

Mrs. Morrow was unusually nervous that night. Now it wasn't as if she never had any pressure. As the wife of a U.S. Ambassador, she often was called upon to entertain influential guests. And she consistently did so with impeccable taste and refinement. But something about this evening made her uncomfortable. Her husband, Dwight, had invited a dozen or so guests to a dinner. Among the guests was the very rich and influential J.P. Morgan. What made this experienced hostess the most nervous was the time that their daughters were to be introduced to the guests. You see, J.P. Morgan had a very large and conspicuous nose. And young Anne Morgan was most outspoken and right at that age when you didn't know what she was going to say. Anne's conscientious mother was terrified that the young girl was going to blurt out something embarrassing about Mr. Morgan's nose. So hours before the gathering and several times in between, there were careful briefings set up to instruct the children what to say and what not to say. Each time, Anne specifically was told not to make any comments about Mr. Morgan's nose for this would be very impolite.

As the moment came for the children to be brought in, the nervous hostess could hardly breathe. She began to panic as she saw Anne's eyes focus on J.P. Morgan's nose and remain fixed there. Nonetheless, the introductions were made, the young girls all curtsied in turn, and then they left without saying another word. Finally, she could return back to her duties as hostess again free from the anxiety of what Anne might do or say. With a sigh of relief, the Ambassador's wife turned to offer tea to her guests and asked in her most distinguished tone of voice, *And now, Mr. Morgan, would you have cream or lemon in your nose?*

We've all been there, haven't we? At some time in our lives, we have all experienced a humiliating situation. We've all stuck our foot in our mouth. We all know what it is like to be thoroughly embarrassed.

Perhaps this is one of the reasons why Simon Peter is one of the best loved of the Apostolic band. For there are more embarrassing situations recorded of him than all of the other apostles put together. Yes, Simon seems to represent the best of the best in us and the worst of the worst in us as well. He was without question a great leader. 4 times in the New Testament the 12 disciples are listed. While there is often a different order of the men in between, Peter is always listed first and Judas Iscariot is always listed last. It is obvious that Peter was the leader of the apostolic band. And that could certainly be one of the reasons for Peter's popularity. We admire those with leadership abilities.

But it was those times of failure, those times of embarrassment that make Peter so human to us. The times when he stuck his foot in his mouth - like on the mount of transfiguration. *Let us put up 3 shelters - one*

*for you Jesus, one for Moses and one for Elijah (For he did not know what he was saying) Luke 9:33 This little slip of the tongue brought a rebuke from God himself - this is my son whom I have chosen - listen to him. (Lu. 9:35)*

We want to look at one such time in Peter's life when he was at his very best and then at his very worst this morning. It was the time when Jesus formally recognized a change of name for this man. It was a time when Peter ascended the heights of greatness, giving the most succinct and clear confession of faith found anywhere in the New Testament. But it also was a time of embarrassment for Peter ending in one of the sternest rebukes that Jesus ever gave one of his followers.

Listen as I read the account found in Matthew 16:13-23.

13 When Jesus came to the region of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, "Who do people say the Son of Man is?"

14 They replied, "Some say John the Baptist; others say Elijah; and still others, Jeremiah or one of the prophets."

15 "But what about you?" he asked. "Who do you say I am?"

16 Simon Peter answered, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God."

17 Jesus replied, "Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah, for this was not revealed to you by man, but by my Father in heaven. 18 And I tell you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it. 19 I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven; whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven." 20 Then he warned his disciples not to tell anyone that he was the Christ.

21 From that time on Jesus began to explain to his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things at the hands of the elders, chief priests and teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and on the third day be raised to life.

22 Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. "Never, Lord!" he said. "This shall never happen to you!"

23 Jesus turned and said to Peter, "Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me; you do not have in mind the things of God, but the things of men."

Now Christ is having a discussion with his disciples here and he takes an informal opinion poll. *Who do people say the son of man is?* What is the public opinion concerning me? There are 4 answers given by the disciples - John the Baptist, Elijah, Jeremiah, or one of the prophets. The John the Baptist option would have

probably come from Herod - that was his belief because of his guilty conscience having beheaded John. The Elijah option would have come from Malachi. The Old Testament canon concludes with the promise that Elijah was going to come. The Jeremiah option undoubtedly comes from the fact that at this time Jeremiah was revered as the greatest of the prophets. These answers demonstrate 2 popular beliefs about Jesus Christ:

- a. People generally respected him. They thought that he was a very capable and godly man. John the Baptist, Elijah, Jeremiah and the prophets were all highly regarded and respected.
- b. People generally did not accept his claim of Messiahship, that he was the Son of God, equal with God. None of these men were Messiahs. They were all godly men, but none was the son of God. None of these people could have atoned for sins. They were just capable and gifted leaders of people.

