

Sifted Saints

LUKE 22:31-34

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This morning, I would like for us to take just a few moments to study what it takes to fail without being a complete failure. I am assuming that most of us here this morning have failed at something. Most of us, in fact, have failed at a lot of things. Some people fail in school. I don't suppose they call it "failing" anymore, but some of us do better in some subjects than others. Personally, I was never very good with numbers. Others might fail in business. We look at the failure rate among those who try to start a restaurant, for example, and the failure rate within the first year is very high – there are so many things that can go wrong. Others may fail when it comes to marriage and family issues. But then, of course, there are also many of us who fail the Lord. In fact, when it comes to this last category, the Bible says that all of us have failed. We remember Paul's words in Romans 3:10-12 as he quotes King David from Psalm 14, ***"As it is written,"*** Paul says, ***"There is none righteous, not even one; there is none who understands, there is none who seeks for God; all have turned aside, together they have become useless; there is none who does good, there is not even one."*** And then, as Paul would go on to say in verse 23, ***"...for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God."*** I would say that that covers pretty much all of us! All of us who are old enough to be held accountable before God have sinned. All of us have failed the Lord.

This past Wednesday evening, I gave everybody the opportunity to turn in a sermon request based on a favorite passage from the life of Christ – maybe a favorite parable, or miracle, or maybe a favorite saying or event. This morning I would like for us to tackle the first in a series of lessons based on these requests as we look at a rather unusual passage in Luke 22:31-34. In our pew Bibles, the passage begins on page 1645, and the passage describes one of many failures in the life of the apostle Peter.

Peter, of course, is an interesting character. Peter is one of the Lord's closest followers. He is a part of the Lord's inner circle of friends. Most of us have some friends that are closer to us than others. Peter was one of the Lord's closest friends. However, as we look at Peter's life, we see it as a series of ups and downs. One moment he jumps out of the boat and starts walking on water; the next moment he starts to sink and is overcome by the waves. One moment he is saying that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; the next moment the Lord says to him, ***"Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling to Me; for you are not setting your mind on God's interests, but man's"*** (Matthew 16:23). One moment he promises to be faithful to the Lord even if everybody else turns away; the next moment he forcefully denies even knowing the Lord.

Peter, then, when it comes to his faith, has a series of ups and downs, and if we are honest with ourselves, most of us can understand what Peter was going through. Most of us know what it means to struggle with our faith. This morning, then, in response to a request to one of our own this past Wednesday evening, I want us to study one of these events in the life of the apostle Peter – some encouraging words from the Lord as Peter was about to go through one of these challenges. If you will, please look with me at Luke 22:31-34. The apostles had just eaten the Last Supper, this is the night of the Lord's betrayal and arrest, the night before his crucifixion. After dinner, the apostles get into an argument concerning who among them would be the greatest. And in that setting the Lord turns aside with a special message for Peter – Luke 22:31-34,

“Simon, Simon, behold, Satan has demanded permission to sift you like wheat; but I have prayed for you, that your faith may not fail; and you, when once you have turned again, strengthen your brothers.” But he said to Him, “Lord, with You I am ready to go both to prison and to death!” And He said, “I say to you, Peter, the rooster will not crow today until you have denied three times that you know Me

As we think about this passage, as we let it sink in, I want us to come away with several ideas that will hopefully encourage those of us who sometimes fail God from time to time, just as Peter did. What can we learn from this passage? How do we handle failure? How do we make it through the sifting the Lord refers to here to come out on the other side as the people God would have us to be?

I. First of all, I would suggest a reminder here that should encourage us in our struggle, and that is: SATAN IS A REAL ENEMY.

For some reason (and I believe the reason was ultimately for Peter's encouragement), but for some reason, Jesus pulled the curtain back just a little bit so that Peter could see what was going on behind the scenes. And behind the scenes, we find that Satan is ultimately responsible the sifting that is about to happen here. As we learned in our study of angels several months ago, it seems as if Satan is some kind of a fallen angel, perhaps a leader among the angels who chose to rebel against God's authority. The name Satan means “adversary.” Satan, therefore, is some kind of being who is against us. He is our adversary. Satan wants us to fail. Satan wants to bring us down. And to bring us down, Satan tempts us. He dangles sin in front of us in an attempt to trip us up, like bait on a hook, like bait in a trap.

