

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.

This text was spoken by our Lord at a sacred season in His life and in the life of His disciples. It was on the night when He was betrayed, after the Passover feast and the establishment of the Lord's Supper as a reminder of His death and His second coming.

Even in that sacred hour His disciples were wrangling as to which of them should rank as greatest. He told them the way to greatness was through service and helping others. And then with sobering suddenness He turned to give the solemn words of the text, which warned them that they would be sifted by Satan.

This fragment of the conversation just before the scene of His agony in the garden shows us the Master's conception of the crisis through which His disciples were about to pass. Note that He did not let the foresight of Peter's desertion chill His praise of his past faithfulness as one of the Twelve. Neither did He permit the memory of Peter's faithfulness to modify His rebuke of Peter's future desertion.

One senses the emotion as He repeated the name for emphasis, saying, "Simon, Simon, behold Satan has claimed the right to sift you as wheat." The pronoun "you" is plural -- "Satan hath desired to have you all, that he may sift you all as wheat." That makes it very plain that it was not only Simon Peter, but also the rest of the apostles, that Satan was asking for the privilege of sifting as wheat.

This incident reveals the fact that Satan cannot touch a Christian without God's permission. His power is limited. Satan was skeptical of their fidelity and integrity. Therefore, he wanted to sift them as wheat, in the hope that they would turn out to be mere chaff, or at least that they would make a miserable and scandalous failure. He was exceedingly anxious to pass the apostles through the sieve of temptation, hoping thereby to overthrow their faith. He maintains this attitude and effort with reference to all the followers of Christ.

I. The Danger To The Saints.

"Behold, Satan has asked to have you, that he may sift you as wheat." 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, in particular, had one great defect. He had too much self-confidence. His self-confidence caused him to speak and to act too quickly. In the New Testament self-confidence is always treated in one way, as that which shuts out confidence in God. It is ever the enemy of faith. You will recall that after Peter made his wonderful confession of faith at Caesarea Philippi (Matt. 16:16), he felt so confident that he even presumed to instruct the Lord. "Then Peter took Him, and began to rebuke Him, saying, Be it far from Thee, Lord: this shall not be unto Thee." (Matt. 16:22). Jesus had foretold His sufferings and death, at the hands of His enemies, but Peter thought that he knew more than Jesus. The Lord had to rebuke Peter severely, "Get thee behind me, Satan." (Matt. 16:23).

What was it that needed to be sifted out of Simon? First of all, it was his exaggerated sense of his own importance, and his boasting of his own merits. In reading the book of Job, you will observe that Job showed that he resented what his brethren said about his condition. It is true that he was falsely accused, but to answer them he justified himself. You cannot answer and defeat Satan by trying to justify yourself. If you are full of self and the feeling of self-importance, you are in a dangerous condition. As certain as can be, you will be sifted, and the process will be far from pleasant. And remember that you will have brought it upon yourself. Regardless of how often He has warned us, the old confidence and pride of the flesh is never gotten out of us until it is sifted out by some painful process.

II. The Defence Of The Saints.

Christ anticipated this danger. He did not wait until His disciple was in the snare before He sought to help him. He interceded for him before the danger came. His intercession preceded Satan's attack. "But I have prayed for thee, that thy faith fail not." The pronoun "thee" is singular and refers to Simon Peter, the impulsive apostle who was so ready to lead. Thus 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 unreliaableness 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.

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 "establish 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. That God their Saviour and Lord is still concerned for them and will not let them fall utterly. 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.

In his book, METHOD IN SOUL WINNING, Dr. H. C. Mabie gives this challenging illustration:

"In the museum connected with the monument to Abraham Lincoln at Springfield, Illinois, . . . is treasured a piece of the rich gown worn by Laura Keane, the actress, in Ford's Theatre, Washington, on the tragic night when Lincoln fell. After the fatal shot of the assassin, Miss Keane sprang to the box and caught in her lap the head of the slain president, while the blood from the oozing wound saturated a portion of her garment. After the event, that blood-stained breadth was cut from the gown, sent to Springfield, and preserved as the speaking symbol of the great sacrificial life which Lincoln lived unto death, on behalf of the redemption of the black slaves of the South. Could we imagine one of those redeemed men on a visit to Lincoln's tomb looking at that emblem and properly remaining indifferent to its appeal?"

Can any redeemed person be indifferent to the blood-bought freedom which Christ has given?

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?