

C h a p t e r O n e

MEETING THE MASTER

(Read John 1:35-42)

A sculptor was asked, “How do you sculpture an elephant?” to which he replied, “I just take a block of marble and chisel away everything that isn’t elephant!”

When God chooses us, He shapes us so that everything standing in the way of our usefulness is cut away. His focus is not on what we *do* but on what we *are* in the hidden parts of the soul. The shaping of character is always His first priority. People, circumstances, and the unseen battles within the heart become His chisel to fashion us after His liking. *He cuts away everything that isn’t like Christ.*

The process is never finished in this life. Thankfully, we do not have to be perfect before we can know God intimately and be used for His glory. History tells us that God uses imperfect people—graciously blessing many whom we would long since have cast away. He is never finished with the raw material that is in His loving hands. Our response to His chisel, however, determines the extent of our usefulness; it determines just how much good we will do that will last for eternity.

Consider Peter, the famous apostle, the man in whose honor the elaborate Basilica in Rome was built. When Peter was growing up as a lad in Bethsaida, no one would ever

have guessed that he was destined for greatness. He spent his early days fishing in the Sea of Galilee, at best had a rudimentary education and would have been willing to live his life in obscurity. He probably became acquainted with the Greek language and its culture because of the foreign influence in this Jewish town. But even after three years with Christ, he was judged to be unschooled (Acts 4:13). Yet for all that, think of what Peter accomplished!

About all we know of Peter's family is that he had a brother, Andrew, and their father's name was John. These two brothers were fishing partners with two other brothers, James and John, whose father was Zebedee. Their business was so successful that they needed hired servants to help with the trade. Incredibly, all four of these young men were eventually chosen to be the disciples of Christ.

Though he was born in Bethsaida, when Peter met Christ he was married and had moved to Capernaum. His mother-in-law was healed of a fever at the beginning of Peter's friendship with Jesus (Mark 1:29-31). Twenty years later Paul mentioned that Peter often took his wife with him on his missionary travels (1 Cor. 9:5). We can only speculate about the kind of stress his decision to follow Christ must have had on his marriage.

Mention the name *Peter* and you get a variety of responses. Some remember him for his vacillating, unpredictable comments in free-flowing discussions with Christ. Others think of his remarkable insight into the person of Christ; or in contrast, there is his fearful denial in the presence of a servant girl. Then again we remember his boldness when confronted by mobs on the Day of Pentecost. Those who have been particularly blessed by his writings (1 and 2 Peter) think of him as a theologian, the man who knew God and gave explicit instructions on how Christians should conduct themselves in a hostile world. No personality in the Bible exhibits

so much faith and doubt, courage and fear, love and impulsiveness. No other disciple reveals his heart so often and so honestly. He is, in the words of Clarence McCartney, “the most vivid and intense person portrayed in the Bible.”

Peter provides an excellent example of how God shapes a life, beginning with the raw material and progressing to a more finished product. The Lord’s training technique includes both encouragement and rebuke, public instruction and private reflection. There was both joy and sadness, success and failure. Christ interacted more often with Peter than with any of the other apostles. Conversion itself is instantaneous, but the refinement of Peter continued throughout his lifetime. *This is nothing less than the sculpturing of the soul.*

Some would have us believe that human nature can only be modified, not changed. Liars seldom become honest, adulterers seldom return to fidelity, and addicts seldom break free from their addiction. And even if these habits change, the disposition of the heart remains essentially the same.

Christ taught, and honest people will agree, that we are all fatally flawed. “For from within, out of the heart of men, proceed the evil thoughts and fornications, thefts, murders, adulteries, deeds of coveting, and wickedness, as well as deceit, sensuality, envy, slander, pride, and foolishness. All these evil things proceed from within and defile the man” (Mark 7:21-23).

Seneca cried out in despair, “O, that a hand would come down from heaven and deliver me from my besetting sin.” Peter’s life is a powerful witness to the good news that a hand *has* reached down from heaven to give us supernatural help. We are not confined to our own efforts in bringing about fundamental change in our character. God has visited our planet, and because of His grace we can be different.

Peter met Christ during the powerful, albeit controversial, ministry of John the Baptist, who commanded people to

repent because the Messiah would soon be revealed. This radical prophet attracted enough attention to warrant a visit from representatives of the religious establishment who wondered who he really was (John 1:19-28).

John's ministry got a boost because the people were grasping for a hope that a redeemer could come and lead them into victory against Rome. The nation was under Roman occupation, and the people responded with all of the resentment that such dominance ignites. Not only were Roman legions visible in the cities and towns, but taxes had to be paid to these self-serving foreigners. The Jews comforted themselves with the belief that the Messiah was coming, and that He would crush the Roman authorities and bring about a thoroughly Jewish state. This nationalistic pride swelled the ranks of those who listened to John's message. Little wonder some of the fishermen of Galilee made the eighty-mile trek to where John was baptizing to satisfy their curiosity.

