

QUANTOCK MINISTRIES

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*A Bible teaching and preaching ministry
for the Christian community*

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LUKE 22 v 31 – 32

“Simon, Simon, Satan has asked to sift [all of] you as wheat. But I have prayed for you, Simon, that your faith may not fail. And when you have turned back, strengthen your brothers.”

The Lord Jesus was talking to Simon as a representative of the whole group; ‘you’ is plural. While this comment by Jesus was very relevant to the immediate circumstances they were facing, the fact that it applied to them all shows that spiritual attack can happen to all followers of Jesus.

1. Satan’s attack

- a) This came at a time of great vulnerability. The tension, fear and confusion felt by the disciples during the days leading up to the crucifixion meant it was a moment of great weakness for them. We, too, are more vulnerable when we are feeling weak in our spiritual experience.
- b) There is no suggestion that Peter was being punished. As explained in Hebrews 12 v 7 – 11 and 1 John 3 v 1 – 3 we are being prepared for eternity by a process of discipline, or refining, and Satan can be used as part of this process. Ultimately, this is part of the big plan God has for each of us.
- c) Satan ‘has asked’. We are not under Satan’s authority; we are children of God. Sadly, we can carelessly or even wilfully open ourselves to Satan’s control through disobedience and worldliness, but because of original sin we all have areas where the influence of sin, Satan and the world can be strong and we are therefore vulnerable. The “accuser of the brethren” delights to point out our shortcomings to our heavenly Father, as he did with Job.
- d) Satan’s activity is described as a ‘sifting as wheat’ – sorting out the wheat from the chaff, demonstrating what we are really like as Christians. This may be in our spiritual life (John 15 v 1 – 5, our faith, love, obedience); our mental life (John 8 v 44, our love of the Word, truth, doctrine); or our physical life (Romans 6 v 11 – 14 and Colossians 3 v 5, our lifestyle). It can be a sifting through circumstances (work, family, health, relationships); in the church (fellowship, love, humility, service, motivation); in society (our role as watchmen, salt, light and ambassadors for Christ).

2. Jesus’ response

- a) His prayer is for our faith. This comes right to the heart of God’s purpose in allowing us to be sifted by Satan. We are to be men and women of faith, Hebrews 11 v 1 - 40. Without faith it is impossible to please God (v 6). This great catalogue of men and women of faith describes the most extreme sifting by Satan. Even in his darkest moments Job did not lose his faith in God, even when he felt totally deserted and bereft of God’s love (Job 19 v 25). True faith is not a stoic “gritting our teeth” and trusting our own abilities to get by. Nor is it trusting in our traditions or denominations, or in some other human being. Our love for, and trust in, Jesus is the core of our Christian being.
- b) His prayer is continuous. In Romans 8 v 33 – 37 Paul addresses the issue of Satan’s accusing charges against us. Jesus is continuously countering those charges by pleading the merits of His own atoning blood, for we are covered by His righteousness (Philippians 3 v 9, 1 John 2 v 1 – 2). This means that whatever the satanic attack we might be experiencing, we will be “more than conquerors” (v37). And Satan can never catch God unawares, for Jesus is always engaged in this intercessory ministry on our behalf (Hebrews 7 v 25).

c) His prayer is effective. Romans 8 v 38 – 39 shows us that the result of the Lord’s continuous intercessory ministry on our behalf is that nothing is able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord. That, not our own performance, is the Christian’s sure and eternal security.

3. The consequence

Jesus told Peter that when this testing trial was over and he had “turned back” (been restored), he would be ready to “strengthen his brothers”. In other words, the result of the time of sifting would be not only a major step forward in his own spiritual life, but he would be in a position to bless others with his example and testimony. This certainly proved to be the outcome ultimately when we consider the great importance and influence of Peter’s two letters, but that “strengthening” ministry started after the Lord’s ascension and especially from the Day of Pentecost. The word translated here as strengthening, by the way, means “more might, more ability”.

Our own trials of faith and spiritual experiences are designed not only for our own good, but to serve as an example and blessing to others as we share what “great things the Lord has done” (Mark 5 v 19). How often we have been blessed when hearing someone else’s testimony, or read of great Christian exploits and experiences.

4. The restoration

The sifting was the extreme circumstances they all passed through over the next few days and, in Peter’s case especially, his three-fold denial. His restoration took place, or at least started, after the Lord’s resurrection and when He met some of the disciples on the Galilean lakeside. John 21 v 15 – 17 are the key verses, but the conversation comes across poorly in English. We have to remember that two Greek words are being played out here, both translated “love” in English. *Phileo* love is the love experienced in a good friendship, which is a mutual and often deep feeling, but conditional on being mutually expressed, respected and reciprocated. *Agape* love is unconditional, where the love felt and expressed towards someone is not conditional on any corresponding expression of love. Of course, in both cases we are not talking about erotic love, which has a different vocabulary in Greek.

What is being said, therefore, is this:

When they had finished eating, Jesus said to Simon Peter, “Simon son of John, do you love me [with an agape unconditional love] more than these?” “Yes, Lord,” he said, “you know that I love you [with a phileo conditional love].” ... Again, Jesus said, “Simon son of John, do you love me [with an agape unconditional love]?” He answered, “Yes, Lord, you know that I love you [with a real phileo conditional love].” ... The third time he said to him, “Simon son of John, do you love me [with only a phileo conditional love]?” Peter was hurt because Jesus asked him the third time, “Do you love me [with only a phileo conditional love]?” He said, “Lord, you know all things; you know [just to what extent] I [do]love you.”

Peter’s declaration before the Lord’s arrest that his unconditional love for Jesus was more than anyone else, proved to be only a conditional love, after his denial and the Lord’s questioning. It was conditional on the Lord doing what they were all expecting Him to do, namely ushering in the messianic reign with themselves having prime positions of responsibility. So, with us, our belief in our unconditional love for Jesus can all too often be, in fact, conditional on Him blessing us with what we expect Him to do for us. Sadly, it is often the case that when something goes seriously wrong in our circumstances, especially after we have prayed for the Lord to prevent it happening, we find our relationship with Him is on a downward spiral. No wonder the Lord’s prayer for Peter, and for us, is that our faith will not fail.