Is Satan real? Ask Adam and Eve! We remember how Satan tempted Eve in the Garden of Eden. Is Satan real? Ask Job! We remember how Satan tormented Job as he tried to get Job to turn away from God. Is Satan real? Ask Jesus! We remember how Satan tempted Jesus in the wilderness. We do not necessarily see Satan today, but we do see him working. I have been on some very interesting visits as a preacher, and on several occasions, I have come home and have told my wife, “I saw Satan tonight.” Again, Satan is against us. He is against us personally. He is against us as a congregation. As a congregation, Satan wants us to fail.

And in verse 31, the door cracks open just a little bit, we are able to see behind the scenes, and Jesus tells us that Satan has demanded permission to sift Peter like wheat. That, of course, is what we see in the picture up here. Sifting wheat is what happens when the grain itself is separated from everything else. Most of us don't think about wheat very often. Usually we get our wheat in the finished product. In the ancient world, though, and also in many other cultures, people are very aware of the process. Normally, the stalks of wheat are beaten. Sometimes giant rollers are involved. Sometimes workers will come through with large tools. The wheat is then beaten until it falls to pieces. And then, workers will come through and will toss the entire mess into the air. The heavier grain tends to fall straight down, but with a little breeze, the lighter pieces (the stalk

and the other useless debris) will very gently blow away over to the side. And so with much work, as they continue tossing that pile of grain up into the air, it becomes purer and purer, until eventually only the grain itself is left. That is the process of sifting. And that is the picture that Jesus paints for Peter, ***“Satan has demanded permission to sift you like wheat.”*** Now, for the wheat, I would imagine that this is a rather unpleasant process! And that is what the Lord is saying here. He is warning Peter concerning what is about to happen: Peter, you are about to get tested. Peter, your faith is about to be challenged. Peter, you are about to get beat up and tossed around. You are about to be seriously damaged.

To me, it is interesting that Satan seems to need God’s permission. That, of course, raises a serious question: Why didn’t God just deny this request? We may never know the answer to that question. In some ways, it gets back to the reason for any human suffering. In some ways, though, we might compare it to our role as parents. If it were up to us, we would protect our kids from any kind of suffering. If it were up to us, we might just hover over our children, constantly shielding them from any negative influence. And I know: Some parents really take this to an extreme. Most of us know what are sometimes described as “helicopter parents,” those who really do seem to hover over their children, arguing with the teacher over any bad grade, and so on. Most of us as good parents, though, know that there are some lessons our children do need to learn the hard way. So, on one hand, I can hover over my children and impose my will on everything they do, I can basically make their decisions for them. Or on the other hand, I can realize that there are times when I as a parent need to step back a little bit. I need to let them fail. I need to let them struggle. I need to let them make their own decisions with the hope that they will grow, and mature over time, with the hope that they will gain wisdom through those challenges. I don’t know whether this is a perfect parallel, but it seems to be what happens here. Satan demands permission to sift Peter like wheat, and God allows it.

The point here at the beginning, though, is that Satan is out to get us. Satan wants to cause us pain. Satan wants us to give up. Satan wants us to lose faith. And Satan often seems to know exactly what buttons to push. He knows what strings to pull. He knows what makes us mad. He knows our weak spots. He knows how to get under our skin. By the way, when Jesus says that Satan has asked permission to sift ***“you,”*** the word ***“you”*** there is plural. In other words, the Lord was saying, ***“Satan has asked permission to sift [all of] you like wheat.”*** Peter gets the warning, but all of the disciples were at risk. Remember: The Lord speaks these words just as the disciples were arguing about which one of them was the greatest. So, already, Satan was hard at work. If we look back up to verse 3 in this chapter, Satan had already won the battle with one of the disciples. In verse 3, Luke tells us that, ***“Satan entered into Judas.”*** Judas’ weakness was money. The others struggled with pride. But the point is: Satan is a real enemy, and he is out to destroy us, even today. Satan is against us. So, when it comes to “failing” spiritually, we need to at least be aware that Satan is working on us behind the scenes. Jesus can see it happening, Jesus knows that our faith will be tested, and so he warns us about it.

