

CHAPTER TWO– STABLE

The Normal Christian Worker by Watchman Nee

Reading: Matt. 16:13-23; 1 Pet. 2:5; Matt. 18:18; 26:31-41, 69-75; Mk. 14:54, 66-68

Stability is another quality that must be found in the life of every Christian worker. Many Christians alas! are very changeable. Their moods change with the weather, so that at times they become the plaything of circumstance; consequently, they are unreliable. Their intentions are good, but because they are emotionally unstable, they frequently lose their poise.

The Bible portrays for us a man of irresolute temperament who is known to us as Simon Peter. One day the Lord asked His disciples who people thought He was, to which they replied that some said He was John the Baptist, and some said He was Elijah, while others said He was Jeremiah or one of the prophets. Then He turned the question on them and asked, “*But who do you say that I am?*” Simon Peter’s reply, “*You are the Christ, the Son of the living God*” brought forth this immediate response: “*Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jonah, for flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father who is in heaven. And I also say to you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church*” (Matt. 16:13-18).

Note the declaration: “*On this rock I will build my church.*” The Lord seems to have in mind here the contrast He drew in the Sermon on the Mount between the wise man who built his house on the rock so that it resisted flood and tempest, and the foolish man who built his house on the sand, and under the same conditions it tottered to the ground. No matter what strain the Church may be subjected to, it can never collapse because it is firmly established on the Rock, Jesus Christ.

At a later date Peter wrote these words: “*You also, as living stones, are being built up a spiritual house*” (1 Pet. 2:5). The superstructure of the Church is of the same substance as the foundation; and just as stability characterizes the foundation, so stability characterizes the entire superstructure. Stability is a necessary trait in the character of every Christian worker, for every one is a “living stone”. Christ said to Peter: “*You are Peter (Greek: petro, a stone), and on this rock (Gk. petra) I will build my church, and the gates of Hades shall not prevail against it.*” A stone in the building is not an immense mass of rock like the foundation; but though the foundation and superstructure differ in size, in substance they are the same. Each one who forms a part of the Church building may be small in measure, but in nature he does not differ in the slightest from the Church’s Head.

Note how the passage from which we have quoted continues: “*I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.*” This promise made to Peter was later on made to the Church. (See Matt. 18:18.) It is obvious that Peter is addressed here as an individual, but it is in his capacity as a minister of Christ that the keys of the Kingdom are committed to him. He was entrusted with those keys so that he might function as an opener of doors, and he clearly functioned in that capacity at Pentecost and later in the house of Cornelius. In the first instance

he opened the door of the Kingdom to the Jews and in the second instance to the Gentiles. But when the Lord Jesus addressed Peter at Caesarea Philippi his character did not correspond to his name, so he was unable at that time to make use of the keys of the Kingdom. However, when in the Lord's grace he had been delivered from the instability that marked him then, and had become a minister of Christ who was firm as a rock, he was able to use the keys committed to him and could wield authority in binding and in loosing.

No one who is of an irresolute temperament can exercise a ministry of this nature. There must be a correspondence between the character of the minister and the character of the ministry. Both must bear the character of the Church against which the gates of Hades cannot prevail. Tragically, the gates of Hades do prevail over many Christian workers because they are always vacillating; for that reason they cannot be relied on in the work. Unless these erratic natures of ours are transformed, we shall be unable to function in the specific ministry committed to us; but, praise the Lord! He has resource to transform our characters even as He transformed Peter's. He can deal with every type of weakness that mars our lives and can so reconstitute us that we become suited to His purpose.

The Bible tells us it was by revelation that Peter was able to recognize Jesus as the Christ, the Son of the living God. He could never have made this marvelous discovery by himself, nor could any man have imparted such knowledge to him; it was God Who made this known to him. From the time of Peter's confession Jesus began to tell the disciples something of the sufferings that lay immediately ahead of Him; and He told them plainly of His impending crucifixion and resurrection, whereupon *"Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him, saying: 'Far be it from you Lord; this shall not happen to you!' But he turned and said to Peter, 'Get behind me, Satan!'"* (Matt. 16:22-23).

