

SIFTED SAINTS

"And the Lord said, Simon, Simon, behold, Satan hath desired to have you, that he may sift you as wheat: But I have prayed for thee, that thy faith fail not: and when thou art converted, strengthen thy brethren." Luke 22:31-32.

God's Word presents the truths and lessons of life in a remarkable way. It presents pictures as real and as varied as life. It portrays the saved and the unsaved, the haughty and the humble, the saints and the sinners.

Our text was spoken by our Lord on the night when He was betrayed. At that sacred season His disciples were wrangling as to which of them should rank as the greatest. He told them that the way to greatness was through service and by helping others. Then, with sobering suddenness He warned them that they would be sifted by Satan.

Christ's coming into a human life makes all the difference there is between light and darkness, between good and evil, between life and death. If we are truly His, we have changed our citizenship; we have a new allegiance; we are subject to a new Master; we belong to a heavenly kingdom—we are no longer children of darkness but children of light; and we are to walk as children of light. The Scriptures are bound with teaching to the effect that the children of God are never let alone by the adversary. "Your adversary the devil, as a roaring lion, walketh about, seeking whom he may devour." I Peter 5:8.

With reference to Job Satan confessed that God had set a hedge about him, about his house, and about all that he had, so that he was unable to touch him. So God lengthened Satan's tether; gave him permission to rob Job of his property, to take away from him his family and at last to afflict a severe bodily ailment. All this Satan was permitted to do, and yet he could not do what he wanted to do for God said, "Do not touch his life."

This incident reveals the fact that Satan cannot touch a child of God without divine permission. He may sometimes be permitted, in the sovereign permissive will of God, to become an instrument in our discipline and further training, but he never has full power over the believer.

I. The Danger To The Saints.

"And the Lord said, Simon, Simon, behold, Satan hath desired to have you that he may sift you as wheat." The pronoun "you" is plural—"Satan hath desired to have you all, that he may sift you all as wheat." Satan was asking for the privilege of sifting all of the apostles. He wanted the Lord to let him sift them intensively.

When Satan asked for the apostles in order that he might sift them, he was not making a new request. Centuries earlier he had asked for Job that he might sift him. Perhaps the case of Job was in Christ's mind when He addressed this text to Peter.

In that hour all eleven apostles were in danger, and Peter was especially so. But, they were forewarned that Satan had asked to have them for the purpose of sifting them. Hitherto, he had sifted them with a gentle agitation. Now, he was seeking permission to shake them violently, as wheat was shaken in the sieve. He wanted to toss them to and fro with sudden and sharp temptations, to distract their minds with dismal forebodings and apprehensions, in the hope that they would be induced to take refuge in utter defection. Our Lord very frankly warned them of their danger in order to induce them to watch and to pray.

Satan not only desired to sift them, but he had already received permission to do so. The verse may be translated, "Satan hath got hold of you," or "Satan hath procured your being surrendered to him." And the pronoun "you" is plural, showing that it was not only Simon, but all the eleven, that Satan had desired, and for a period had obtained for the specific purpose of sifting.

By "sifting" is meant testing, or shaking in such a manner that part will fall through and part will remain. The sifting of wheat is a necessary process. The wheat must be separated from the chaff, or the foreign substances taken from the air and from the earth. Before the wheat is ready for use it must be sifted. No pains must be spared to make the process as thorough as possible.

In the sifting process, Satan does his best to scatter the wheat and to keep the chaff. He asked to have Simon Peter that he might sift him. He was confident that Simon's character was unsound, and that all of his professions were chaffy. Satan is still hurrying to and fro in the world, peering into every keyhole of character to find baseness there, and sneaking into every corner of the soul to detect its depravity.

In a sense, the apostles brought the danger upon themselves. They virtually invited Satan into their company. Evidently they had ignored Christ's teaching concerning humility and love. The evil spirit of envy and selfish ambition, which they had harbored among themselves, attracted Satan to that particular upper room. If they had been more humble and less selfish, if their hearts had been more guileless, and if their characters had been attuned by discipline to the teachings of their Lord, Satan would not have been attracted to that upper room, nor would they have stood in such danger of an awful sifting.

Simon Peter is one of the most interesting Bible characters. His biography affords us a great study in human nature and divine grace. In the ups and downs of his experience we see a picture of our own lives. When we notice his failures, and then observe what Christ made of him, we are greatly encouraged.

Peter was a strong character and the foremost apostle. He would have made himself felt in any association. He believed that he had certain qualities of courage and strength which would enable him to follow the Master whithersoever He should lead. Self-confidence was one of his greatest defects. It often caused him to speak and to act too quickly.

Satan desires to have each of God's children. He does not readily release his hold upon the least of them. He endeavors to impair their usefulness, to cripple their influence, and to prevent them from rendering Christian service. He would like to bring them back under his control if he could.