II. As we go back the text, we find a second basic fact that should encourage us when our faith is tested, and that is: AS WE ARE TESTED, JESUS IS PLEADING OUR CASE.

So yes, Satan will sift, but in verse 32, the Lord says to Peter, ***“...but I have prayed for you, that your faith may not fail.”*** I would point out just a few things here. First, when Jesus uses the word ***“you”*** this time, it is singular. In other words, ***“Satan will be sifting all of you, but I have prayed for you (Peter) in particular. I have prayed for you personally”*** [paraphrased]. And to me, that is so important. Today, hopefully we know how important it is to pray for people by name. Yes, there are times when we need to ask God to be with all of the sick of the congregation. But there are also times when we need to pray for each other by name, as individuals.

Secondly, I would also point out that this prayer is something that Jesus had already prayed. And this may or may not be a big deal, but to me at least, I am very thankful when somebody says, "Baxter, I will be praying for you." That is so important. However, what really impresses me is when somebody says, "Baxter, I have prayed for you this week." In other words, this is not what might be an empty promise, but this is something that they have already done. And that is what the Lord does for Peter here, ***"I have prayed for you."***

I would also point out WHAT the Lord is praying for here. He prayed that Peter's ***"faith may not fail."*** Again, we note that the Lord did not pray that Peter's faith would not be sifted. Jesus did not even pray that Peter would not sin. Instead, the Lord prayed that when Peter was sifted, that his faith would not fail. The word ***"fail"*** in this verse is the basis of our English word "eclipse." He was praying that Peter's faith would not be "eclipsed," literally, that Peter's faith would not be left behind. So, knowing that Peter would sin, Jesus had already prayed that Peter's faith would ultimately stay intact.

Through all of this, what the Lord is doing here is interceding on Peter's behalf. Peter himself might not have been in a position to pray for himself here, and so the Lord was praying for him. The Lord was going to God the Father on Peter's behalf. I might compare this to going for a new job and getting your references together. Yes, I can go in there and tell a potential employer how good I am, but it means so much more when it comes from somebody else. In this situation, Jesus was saying to his Father, "I know Peter personally, and Peter needs your help." He was interceding on Peter's behalf. He was serving as Peter's reference. He was putting in a good word, so to speak.

Most of us are familiar with 1 John 2:1, where John says, ***"My little children, I am writing these things to you so that you may not sin. And if anyone sins, we have an Advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous."*** Jesus is our Advocate. In the ancient world (and even today) that word was used to refer to a lawyer. Jesus, then, is our attorney. He is our advocate. When we face the Judge, when we go to the Father in prayer, Jesus is the go-between. Jesus is pleading our case. Jesus is our reference. And I love the fact that my lawyer also just so happens to be the Judge's only Son! And so, when I sin, when I face a spiritual challenge in my life, when my faith is tested, when my faith is sifted by Satan, Jesus is pleading my case with the Father.

As the Bible says in Hebrews 7:25, ***"Therefore He is able also to save forever those who draw near to God through Him, since He always lives to make intercession for them."*** Even today, therefore, Jesus continues to intercede on our behalf. Jesus is our go-between. Jesus takes our struggles directly to the Father. What a comforting thought that is!

III. As we go back to Luke 22:32, I would point out one more encouraging fact from this passage, and that is: JESUS WAS CONFIDENT THAT PETER WOULD TURN AROUND AND WOULD ULTIMATELY USE THIS EXPERIENCE TO STRENGTHEN OTHERS.

