

# The Sifting of Simon Peter

by John Piper

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*Jesus' prayer for Simon Peter shows that God is actively engaged in our lives and will work to keep us trusting in Him, giving us the victory over Satan's attacks.*

**Duration:** 30:33

**Scripture:** Luke 22:31

**Topics:** "Eternal Security", "Spiritual Warfare"

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## Description

In this sermon, the speaker reflects on the excitement and anticipation among the disciples about the establishment of the messianic kingdom. However, Jesus brings a sobering message that the kingdom is not yet and that life is filled with spiritual difficulties. He then shares a promise that he has prayed for Peter, that his faith will not fail. The speaker emphasizes the importance of community and how God often encourages us through others. The sermon also highlights Jesus' desire to share the Passover meal with his disciples before his suffering and his reassurance that they will have a place in his kingdom. The speaker concludes by emphasizing the promise of eternal security and how God will not let us fall through the testing of Satan.

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## Transcript

The word of encouragement and consolation and hope that I want to offer to you today from the word of God is this. If you love God and are called according to his purpose, if you are despairing of all your own resources and looking away to Jesus Christ as the source of your hope, then to you belongs this promise. Jesus prays for you and will never let your faith fail and bring you to ruin.

He will never let Satan so sift you that you no longer have any faith left. Do you know why we need to hear a word of consolation and hope the Sunday after Easter? It's because most of our worst collapses of spiritual and emotional strength occur very soon after our greatest spiritual victories and highs. Have you ever found that to be the case? Maundy Thursday was rich and holy.

Good Friday was sober and sweet. Today you will be with me in paradise. Easter morning was glorious, begotten of God unto a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead.

Sunday night was moving, no greater love. And then came Monday morning. And I know personally of more than three people in this congregation whose burdens have brought them to tears this week, right after Easter.

It's almost like a law of nature with me. I've gone home at night and said to Noel, well, tomorrow is going to be a real bummer. How do you know that? Because today was so great.

In Luke 22, we have a record of some of the things that happened on that night of the Last Supper. And I'd like you to turn to Luke 22 with me. In verse 15, Jesus says this very moving thing.

I have earnestly desired to eat this Passover with you before I suffer. That must have been a very precious meal. At least when I empathize with those disciples and hear Jesus say that to me, my heart is very warmed.

And even though he has to give them a mild rebuke about their concern for who's the greatest, right after that rebuke in verse 28, he gives them an astonishing and reassuring promise. You are those who have continued with me in my trials, and I assign to you as my father assigned to me a kingdom that you may eat and drink at my table in my kingdom and sit on thrones judging the twelve tribes of Israel. There must have been a great stir of excitement among that little band of people.

The great messianic kingdom established, we the twelve sitting on thrones judging the tribes of Israel talk about a spiritual high. And then come the sobering words of realism in verses thirty one to thirty four. The kingdom is not yet.

And so Jesus portrays life as threatened. And fraught with spiritual difficulties. But in doing this, in these verses, he gives us a promise that I could scarcely live without from day to day, especially in the week after Easter.

Simon, Simon, behold, Satan has demanded to have you that he might sift you like wheat. But I have prayed for you that your faith fail not. And when you have turned, strengthen your brothers.

Peter says to him, Lord, I'm ready to go with you to prison and to death. And Jesus says to Peter, I tell you, Peter, the cock will not crow today until you three times deny that you know me. Only hours after he had been promised that he was going to be a ruler in Israel, Peter is going to crash in a life changing experience of defeat from the heights of joyful anticipation and confidence to the pit of failure and bitter weeping in one night.

Think it not strange that Easter Sunday is followed by Blue Monday. But take heart, Jesus prays for his own and will not let Satan destroy our faith and bring us to ruin. Let's take these two verses in verse thirty one and thirty two, a phrase at a time and see what the implications are for that day and for hours.

First, Simon, behold, Satan demanded to have you. Now, the first thing to notice in that phrase is that the word you is plural. You can't tell that in English, except in the NIV where they've said you all to bring it out.

You've got the RSV or the King James, just you. But in the Greek, there's a clear difference between the word you plural and the word you singular. And this is plural.

So he's telling Simon Peter that Satan demands to have all the disciples, that he might sift them. Now, to whom is Satan making that demand? Well, in all likelihood, he's making that demand to God, God, the father. You all remember the story of Job.

There we have a situation that I think is probably typical for all of time. Here's the interchange in Job one between Satan, who comes into heaven to confront God. Then Satan answered the Lord, does Job fear

God for not? Have you not put a hedge about him and his house and all that he has on every side? You have blessed the work of his hands and his possessions and have increased the land.

But put forth your hand now and touch all that he has and he'll curse you to your face. And the Lord said to Satan, behold, all that he has is in your power. Only upon himself do not put forth your hand.

Now, there is probably the situation that we've got in Luke 22, 31, Satan approaching God and saying, you give me Job, you give me those disciples. And I will sift them like wheat. Job's faith does not fail in that first test.

So Satan comes back into the presence of God. And here's what he says. Skin for skin, all that a man has, he'll give for his life.

But put forth your hand now and touch his bone in his flesh and he'll curse you to your face. And the Lord said to Satan, behold, he's in your power. Only spare his life.

So both Job and Jesus picture Satan as a person who must go to God first before he can do any harm or cause any trouble to the children of God. Now, there are two implications in that one phrase that I think are very important for us today, and I want to stress them first. Satan has a lot of power in this world.