II. The Defence Of The Saints.

Christ said, "But I have prayed for thee, and thy faith fail not." The pronoun "thee" is singular and refers to Simon Peter, the impulsive disciple who was so ready to lead. Christ singled him out and told him that He had prayed for him. He knew that he needed special prayer for the sifting time ahead. He prayed for him particularly and personally. The Master did not pray that Peter might escape the trial, for he needed just such an experience. He did not pray that He might not fall, but that his faith might not fail or suffer an eclipse. Our Lord knew full well 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 which was worth working on and worth preserving.

The man who was in the greatest danger was the one who was nearest to Christ, and the chief object of His intercession. Thus it is always. The tenderest of His words, the sweetest of His consolations, the strongest of His supplies, the most pleading and urgent of His petitions, and the mightiest gifts of His grace are given to the weakest, the neediest, and those in the most sorrow and stress and peril. They who want Him most always have Him nearest. The thicker the darkness, the brighter His light; the drearier our lives, the richer His presence; the more solitary we are,

the larger the gifts of His companionship. Our need is the measure of His prayer. He is regarding us with a very tender interest, is following the choices we are making and the courses we are pursuing with holy and loving solicitude, is grieved when He sees us wander from the path of wisdom, and rejoices in us and over us when He sees us traveling the upward way. It is indeed comforting and encouraging to know that our Master watches over His own with eyes of flame, with tender solicitude, and with sovereign power.

Was Christ's prayer for Peter in vain? Did his faith fail? If we look only at his denial, we must answer, "yes." If we look at the whole of the future life of the Apostle, we must answer, "no." Eclipse was not extinction. As a result of being sifted in Satan's sieve, the chaff was sifted out of the Apostle, and the pure wheat was left. His vanity was sifted out of him, his rash presumption was sifted out of him, his impulsive readiness to blurt out the first thought that came into his head was sifted out of him, and so his unreliableness and changeableness were largely sifted out of him, and he became a man strong in grace, and fit to bear the burdens of the weak.

We should apprehend clearly the truth of the intercessory ministry of our Lord. We should remember that He who died for us lives now as our Representative before the Throne and is interceding constantly in our behalf. What a joy to know that God always hears the intercession of His Son!

III. The Duty Of The Saints.

"Do thou, when once thou hast turned again, stablish thy brethren." The Lord knew that Simon's faith would not fail, but would make a recovery. The word here translated "converted" literally means "turned around." It does not mean, "when thou art regenerated" but "when thou art turned again, when thou hast gotten right again." Simon could not keep himself, nor can any of us. But how good it is to know that though our faith may flicker it will not go out. We shall turn round again, sifted but still pure grain and not chaff.

Christ anticipated a change being wrought in the character of the apostle that would make him helpful to others in time to come. His meaning was that a new power of helpfulness was to come to Peter through his sad experience, which he should use in strengthening others to meet temptation. His personal failure would make him better able to help others in their weaknesses by the experience he had gained in his weakness. His being sifted made him more sympathetic towards the weak, and better able to understand the trials and the difficulties that beset them.

Peter had double cause for gratitude--first, that he had been forgiven and restored, and second, that he was a better man, prepared in a higher sense than before, to be a patient and helpful friend to others in similar trial. He had the qualifications for stablishing his brethren. He had known by experience the unforgetting, rescuing, restoring love of Christ. He took up the task laid upon him and justified to the full his Master's confidence. Because Christ had helped him, he determined to do all that he could by prayer and otherwise for others.

Peter was not satisfied merely to entrench himself and to strengthen his own position. He made it the great object of his life to warn, to admonish, to exhort, and to establish his brethren. Having turned back again, after being sifted, he was enabled to strengthen others, he was obliged to strengthen others, and he was disposed to strengthen others. He sought to strengthen them in the way of faithfulness, thankfulness, and zeal for the glory of God.

It was his duty to "stablish his brethren" because he could thus manifest brotherly

love, prove that he was a child of God, express his gratitude to God, show forth his zeal for the glory of God, please God, and help to undo the evil which he had wrought. I need only to remind you how nobly he fulfilled this commandment, "strengthen thy brethren." He seems to have carried in his mind and memory an abiding impression from his bitter experience, and in his letter, which was written late in his life, he wrote many words which sound like echoes and reminiscences of it. He thus strengthened his brethren when he reminded them of the temptation to which he had succumbed so shamefully, and when he referred them for all their strength to the source of it all, even God in Christ.

Satan still sifts saints. It may take much sifting to separate the chaff from the pure grain, but it will refine faith and give a new service to saints who have failed. Before the Lord is through with us, sifted saints will become strong saints and strengthening saints. Sifting cannot destroy faith but only refine it for better service. Many souls about us are waiting for our better service.

What if we have failed Him in the past? We can turn again and go out in service to make others stronger and to win the lost to Him. Will we do it--beginning now?