

SIFTED AS WHEAT; OR, SIMON PETER

REMARKS ON LUKE 22:14-34

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How good and precious it is that we have at all times the Lord to look to; for if our eye had always to be fixed upon self, not only should we not advance, but we should be thoroughly discouraged by the thought of the evil within us. We confine ourselves to the idea of the evil, and thus deprive ourselves of the strength which can overcome it.

The nature of the flesh and the blindness of man's heart are worthy of remark. What foolish things come between God and us, to hide from us that which we ought to see! How strangely, too, do the thoughts of the natural heart follow their natural course (even when the Lord is near us), and deprive us of the consciousness of the most striking things, which have a sensible effect around us! We find this presented in the portion before us.

The Lord Jesus was about to accomplish that work which can be compared to no other; He was on the point of bearing the wrath of God for us poor sinners; He was in circumstances which ought to have touched His disciples' hearts. He had just spoken, in the most touching terms, of the passover which He desired to eat once more with them before He suffered; He had told them, too, that one of them should betray Him, All this ought to have rested upon their minds and have filled their hearts. But they? They were striving among themselves which of them was the greatest!

To us the curtain is withdrawn; and when reading of this fact, we can hardly understand how they could be busied with such things; but *we* know what was then about to take place. How many things have power to turn even us, who have more light than they, from the thought which then filled the heart of Jesus! Such is the heart of man in presence of the most serious and solemn things. The death of Jesus should exercise the same influence on our hearts as on the disciples'; it should be precious to us.

The Lord is with us when we are gathered two or three together; and yet we well know the thoughts which then pass through our hearts and minds. Here we see the same thing under the circumstances most calculated to touch the heart. Jesus tells His disciples that *His blood was to be shed for them*: "the hand of him that betrayeth me is with me at the table, but woe unto that man by whom the Son of man is betrayed "; and they inquire among themselves which of them it was that should do this thing. One might suppose that they would think of nothing save the death of their gracious Master; but no! "*There was a strife among them which of them should be accounted the greatest.*" What a contrast! But, alas I if we examine our own hearts we shall find these two things generally brought together, namely, real feelings which bear testimony to our love of Jesus, but also, and perhaps within the same half-hour, thoughts which are as unworthy as this strife among the disciples. This shews the folly and vanity of man's heart; he is but as the small dust of the balance.

The Lord, ever full of gentleness and meekness, forgets Himself in His care for His disciples, and says to them, "He that is greatest among you, let him be as

the younger, and he that is chief, as he that doth serve." He knows how to teach them, by His own example, what the love of God is; and at the same time He shews them the grace which is in Him, and all the faithfulness for which they are indebted to Him. It is as though He had said, *Ye need not raise yourselves : my Father will raise you.* "Ye are they which have continued with me in my temptations, and I appoint unto you a kingdom, as my Father hath appointed unto me; that ye may eat and drink at my table, in my kingdom, and sit on thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel."

Instead of being irritated by the abominable conduct of His disciples, He shews them that, if there is no grace in men, there is grace in *one Man*, that is in Himself. This grace is perfect in Jesus; and He places His disciples in it, whatever they may have been toward Him. He has fixed them firmly in the principle of grace, instead of the folly of the flesh which had just shewn itself among them; as though He had said, I am all grace towards you, and I trust the kingdom to you.

We are put under grace, and its voice is always heard. It assures us that, notwithstanding all our weakness, we have continued with Jesus, and that He gives the kingdom as His Father gave it to Him. Nevertheless the soul which is to enjoy these things must be exercised. The flesh must be made manifest to us as men; and therein we see the needs-be of all the trials we pass through; but Jesus enables us to persevere, because we belong to Him. If He says to His disciples, "I appoint unto you a kingdom, ye shall sit on thrones," etc., etc., He takes care to shew them what the flesh is.

"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." He does not say, Thou shall not be tempted; I will hinder Satan from sifting thee; no, nor does He do it. We see here that God often leaves His children in the presence of their enemy, whom He does not destroy; but, even while thus in the presence of the enemy, He watches over His own; as we see (Rev. 2: 10), "The devil shall cast some of you into prison, that ye may be tried. Be thou faithful unto death, and I will give thee a crown of life."

Peter might have said to the Lord, Thou canst hinder my being thus sifted, as Martha and Mary thought Jesus could have hindered the death of Lazarus; and, truly, He who can give the crown of life can shelter us; but He does not do so, that we may be tried. Satan desired to have Job to sift him like wheat, and God permitted him to do so; and this happens to us also. We often say within ourselves, Why has He dealt thus with me? Why has He put me in such or such a crucible? Ah, it is Satan who desired, and God who permitted it. Things often occur which we cannot understand; such things are intended to shew us what the flesh is.

When God is about to use a Christian in His work, He takes the one who has gone the farthest in the path of trial. Thus here it is said, "Satan hath desired to have you, that he may sift you." The danger is presented to all; but He adds, speaking to Peter, "I have prayed for thee," for thee in particular; for Jesus distinguishes him from all the rest because he had taken a more prominent position than the others, and was thus more exposed, though they were all sifted at the death of Jesus.