Jesus Himself paid a visit to John, who was His cousin in the flesh. When John saw Him coming toward him near the Jordan, he cried out, "Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!" (John 1:29) Then John told his disciples how he had had the privilege of baptizing the Christ, and how God Himself had borne witness that "this was the Son of God."

Two of John's disciples heard his speech and were so impressed that they left John to follow Christ to His abode. "What do you seek?" Jesus asked. They responded, "Rabbi (which translated means Teacher), where are You staying?" (v. 38) Jesus was always ready to take time for seekers, so He extended the invitation, "Come, and you will see" (v. 39). They walked with Him to where He was staying and, according to Roman custom, visited with Him from 10 o'clock in the morning until sunset.

We should marvel at Christ's accessibility to ordinary folk.

He was willing to entertain those who took the time to investigate His claims; He had the time and the disposition to answer questions and show kindness. Here was a man who understood both the motives of the heart, and its potential for either great blessing or great disaster.

These two disciples, Andrew and most likely John (the brother of James the son of Zebedee, who would become known as the "beloved Apostle"), were increasingly impressed. During those hours they became absolutely convinced that Jesus was the Christ, the promised Messiah of Israel. Incredible as it seemed, this was the One they had been waiting for!

Andrew left the meeting and immediately went to find his own brother, Peter, to blurt out the news, "We have found the Messiah!" The Greek word may be translated *eureka*, a word attributed to Archimedes upon discovering a method to determine the purity of gold. These two disciples, however, had found something of much greater value—they had found a pearl of infinite worth, the Messiah, the Lord, the King!

Andrew was not a scholar, but he knew that if his brother would meet Jesus for himself, he would come to the same conclusion. So with a heart filled with warmth and affection, Andrew brought Peter to Jesus. He discovered that he scarcely needed to introduce them to one another!

Andrew stands in sharp contrast to his flamboyant, famous brother. He is not recorded as having preached any sermons; he did not make any rash promises nor did he ask any impertinent questions. But he was active behind the scenes bringing people to Christ. Certainly this one thoughtful act alone is sufficient to assure Andrew a place in history. For those servants who are faithful in bringing a mighty servant to Christ share in that mighty servant's reward.

Few people have heard of Edward Kimball, yet he is the

Sunday School teacher who led D.L. Moody to Christ. No one knows the name of an unlettered lay preacher who preached in a primitive British chapel on the text, "Look unto Me and be ye saved, all the ends of the earth." Yet through that imperfect channel, the famous Charles Haddon Spurgeon was converted.

Andrew teaches us that when we do the good that lies at our hand, we may do more for Christ than if we perform some visible service that catches the eyes of men but misses the approval of God. God always begins His special works in secret, and only later is His plan made clear to His people. It is a high privilege to be a steppingstone for others who are destined to have a personal confrontation with Christ.

Andrew brought his brother to Christ but apparently did not have the opportunity of making a formal introduction. The moment they met, Christ looked at Peter with a gaze that held the promise of hope and power: "You are Simon the son of John; you shall be called Cephas" (v. 42). The name *Cephas* is Aramaic for Peter, which means *rock*. Christ not only knew who Peter was, He also knew who Peter would eventually become.

"*You are!*" is the diagnosis.

"*You shall be!*" is the promise.

Peter, with his knowledge of the Old Testament, might well have thought of Abram, whose name was changed by God to Abraham (the father of many); and Jacob, whose name was changed to Israel (a prince with God). God never changes a man's name without also changing his character or position.

To know Simon's name was to know his present character and life. To rename him was proof that he would become a different kind of person. And only Christ, who had both the knowledge and power to shape this man according to God's intentions, could make such a prediction.

Such knowledge and power can be both frightening and comforting. If Jesus knows us completely and yet loves us enough to reshape our lives, we can take heart. And although His chisel will hurt, in the end it will be for our good. To be molded by the Master's hand is an honor indeed.

Peter learned, as we all must, that standing in Christ's presence brings both despair and hope. Those who reject Him will wish they had not been born; those who submit will become a masterpiece that will endure forever as a credit to the Divine Sculptor.

Christ Knows Who We Are

"You are Simon!"

Occasionally God selects His leaders from among those of noble birth, the intelligent, or the gifted. But usually He uses the common clay pot or stones of ordinary grain. The unadorned and simple home of this fisherman would be the quarry from which this stone would be dug. If we had done a study of Peter's humble origins, we would never have guessed that he would eventually become the stuff of saints.

Christ knew Simon's true character, his strengths and weaknesses, his aspirations, insecurities, and disappointments. Christ knew his vocation, his secret thoughts. He knew how Simon would respond to all the twists and turns that lay in his path. Christ's knowledge was so exhaustive that He could have written a whole library of books on one whose name was Simon, son of John!