It is interesting to note that public opinion polls concern Jesus Christ have not changed much over the centuries. Opinion polls concerned Jesus Christ today come up with very similar conclusions with the majority of people. Most people look at Jesus Christ as a great religious leader, a good man, a godly man, a man who taught many good principles. But most do not accept his claim to be the unique Son of God, the second person of the triune godhead in human flesh. And the sad thing is that most people don't see the irrationality of this view of Jesus Christ. For this is the one option that God didn't intend to leave us.

I think that one of the most profound paragraphs in apologetic writing was written by C.S. Lewis in his short book entitled *Mere Christianity*. In this book, Lewis writes: *I am trying here to prevent anyone from saying the really foolish thing that people often say about him (Christ); I am ready to accept Jesus as a great moral teacher, but I don't accept His claim to be God. That is the one thing that we must not say. A man who was merely a man and said the sort of things Jesus said would not be a great moral teacher. He would either be a lunatic - on the level with the man who says he is a poached egg - or else he would be the Devil of hell. You must make your choice. Either this man was, and is, the Son of God, or else a madman or something worse. You can shut Him up for a fool, you can spit at Him and kill him as a demon, or you can fall at his feet and call him Lord and God. But let us not come with any patronizing nonsense about His being a great human teacher. He has not left that open to us. He did not intend to.*

Well, it is clear from the context that Jesus was bringing his disciples to the place where they had to think through His claims and confess His true nature. And Peter comes through this test with flying colors, doesn't he? He confesses Jesus Christ to be the Son of the Living God.

Jesus is so pleased with Peter that he changes his name. Peter was born Simon son of Jonah or John. We would call him Simon Johnson today. Simon was a popular Jewish name. Simon or Simeon was one of the 12 sons of Jacob. He was the second born - only Reuben was older than Simeon. One of the tribes of

Israel was named after him. His name meant *one who hears*. He was named Simeon because of God's hearing Leah's prayer for another child. Simeon was a very well known and respected Jewish name. It would have been the obvious name for someone who was going to be the leader of the early church.

Peter, on the other hand, was unheard of as a name. Peter means stone or rock. Whereas Rock or Rocky might be a common nickname today, it was unheard of in Jesus' time. Before Jesus changed Simon's name to Peter, there is no record of anyone having Petros as a name. It would be like calling someone *Mud* today. When we say someone's name is *Mud* it generally isn't a compliment, is it? Well, that is what a rock is - just hardened mud. Peter wouldn't have been very impressed with his new name.

But the Lord Jesus wanted to make 2 points in giving Simon the new name, Peter. The first he quickly makes in the context by making a play on words. You are Peter and on this rock I will build my church. There is an obvious play on words here in the original language. You are Peter (Petros) and on this rock (Petra) I will build my church. Whereas a Petros was a smaller stone, a Petra was a large, table rock. Something that a builder would love to construct a house on. What Christ is saying here is quite clear in the context, I believe. Peter had just given a great confession of faith. So Christ makes a play on words here and says that upon this great table rock of Peter's confession of faith he is going to build his church. Everyone who has ever come into the family of God since Jesus uttered these words to Peter has come through the door of confessing the Lord Jesus Christ as his savior. *If you will confess with your mouth Jesus as Lord, and believe in your heart that God has raised him from the dead, you will be saved. Rom. 10:9.* So this great confession that Peter makes here is most important for it is the great table rock upon which the church will be built.

But there is another lesson in Simon's change of name to Peter that we can see from looking at the broader picture of his life. Simon by nature was a vacillating man. He was up and down all the time. Stability was not a word that came to mind when one thought of Simon. Yes, he could have his moments of greatness - as he did in making this great confession of Christ, the son of God. But he could also fail miserably as he shortly did here in rebuking Christ. I mean, in one breath, Jesus is congratulating Peter for his confession of faith and in the very next breath, Jesus is rebuking Peter, even calling him Satan. You talk about being up and down. That was Simon - he could be very good, but he could also be very bad. And he could change from being very good to very bad very quickly. Stability was not strength of Simon's.

But the Lord Jesus Christ had great plans for Simon Peter. He was going to take this man who was naturally up and down with a vacillating temperament and he was going to make him to be like a rock - stable and secure. In fact, Christ planned to make Peter be such a stable person that he would be one of the main foundational stones for the whole church. What a responsibility this would be! What pressure there would

be on the person who would lead the kingdom of God into battle against the pagan forces of the mighty Roman Empire! This captain of the assault would have to be a rock. He couldn't waiver or falter. Simon was Christ's choice to be that man. That's why he named him Peter - rock.