The Lord then says to Peter, "When thou art converted, strengthen thy

brethren." He was not going to spare any of His disciples the sifting; but Peter was to be the most severely tried, and, therefore, the best to strengthen his brethren. Notwithstanding all this, Peter is full of self-confidence. "I am ready to go with thee both unto prison and to death." But Jesus replies, "The cock shall not crow this day, before that thou shalt thrice deny that thou knowest me."

The flesh acting in Peter had only power to carry him up to the time of trial, and there failed; for Peter denied the Lord Jesus, even in His very presence. He might have seen his Saviour, if his heart had not been turned away from Him. Jesus was looking at him; and yet he denied Him to the maid, saying, "I know him not." He had been warned; but the Lord would not allow him to be kept by divine power at that moment, because he needed to learn by experience what he was in himself.

If we notice all that Christ did, we shall see how He was watching at this time over Peter; His grace (so to speak) went out to meet him, and took care of him all through the temptation. The first thing that Jesus tells him is that He has prayed for him. It is not that Peter's repentance led to Jesus' intercession; but the intercession of Jesus brought about Peter's repentance. "I have prayed for thee," and "Jesus looked on Peter." As to Judas, he denied the Lord; and, when his conscience was awakened, he killed himself. No sooner was the crime committed than all confidence fled, and he went and killed himself. But, here, the effect of the prayer of Jesus was to preserve faith at the bottom of Peter's heart, so that, when Jesus looked on him, he was broken down.

The Lord, ever full of gentleness and meekness, forgets Himself in His care for His disciples

The first thing to remark is, that the Lord had prayed for Peter; and the second, that He always remembered His disciple, and as soon as the cock crowed, Jesus looked on him, and Peter wept bitterly. It is in this way the Lord deals with us, He prays for us, and allows us to go into temptation. If He conducts us when in it, He also bids us to pray that we enter not into temptation: but God permits all this because He sees the end of it. If Peter had been conscious of his own weakness, he would not have dared to shew himself before the High Priest. This trial was the natural consequence of what he was in the flesh; but it was God's purpose to use him, and even to put him in a prominent position in His work. The cause of his fall was self-confidence; the flesh was actively present.

God did everything well for him, and Peter saw what was the power of Satan's sifting. The other disciples, not having the same fleshly strength, fled at once. They had not so much confidence as Peter; but God left him to struggle against Satan, and Jesus prayed for him, in spite of his fall, that his faith should not fail. The moment Peter fell, the eye of Jesus was turned upon him. That look did not give peace, but confusion of face; Peter wept; he went out, and it was all over. He had learnt what he was. There was his failure--the sin was committed, and could not be undone; it could be pardoned, but never blotted out. Peter could not forget that he had betrayed the Lord: but Jesus made use of this fall to cure him of his presumption.

It is the same with us. We often commit faults which are irreparable, from too much confidence in the flesh. When there is no possibility of correcting one's faults, what is to be done? The only resource is to cast oneself on the grace of God. When the flesh is too strong, God often permits us to fall, because we are not in that precious state of dependence which would preserve us.

Jacob had too deeply offended Esau not to dread his anger; yet God did not leave him in his brother's hand, but gave him enough faith to carry him through the difficulty. God wrestled with Jacob, and the latter prevailed; but he must have felt within his heart what it is to have had to do with evil. God would not allow him to be given over to the hatred of Esau; and at the end of his course Jacob could say (Gen. 48 : 15, 16), "The God which fed me all my life long unto this day, the Angel which redeemed me from all evil," etc.

When God tries the heart in this way, He sometimes leaves it in Satan's hands, but He never leaves the consciences of His children in the enemy's hands. Judas' conscience was in Satan's hands, and, therefore, he fell into despair. Peter's heart was in his hands for a time, but his conscience never. Therefore, instead of despairing, like Judas, the love of Jesus, expressed in a look, had power to touch his heart.

Directly grace acts in the heart, it gives the consciousness of sin; but, at the same time, the love of Christ reaches the conscience, deepening the consciousness of sin; but if this is deep, it is because the consciousness of the love of Christ is also deep. Perfect as was the pardon of Peter, he could never forget his sin. Not only was he fully forgiven, but his conscience was in the Lord's hand when the Holy Ghost revealed the fulness of the heart of Jesus to him. His conscience had been so fully purified, that he could accuse the Jews of the very sin he had himself committed under the most solemn circumstances, "*Ye denied the Holy One and the Just,*" were his words. The blood of Christ had fully cleansed his conscience; but if the question of his strength in the flesh was raised, all he had to say of himself was, I have denied the Lord; and, were it not for His pure grace, I could not open my mouth.