Counselors tell us that their clients are often not entirely honest. All of us want to put ourselves in the best possible light. Who of us would reveal our hidden thoughts to others? Yet, without our saying a word, without a chance to put the best possible spin on our shortcomings and temptations, *Christ knows!*

Our lives and thoughts are an open book to Jesus: "There

is no creature hidden from His sight, but all things are open and laid bare to the eyes of Him with whom we have to do" (Heb. 4:13). He knows our names and a lot more besides.

He also knew Peter's lineage: "You are Simon the son of John." Some people think they were born into the wrong family. Others do not know their parents, because of either death or adoption. With the families of our nation being so torn apart, those who struggle with the uncertainty of their family roots often despair of becoming emotionally whole. Yet, *Christ knows!*

On January 5, 1527, Felix Manz was brought from the Wellenberg prison in Zurich, Switzerland, to the Limmat River, where he was drowned because of his faith in Christ. His crime was that he rejected infant baptism and was re-baptized as an adult on profession of his faith in Christ. As he was pushed into the water, the voice of his mother was heard above the waves, urging her son to remain true to the faith.

This famous martyr was an illegitimate son of a priest who practiced immorality, a sin that was almost as rampant in those days as it is today. This is proof, if proof is needed, that God can mightily use those who are conceived out of wedlock. Christ is not limited by our family history. The Christ who knew Peter's lineage knows about all of the skeletons in our family closet.

Take heart, you who are ashamed of your family history. You stand in the presence of Christ who loves you and has a plan for your life, no matter your family roots. His providential care is not limited by your lineage. He is prepared to lovingly mold anyone's offspring if they submit to His sure hand.

Christ knows not only what is true of us, but what would have been true of us if our circumstances had been different. If Peter had been born in another town and to a different

family, he would have had quite a different history. Christ knows what Peter would have been like in all of these situations.

Have you been misunderstood? Have your enemies spread lies with the express intention of ruining your good name? Christ knows everything; He knows it fully, accurately, and without bias. And though He knows your weaknesses, He also loves you and knows He can change you.

When Christ died on the cross, we were on His mind. In fact, we were known by Him from eternity past. He is not about to forget about us now.

Let me repeat: *Christ knows who we are!*

Christ Knows Who We Can Become

There is a story of a painter who saw a beggar whose clothes were tattered, hair unkempt, and his face dirty. The artist decided to paint the man as he might have looked if he had had the dignity of a job and home. When he invited the beggar to see the painting, the beggar did not recognize himself. "That's me?" he asked. "Yes," said the artist, "that's what I see in you." For the first time in years the aging man was given hope. He promised, "By God's grace I'm going to be the kind of man you see me to be!"

Christ, the omnipotent artist, saw not the Peter who *was* but the Peter he *would become*. " 'You are Simon the son of John; you shall be called Cephas' (which translated means Peter)" (John 1:42). As already mentioned, the name *Cephas* is Aramaic for Peter, which means "rock." Rock is formed by sand that is under pressure and heat. Peter would have his character changed from instability to stability. *Simon* was the name given to him by his parents; *Rock* was the name given to him by Christ.

What does the name *Rock* affirm?

First, we think of *strength*. A rock signifies stability, de-

pendability, and permanence. The man who builds his house on the rock can withstand the storms of life. Though everything else may be swept away, the rock stands firm. Simon's insecurities and fears would be turned into a monument to God's unfailing grace.

Second, a rock symbolizes *permanence*. A rock remains though all else be swept away. When a dam breaks, spilling torrents of water into the area, all the sand along the riverbanks is washed away. But the huge boulders remain. So it will be at the end of the age; everything we did that was not tied to God and His eternal purposes will be carried away by the flood of God's judgment. The rocks will remain.

When is the last time Peter is referred to in the New Testament? We might be tempted to say that it is in the Book of Acts or in his own epistles. But his name is inscribed in the New Jerusalem, and will be there forever as a testimony to his faithfulness. We read, "And the wall of the city had twelve foundation stones, and on them were the twelve names of the twelve apostles of the Lamb" (Rev. 21:14). Peter's name, along with that of the other apostles, is permanently engraved in one of the pillars of the Holy City!

Peter and his contribution to Christ's work will survive the destruction of the earth and the burning up of all of its elements. This rock will endure long after the flames of judgment have done their damage. There he is, a fisherman, but also *a pillar in the eternal city of God*.

We cannot be sure that Peter was converted during this first encounter with Christ. Yet he left that initial interview both elated and despairing. He must have wondered whether Christ really understood who he was, a rough fisherman filled with the frailty and desires of the flesh. How could he ever become known as "the man of rock"? Yet his affection had been won, his soul stirred with restless passion. Now that he had met Christ, he would never be the same. Though

he had an ordinary past, he would have an extraordinary future.