Note the sudden swing of the pendulum. Peter, who has so recently attained sublime heights of spiritual experience, has already dropped to perilous depths. We have barely heard the Lord acknowledge that he has had a wonderful divine revelation then we hear Him say that he is a tool in the hands of Satan. At one moment Peter is declaring to the Lord, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God"; at another moment he is actually rebuking Him. These two moments, so near in time, are poles apart in spiritual experience; and the self-same man who has been a vessel of divine revelation has, within a brief space of time, become an instrument in Satan's hand to try and hinder the Lord from going to the Cross.

The Lord reacts immediately, and directly addressing Peter, to whom he had so recently said, "Blessed are you," He says, "get behind me, Satan!" Only a short time has elapsed since He declared "You are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church." But how could a man, himself overcome by Satan, be used to build up the Church concerning which the Lord had affirmed that the gates of Hades could never prevail against it? If Peter is ever to be so used, then he must undergo a fundamental change. And that is exactly what happened. Let us look at the story as recorded in the twenty-sixth chapter of Matthew's Gospel.

When the disciples were gathered around the Lord after the celebration of the passover He said to them: *"All of you will be made to stumble because of me this night, for it is written, I will strike the shepherd, and the sheep of the flock will be scattered."* Peter, with his characteristic impulsiveness, protested immediately: *"Even if all are made to stumble because of you, I will never be made to stumble."* Peter was clearly contradicting the Lord, but in so doing he was not just making a bravado: he was convinced that he was uttering the truth. It was because Peter so firmly believed in himself that the Lord reinforced His general statement regarding all the

disciples and, addressing Peter directly so that he should be left in no doubt that he, Peter, was included in the number of those who would desert Him, He added details, describing the depths to which he would fall in his desertion of the Lord. But so deep-rooted was Peter's self-confidence, that all the Lord's assertions failed to convince him, and he protested more vehemently than ever: *"Even if I have to die with you, I will not deny you!"* Peter was not trying to deceive anyone: he meant every word he said. He loved the Lord and he wanted to follow Him unreservedly. When he spoke as he did he was expressing his heartfelt desire; but **he mistook himself for the man he desired to be**. Peter wanted to pay the utmost price to follow the Lord, but he was not the kind of man he thought he was; he had not got it in him to pay such a price.

A short time after Peter had made his repeated declarations that he would follow the Lord at all costs, the Lord said to him and to two other disciples He had taken apart with Him in the garden of Gethsemane: *"My soul is exceedingly sorrowful, even to death. Stay here and watch with me."* But all three fell fast asleep.

Again He addressed Peter specifically and said: *"What? Could you not watch with me one hour?"* But He did not stop for Peter's answer; He supplied it Himself – ***"the spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak."*** Yes, that was Peter. He was so willing, but he was so weak.

In a moment the scene has changed again. And Peter has changed with the changing circumstances. A great multitude have come to take Jesus, and Peter's emotions are stirred. He stretches out his hand, draws his sword, and strikes off the ear of the high priest's servant. Is not this proof of his readiness to die with his Lord? But wait a moment. Jesus is taken, and He is being carried off alone. Where is Peter? *"Then all the disciples forsook Him and fled."* Peter has deserted his Lord.

Mark records: *"But Peter followed him at a distance, right into the courtyard of the high priest. And he sat with the servants and warmed himself at the fire"* (14:54). Suddenly one of the high priest's maids recognized him and exclaimed: *"You also were with Jesus of Nazareth. But he denied it, saying, I neither know nor understand what you are saying"* (vv. 67-69). Can this be Peter, who that very day had dared to cut off the ear of the high priest's servant? Yes, this is Peter, now so overcome with fear when the high priest's maid identifies him as one of the disciples, that he actually denies His Lord. A moment ago he wanted at all costs to follow Him, even if it meant giving up his life, but now he wants at all costs to preserve his life.