Jesus never reproached Peter with his sin in those conversations He had with him. There is never the question, Why hast thou denied me? No; He does not once remind him of his failure: on the contrary, He acts according to that expression of love of the Holy Spirit, "I will remember their sins no more." Jesus had forgotten all. But there was one thing He had to shew Peter; it was the root of the sin, the point where he had failed. Satan's temptation, with his own want of love, had been the cause of his fall, and had destroyed his confidence; but now, his conscience being touched, it was needful that his spiritual intelligence should be formed. Peter had boasted of more love to Jesus than the rest; and Peter had failed more than all.

Then Jesus said to him, "Lovest thou me more than these?" Where is now Peter's self-confidence? Jesus repeats three times, "Lovest thou me?" but He does not remind him of his history. Peter's answer is, "Thou knowest all things; thou knowest that I love thee." He appeals to Jesus, and to His divine knowledge; "Thou knowest that I love thee." This is what Jesus did for Peter, and that after his fall.

Jesus had foretold his failure; and here He asked him, "Lovest thou me more than these?" Peter can say nothing, save that he has learnt his weakness and that he has loved Jesus less than the other disciples. The relationship between Jesus and Peter is all of grace; he had no resource except to confide in Jesus, and now he could be a witness for Him; he had felt the power of a look of Jesus.

Peter seems to say, I confide in thee, thou knowest how I have denied thee; do with me what seemeth thee good. Then we see Jesus sustaining His disciple's

heart, lest Satan should rob him of his confidence, and saying, "When thou art converted, strengthen thy brethren." What enabled him to strengthen his brethren? His denial had so taught him what the flesh was, that he would no longer bind himself to anything; he knew that he had nothing to do save to trust God. Whatever his own incapacity to resist Satan, he could appeal to the grace of Him who knows all things. The knowledge that he could confide in Jesus, was that which made him strong. It was after reminding Peter of the utter incapacity of the flesh, that the Lord confided His sheep to him: "Feed my lambs"--and it was not till then that he could strengthen his brethren.

The flesh has a certain confidence in the flesh, and this is often the folly into which we fall. It is then necessary for us to learn ourselves by conflict with Satan; every Christian has to learn what he is through the circumstances in which he is placed. God leaves us there to be sifted by Satan, that we may learn our own hearts. Had we enough humility and faithfulness to say, I can do nothing without Thee, God would not leave us to this sad experience of our infirmity. When we are really weak, God never leaves us; but, when unconscious of our infirmities, we have to learn them by experience.

If a Christian does not walk under a constant sense of his infirmity, God leaves him in the presence of Satan, that he may there be taught it. It is then also that he commits faults which are often irreparable; and it is this which is the most sorrowful part of all.

Jacob halted all his life. Why was this? It was because he had halted, morally, during one-and-twenty years. He wrestled mightily, yet he must have been conscious what a feeble creature he was in the flesh, although God did not leave him to struggle with Esau. We need never be surprised if the Lord leaves us in difficulty; it is because there is something in us to be broken down, and which we need to be made sensible of; but grace is always behind all this. Christ is all grace, and if He sometimes appears to leave us to learn our weakness, still He is grace, perfect grace, towards us.

It was not when Peter turned his eyes towards the Lord that Jesus shewed Himself to him; as to communion, indeed, this is true, but it was before his fall that Jesus had said, I have prayed for thee," for it is always grace which anticipates us. Jesus sees what Satan desires, and leaves us to that desire, but He takes care that we should be kept. It was not when Peter looked at Jesus, but when Jesus looked on Peter, that the latter wept bitterly. The love of Christ always precedes His own; it accompanies us, precedes us in our difficulties, and carries us through all obstacles. While it leaves us in Satan's hands, that we may learn experimentally what we are, it is always near to us, and knows how to guard us from the wiles of the enemy. Here we see the perfect goodness and grace of the One who loves us, not only when our hearts are turned towards Him, but who adapts Himself to every fault in our characters, that we may be fully and completely blessed according to the counsels of God.

All this should teach us to humble ourselves under the mighty hand of God, that He may exalt us in due season. When I feel cast down and grieved in thinking of myself after a fall, I ought not then forthwith to seek comfort, however natural that may be: no, it is not that which I am to seek, but rather, and first of all, the Christ who is there; I have to learn the lesson which God has traced for me.

If, in the midst of painful circumstances, you say that you cannot understand the teaching, God knows what it is, and He leaves you there to be sifted, in order to bring you by this means to a deeper knowledge of Him and yourself; He wishes to shew you all He has Himself seen in you, so that we ought not to shrink from this sifting, but rather to seek to receive the precious teaching which the Lord offers us through it; and thus we shall obtain a much deeper knowledge of what He is for us.

We must learn to yield ourselves to His mighty hand, till He exalts us. May God give us to know Him alone! If we had only to learn what we are, we should be cast down, and sink into despondency; but His object in giving us a knowledge of ourselves and of His grace, is to give us an expected end.

One can say then, "Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life; and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord for ever."

-- [J. N. Darby](#), "Sifted as Wheat; Or, Simon Peter", *Collected Writings*, Vol XVI, pp. 85 - 92, ed. [W. Kelly](#), H. L. Heijkoop and Sons, reprint 1971.

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