Christ's words provided the hope and motivation Peter needed to think beyond the immediate pressures of earning a living. In moments of loneliness, misunderstanding, and failure, he could reflect on Christ's prediction that he would become a man of stability and strength. Regardless of the past and present, he was promised a rewarding future.

The Stonecutter had begun by hewing a rough stone from the quarry. From now on the work would progress at a reasonable pace. Looking at the untrimmed edges of this obscure piece of rock, the Master saw a saint. The chisel would do its work.

Christ Can Change Us

Why could Jesus be so confident that Peter would become a great man? He was making a promise, not just because He knew the future but because He knew that He had the power to shape the future. His promise was not based on a whim but on known resources. *Christ can guarantee the future because it is in His hands!*

Simon, I believe, was the firstborn, the leader among his siblings. In the New Testament he asked more questions than all the other disciples combined; he was the only one who tried to walk on water; the one who made the great confession regarding who Christ was; and also, the one who promised he would never deny Christ. Firstborns often have just such leadership qualities that need to be honed and directed.

A difference in temperament, often found among brothers and sisters, should be a cause for rejoicing, not unflattering comparison. The Divine Sculptor does not manufacture saints as one might make statues in a factory. He delights to take diverse raw material and make the unexpected. The var-

ied personalities, gifts, desires, and aptitudes of all God's people remain intact but are brought under His direction. Then, like the different parts of a body, each of us contributes to the strength and coordination of the whole.

Since Christ is now shaping us just as He did Peter, we need to take a moment to learn some lessons about how the Master Sculptor does His work. Here are some basic observations.

First, we are struck with the realization that human actions and divine providence converge to accomplish the will of God. Andrew, no doubt, thought that the decision to bring Peter to Christ was his alone; this was a natural response of someone who wanted his brother to share good news. Yet years later Jesus would explain that those who came to Him were drawn by the Holy Spirit. *The visible actions of men are often the invisible actions of God.* Christ is the One who chooses the stones He desires to fashion (15:16).

Second, Christ begins the transformation by forgiving our sins and changing our disposition. John the Baptist said of Him, "Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!" (1:29) Here was a man who could successfully deal with the most fundamental problem of human existence. He would begin by removing Peter's sin so that this humble fisherman might establish a direct relationship with God.

Sin was covered in the Old Testament, but it was never taken away. Day by day and year by year sacrifices had to be offered with the distinct knowledge that the offenses of tomorrow would need yet another sacrifice. And even then the sacrifices covered only the sins of Israel; *this* sacrifice would take away the sins of the world!

Third, Christ can change human nature. A Christian is not merely a sinner minus his sins, but a new creation. There is a transformation of heart that is the beginning of a whole new level of human existence. This does not mean an instant life

of spiritual vigor; it means simply that the potential is there for radical transformation.

Jesus used the illustration of human birth: "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God" (3:3). When a baby is born, it has all the parts of its anatomy intact. The toes, fingers, eyes, and ears are all there; whether or not it grows depends on the nourishment and care it will receive. When we are born again, the work is complete but it is not finished. We still have growing to do.

Peter was promised that he would become a rock. Thirty years later, he wrote that all of us are stones in the living temple which God is building: "You also, as living stones, are being built up as a spiritual house for a holy priesthood, to offer up spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ" (1 Peter 2:5). The same Lord who took up the chisel to bring about a new Peter is the One who uses His chisel to shape us too.

Only gradually would Peter understand how much he really needed to be changed. The gap between what he was and what he would become was much wider than he realized. He would learn that *he must be willing to admit who he was before Christ could change him into who he could become.*

Before we look at how Christ shaped Peter's life, let us each identify our real name, the word that best describes where we are spiritually right now. Then let us think of how Christ can rename us for His glory.

Is our name <i>anxiety</i> ?	Christ can name us <i>peace</i> .
Is our name <i>addiction</i> ?	Christ can name us <i>freedom</i> .
Is our name <i>rejection</i> ?	Christ can name us <i>acceptance</i> .
Is our name <i>bitter</i> ?	Christ can name us <i>love</i> .
Is our name <i>fear</i> ?	Christ can name us <i>courage</i> .
Is our name <i>guilty</i> ?	Christ can name us <i>forgiveness</i> .

There is no transformation without pain. With every bit of change, we die a bit more to ourselves. The Divine Sculptor wounds us that He might mold us; He breaks us that He might straighten us.

As the shaping begins we can say with John Newton:

I am not what I ought to be,
I am not what I want to be,
I am not what I hope to be.
But thank God
I am not what I used to be.

The first step is to submit to the Man with a loving heart who has a chisel in His hand. “You *are* . . . but you shall *be* . . .”