The great surge of emotion that swept over him then has already passed; and while Jesus is being put to shame in the judgment-hall Peter is seeking to evade any implication in His sufferings. So he moves out into the porch. There he overhears another servant saying to some of the bystanders, *"This is one of them,"* and immediately he is roused to a further denial. Matthew says: *"But again he denied with an oath, I do not know the man."* (26:72).

Soon afterwards some of those who were standing around came up to him and said: *"Surely you also are one of them, for your speech betrays you. Then he began to curse and swear, saying, I do not know the man!"* (vv.73-74). Is it possible that this is Peter, this man who has denied the Lord three times, and has denied Him with oaths and curses? Yes, this is Peter.

Peter's trouble was not just superficial. There was a fundamental flaw in his character. He was governed by his emotions, and his conduct was always unpredictable, as the conduct of people is who are controlled by their feelings. The enthusiasm of such people carries them at times to the loftiest heights; at other times depression drives them into the depths. It is possible for such

people to receive divine revelation, but it is also possible for them to put hindrances in the way of the divine purpose.

They are apt to speak and to act swiftly under the urge of a sudden impulse, but the impulse may not be a divine impulse. Many problems in the Lord's work arise because of this radical defect in the lives of His servants; and because the trouble is radical, it calls for a radical correction.

Peter was a forthright character. He was not given to diplomacy and double dealings; but he had strong emotions, and he trusted in his emotions till the day of testing proved he was not the man of unswerving devotion to the Lord that his feelings had led him to believe.

Brothers and sisters, it is woefully possible that our fancied love for the Lord is little more than sentimental attachment. Our emotional reactions to His love are not necessarily so deep or so pure as we think. We feel we love Him utterly; but we live so much in the soul-realm that we think we are the kind of people we feel we are. We feel we want to live for Him alone and want to die for Him if He so wills; but if the Lord does not shatter our self-confidence as He shattered Peter's, we shall go on being deceived by our feelings and our life will be one of endless fluctuations.

Peter did not deliberately tell a lie when he affirmed his devotion to the Lord; but his feelings tricked him into believing what was not true. **It is a horrible thing to tell a lie; but it is a pitiful thing to believe a lie.** If we continue to trust our feelings, the Lord may have to let us discover through serious breakdown the unreliability of our emotional life. The measure of our ability to follow the Lord is not assessed by the measure of our desire to follow Him.

Oh, that we might recognize the fact that **the Church is an eternally stable structure!** The foundation of the Church is a rock foundation, and every stone throughout the building is quarried from the same rock. If our characters have not been brought into correspondence with the character of the Church, how can we hope to have any part in its construction? If we seek to build with substandard material we shall endanger the whole structure.

Stone of other quality than the foundation will not stand the strain imposed upon it, so our attempts at building will only result in breakdown, and breakdown will mean loss to ourselves and others, and loss of precious time in the completion of the work. We do well to heed this word in 1 Cor. 15:58 – *“Be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord.”*

Thank God, Peter was brought through breakdown to discover his own weakness, and his fall was deep enough to shatter his self-confidence. Have not our past failures been serious enough to convince us of our unreliability? We keep praying for light on our condition, but is not the knowledge of our past failures light enough to cause us to fall down before God in deep contrition and let Him remake us as He remade Peter? When Peter's collapse showed him what kind of a person he was, he *“went out and wept bitterly.”* From that hour the Lord began to refashion him till his character corresponded to his new name, and he was able then to use the keys of the Kingdom with mighty effect.

We cannot expect to become outstanding instruments like Peter, but we trust the Lord will have mercy upon us and work a transformation in our lives such as He worked in his. A radical change needs to take place in our characters if we are to be Christian workers worthy of the name.

- NOTHING FOLLOWS -