived.

Do not blink at the truth of what thou art. Nothing can be gained by deception or denial. Face up squarely to the light of the searching judgment of what thou art. "Thou art" what? Fill it in according to the disclosure and conviction which the Holy Spirit brings to your heart, whether you are a lost person, a backslider, a covenant-breaker, a moralist, a formalist or a true believer. To the struggling patriarch, Jacob, by the brook Jabbok, the wrestling angel of God put the question straight: "What is thy name?" Although he had met God before and had made a covenant with Him, Jacob was compelled to confess what he really was. He had to say, "Jacob," which meant supplanter, trickster and deceiver.

To each of you Christ says, "Thou art." Sometimes He has to say it with a sob in His voice. Christ sees us exactly as we are in the light of the unchanging purpose of God.

II. "Thou Shalt Be"

Whereas truth says, "Thou art," grace says, "Thou shalt be." To shun the truth is to miss the grace. In various ways and through different voices Christ has been proclaiming to us His power to redeem, to renew, to liberate, to cleanse and to indwell us abidingly. His statement, "Thou shalt be," summarizes the possibility and promise of power.

Christ's "Thou shalt be" should stimulate hope. Where sin abounds grace shall abound more exceedingly. Whatever miserable thing your Christless life has come to be, the Son of God undertakes to redeem it, reshape it, and make it strong and glorious. This promise is indeed throbbing with hope. "Thou shalt be." Hope is a great thing. It has in it the elements of desire, expectation and patience.

John Newton, author of "Amazing Grace" and "How Sweet the Name of Jesus Sounds," dictated his own epitaph. It is a striking summary of his life, and reads: John Newton, Clerk, once an infidel and libertine, a servant of slaves in Africa, was by the mercy of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ, Preserved, Restored, Pardoned, and appointed to Preach the Faith he had so long laboured to destroy.

The story of his conversion is one of the great epics of grace. At the age of 23, having drunk dregs of vilest sins, young Newton took ship from Africa for his native England. Plunged into a terrific storm, the battered vessel began to take water into its hold. The pumps had to be manned. Hurrying to take his turn, Newton said to the captain, "If this will not do, the Lord have mercy upon us." His own words startled him. For the first time in years his thoughts turned to God in a serious way and he considered the interests of his soul. That evening he began to seek the face of God. At first he seemed to get nowhere. He said,

"I could not utter the prayer of faith. I could not draw near to a reconciled God and call Him Father." On he struggled. Then came the light. There are his own words: "In the gospel I saw at least a peradventure of hope; but on every side I was surrounded with black, unfathomable despair." In following the glean of that peradventure of hope, saving faith was born in his breast and on that 10th day of March 1748, John Newton became a new creature in Christ Jesus. Though he sleeps in death, the grace of which he wrote and sang lives on deathlessly and works on transformingly:

"Amazing grace, how sweet the sound --
That saved a wretch like me;
I once was lost, but now am found,
Was blind, but now I see.

'Twas grace that taught my heart to fear,
And grace my fears relieved;
How precious did that grace appear
The hour I first believed!

Thro' many dangers, toils and snares,
I have already come;
'Tis grace hath bro't me safe thus far,
And grace will lead me home.

When we've been there ten thousand years,
Bright shining as the sun,
We've no less days to sing God's praise
Than when we first begun."

Christ was full of optimism concerning Simon. He has never despaired of any man. He believes in the possibility of your reclaimability and service. Let me emphasize, however, that you cannot realize your possibilities alone. The only One Who can bring the possible you out of hiding is none other than Christ. You need Him as your Saviour. He alone can save you from sin and your baser self. You need Him in an intimate partnership so that you may experience His grace and feel His power in your life. Listen to the appeal of Him Who desires to have you in partnership with Himself, "Come unto me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn of me; for I am meek and lowly in heart: and ye shall find rest unto your souls" (Matthew 11:28-29). By its very nature a yoke implies two. The Lord Jesus Christ wants to join with you in your life walk and work. What a blessed partnership! The only time there is an irritation or chafing under that yoke is when you or I get out of step with Christ.

There are plenty of alternative routes that can be taken in the place of the one which God has declared is His way. There are ways which seem easier because they follow the line of least resistance, ways that seem to make little or no demand, ways in which backbone and character are not essential. But traveling through life along such paths lacks purpose, program and progress, and in the end it is very costly and unsatisfactory.

Any man who seeks to live according to his own ideas is definitely cheating himself. He thinks that he is just holding out on God, that is, cheating God out of the use of his life. Judas thought that he was selling Jesus when he betrayed Him and accepted the thirty pieces of silver, but we know that what he did was all at the expense of his own soul. He made a bargain with death,

and deliberately cheated himself out of eternal life. Disobedience to God on the part of any Christian is never worth the price one pays for it, which is the loss of fellowship with God.

Heavy-hearted over the knowledge of what we have been and are, but quickened with the hope of a new and better life, it becomes imperative that we place ourselves in the hands of Christ. Would you taste the joys of a life in vital fellowship with Christ, then yield your will to Him. If you have a desire for the life of purity, praise and power, dedicate yourself unreservedly unto the Lord. Offer praise to the Christ Who can take your possibilities and convert them into actualities. By His grace you can be what you ought to be.