And here is the lesson for us: Failure does not need to be final. You are not a failure just because you have failed. Yes, Peter sins. He publicly denies even knowing the Son of God. It doesn't get much worse than that. But, he feels terrible about it, he feels remorse, and then he turns again. He turns back to God. We certainly think of Isaiah's words in our scripture reading this morning (Isaiah 55:6-7). When we turn again, the Lord will ***"abundantly pardon."***

Peter turned again, and when we look at Peter's life as a whole, we find that his failure actually has quite a positive effect in the long run. As most of us know, before this, Peter was outspoken, even to the point of being abrasive. We might almost say that Peter was a little bit reckless. And yet after this one night, Peter has

a complete change of heart. He is humbled, and he comes out on the other side as one of the most powerful leaders in the early church. In Acts 2 Peter preaches one of the most powerful and hard-hitting sermons in the history of the Christian faith, and in response to that sermon, at least 3,000 people were stabbed in the heart. They were so touched by the message, in fact, that they turned to God as Peter had done, and they were immersed into Christ, for the forgiveness of their sins. In Acts 4, we find Peter standing before the same council that ordered the death of Jesus, and yet we find not even the slightest hint of fear. Peter goes on, in fact, to serve as an elder in the church and to write two books in the New Testament. Peter failed, but his failure gave him the very special ability to strengthen others.

As we began our study this morning, I briefly mentioned the fact that all of us here today who are old enough to be accountable to God have in some way failed. If we look at our failures in light of this passage, it seems that the emphasis is on how we are to use our experience (as Peter did) to go out and strengthen others. We think of Hebrews 12:12-13 where we are told to ***“...strengthen the hands that are weak and the knees that are feeble, and make straight paths for your feet, so that the limb which is lame may not be put out of joint, but rather be healed.”*** And so the question is: Who are we strengthening? Is a fellow Christian right now going through something that was a challenge to us at some point in the past? If so, what can we do to strengthen our brothers?

Some people sin, and they give up. Peter, though, learned from his failure and used it to the Lord’s advantage. We think of what the Lord said to Paul in 2 Corinthians 12:9, ***“My grace is sufficient for you, for power is perfected in weakness.”*** God can take weakness and use it. That’s what God does: He takes weak people, and he uses human weakness to do some amazing things. We learn, then, that a fall into sin does not need to be the end of our Christian influence.

Conclusion:

As we come near the end of our study this morning, I would invite you to turn with me to one final passage – it is found in 1 Peter 5 (p. 1899). As we read this passage, I want us to think of the apostle Peter as we know him from the four gospel accounts – outspoken, brash, with almost a touch of arrogance. But then, as we read this passage, I want us to think about the change that took place that night as Jesus warned him that Satan had demanded permission to sift him like wheat, as Jesus prayed that his faith would not fail, and as Jesus encouraged him to use this experience to one day strengthen others. Please notice with me this passage written by Peter roughly 30 years later - 1 Peter 5:6-11.

Therefore humble yourselves under the mighty hand of God, that He may exalt you at the proper time, casting all your anxiety on Him, because He cares for you. Be of sober spirit, be on the alert. Your adversary, the devil, prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour. But resist him, firm in your faith, knowing that the same experiences of suffering are being accomplished by your brethren who are in the world. After you have suffered for a little while, the God of all grace, who called you to His eternal glory in Christ, will Himself perfect, confirm, strengthen and establish you. To Him be dominion forever and ever. Amen.

Did Peter learn a valuable lesson that night? Absolutely! When the sifting was done, the useless chaff was gone, and only that heart of grain remained.

The good news this morning is that God will do for us exactly what he did for Peter. No matter what we have done in the past, God is able to abundantly pardon if we are willing to turn again. And God is able to use our

failures as we turn around and strengthen others. The Bible teaches that when we are buried in the waters of baptism, our old life is buried with Christ in God. At that point, our sins are forgiven, and we rise up to start living the Christian life. If you have any questions, we hope you will ask. If you have something we need to pray about as a congregation, we would invite you to write it down and bring it to the front. We would be honored to go to God on your behalf. But if you are ready to obey the gospel right now, you can let us know as we sing this next song. Let's all stand and sing...

To comment on this lesson: fourlakeschurch@gmail.com