It would take much time for Simon to actually realize his name Peter in reality. Jesus, of course, gave him the name because he saw who Simon Peter was to become in the future. In actuality, Simon Peter would have many more times of failure before he became that rock of security for the early church. One of the most famous times occurred on the very night that the Lord Jesus was betrayed. Who can forget Peter's denial of his master as he was warming himself by the fire with the godless crowd? The picture of Peter here is pathetic. It is certainly not the picture of a rock, solid and unmoved in the midst of the storms of adversity. No, the Lord Jesus is the rock here. He is headed for the cross and will not be diverted from his mission. The enemy could not divert him in the Garden of Gethsemane; the Jewish leaders could not divert him with their taunts and jeers; the Roman soldiers could not even divert him by their physical torture. Christ knew what he had to do and he was determined to carry out his mission.

Peter, on the other hand, was again vacillating. Promising publically to be willing to die for Christ just before this event, Peter has quickly reneged on his commitment to Christ and now is being tossed to and fro by the moods of the crowds around him.

But, happily, this scene around the fire on the night when Jesus was betrayed was not the final scene in Peter's life. Nor was God through with Simon Peter. For the Lord Jesus Christ had given his word that Simon would become Peter - and God's word never returns void.

As one studies the life of Peter in the Bible, he finds that it naturally falls into 3 segments. There are the early years when Simon walked with the Lord as a disciple. This period of his life is characterized by impetuosity, by vacillation, by instability. There are some very promising moments - but there are also some miserable failures. The second stage of Peter's life occurs in those years after Pentecost when the early church is going through its infant stages. Peter, filled by the Holy Spirit, is the key leader in the first 12 chapters of Acts. Paul would become the central figure from chapter 13 on as the church expands into Asia Minor, but Peter is the dominant person in the first half of Acts. Peter is characterized by courage and heroism in this section of his life. He preaches on the day of Pentecost and sees 3,000 respond to his call to repentance. He faces the Sanhedrin with courage and refuses their intimidation as they try to deter him from preaching the gospel. No longer is Peter swayed by the crowd. Now Peter is determined to do what is right for the Lord. Perhaps one of the most representative pictures of Peter during this period of his life is the one where he is in prison awaiting execution. Herod has just killed James to the delight of the ungodly crowds.

And now he has planned to have Peter put to death as well. But is Peter worried? Not at all. He almost misses his angelic rescue because he is sleeping so soundly. The angel has to shake Peter awake in order to lead him out of the prison to safety. Peter was willing to give his life for the Lord at this point in his life - there is no question about that. He is sleeping soundly the night before his execution. But whereas it had been God's will for James to be martyred as an example for the early church, God still had a mission for Peter - the mission to be a rock of stability for the church.

The third period of Peter's life reveals him to be that immovable rock and source of security for the growing teenage church. The enemy has launched an assault of persecution in an attempt to stunt the growth of Christ's church and then wipe it from the face of the earth. But in the midst of the severe trials and storms, there are some who are standing firm and unmovable. Peter is the leader of this group. Unlike the prolific Paul, Peter only writes 2 letters to the early church that are included in our New Testament. But the theme of both of his epistles is Standing Firm for the Lord with Joy through times of Suffering. Listen to the opening paragraph of his first epistle:

1 Peter 1:1-9

1 Peter, an apostle of Jesus Christ,

To God's elect, strangers in the world, scattered throughout Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia and Bithynia, <sup>2</sup> who have been chosen according to the foreknowledge of God the Father, through the sanctifying work of the Spirit, for obedience to Jesus Christ and sprinkling by his blood:

Grace and peace be yours in abundance.

<sup>3</sup> Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! In his great mercy he has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, <sup>4</sup> and into an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade -- kept in heaven for you, <sup>5</sup> who through faith are shielded by God's power until the coming of the salvation that is ready to be revealed in the last time. <sup>6</sup> In this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while you may have had to suffer grief in all kinds of trials. <sup>7</sup> These have come so that your faith -- of greater worth than gold, which perishes even though refined by fire -- may be proved genuine and may result in praise, glory and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed. <sup>8</sup> Though you have not seen him, you love him; and even though you do not see him now, you believe in him and are filled with an inexpressible and glorious joy, <sup>9</sup> for you are receiving the goal of your faith, the salvation of your souls. (NIV)

Quite a different man than the one who cursed and said to the godless crowd around the fire, *I don't know this man - I never saw him before in my life.*

Simon had become Peter. God had made an impetuous, vacillating man into a courageous rock of strength for his kingdom.

God desires to do a similar work in each of our lives. And we can be thankful that just as he did with Simon Peter what God starts he finishes.