You know, Jesus calls him the Prince of this age or the ruler of this age, and Paul calls him the god of this age, the ruler of the authority of the air. He blinds the minds of unbelievers.

He holds them in his snare until God releases them by the gospel. He can take life as with Job's children. He can ruin health as with Job.

He can torment with demons as in the demonic in Jesus day. He can provoke to evil deeds as he did with Judas. He can cause natural disasters as he did in Job one.

Satan has a lot of power in this age. And I think knowing that should cause us to have a special kind of seriousness about life that unbelievers don't have. I don't mean that it should make us paranoid or fearful.

There are some Christians who are so wrought up about the demonic that they don't experience any victory in Christ. I don't mean that. I mean, there ought to be a kind of sober earnestness in our prayers and a persistent consciousness that we are really dependent on God's help to handle Satan's attacks.

When the enemy is supernatural, so must the weapons be. We are aliens and exiles in the world, not merely because our values differ from those who don't know God, but also because our struggles differ from those who don't know Satan. That's one implication of Jesus words here, Satan is real, has great power and must be reckoned with seriously and soberly in the world.

But the second implication is encouraging, namely, Satan's power. All of it is only by permission. He wouldn't go to God and demand to have the disciples if he could get them without that kind of demand or request.

There are not two ultimate powers in the world. There is one ultimate power, and that is God. And that's an important word for our day, I think, because we live in a day in which the demonic forces of unreason and insubordination and hate and violence are pressing in on us ever closer.

It seems so that it may be that our confidence in the supremacy of God over all these forces is going to be tested to the limit. We will have to remember these words, Satan has demanded to have you and their meaning. Satan has no power over the children of God, but what he gets by permission from the father.

Now, that raises an important and really hard theological question for me. Namely, why should God almighty grant Satan anything? You ever asked yourself that when reading Job or when reading this text? And as soon as I started to ponder that text, it became clear to me that it's part of a larger question, namely, why should God suffer Satan to continue in his existence and his havoc at all? Revelation 20 pictures the close of this age, the coming of Christ, Satan being bound, confined in a pit for a thousand years, no longer deceiving the nations. The thousand years comes to an end, Satan is released for a brief moment of deception.

There's defeat in a great battle. Satan is thrown into the lake of fire and it's curtains for Satan in all of his forces. Therefore, God has the right and the power to put Satan out of commission anytime he wants.

Why doesn't he do it now? That may be one of the questions which we have no right to know the answer to. Maybe we should just trust the wisdom and goodness of God anyway. But I think that the scriptures do indirectly give us an answer.

For why God tolerates the havoc that Satan is wreaking in the world. And I think this answer will encourage our faith and strengthen us. So I want to mention it.

I think the reason that Satan is suffered to go on is that in the end we're going to see that it worked good for the church and glory for God. Isn't it clear from the whole New Testament that God intends to bring the bride of Christ to perfection through suffering and trial? If we would be glorified with him, we must suffer with him. God does not intend to short circuit Good Friday in any of our lives on the way to Easter.

Through suffering and trial, our faith is refined. We are drawn to rely more heavily on the mercy and promises of God. And we're moved to cherish his grace more intensely.

And Satan evidently has his place as the one who fans the fires of our refining furnace. And God waits until the appointed hour of judgment. That's one of the reasons I think he lets Satan go on doing his damage.

The other reason is I think that in the end, God is going to be more greatly glorified by the timing that he has chosen than by any other timing. Here's the way I picture God. I picture God as an omniscient general leading his forces to victory.

And his aim is to win the war in a way that will bring the most glory to him for his infinite wisdom and his strategic power. Now, instead of steamrolling over his enemies in one fell stroke. He doesn't do that.

He advances and he retreats. And in his retreats, the enemy is emboldened to reveal all of its rage and all of its hate and all of the evil that it has inside. God gives them the illusion of success to bring out all the arrogance and violence that is in the enemy so that it can be seen for what it is.

And in his wisdom, he knows the perfect time when the end should come. In the end, the Bible says he's going to give way and the enemy is going to rise in an amazing display of rage and defiance against God. And people will think that the forces of good have been defeated.

And just at the perfect time, he is going to clamp down and destroy all his enemies and display his wisdom and power and strategic know-how in such a way that nobody will doubt that here is God, one to be reckoned with and glorious. So it seems to me that Satan has great power in this world, but it's power only by permission. And we should be sober in our prayers and fight the good fight and anticipate the victory at God's perfectly appointed time.

And now Jesus goes on in verse 31. Simon, Simon, behold, Satan demanded to have you that he might sift you like wheat. The you is still plural here in the second half of verse 31 that he might sift you all like wheat.

So he's telling Simon what Satan intends to do to all the disciples. What does Satan aim to do? What does it mean? Sift you like wheat. I think the best clue to the meaning of this sifting is probably found in the very next verse where Jesus says, but I have prayed for you that your faith fail.

Not Satan aims to sift Simon and the others like wheat. Jesus aims to keep Simon's faith from failing. So evidently the sifting.

Is doing something that causes faith to fail, whatever it is. Here's the picture I get in my mind. Satan has a big sieve.

This big square sieve and connecting the boards around the sieve is jagged wire forming a mesh. With holes in it. Through which only faithless can fall.

Only unbelievers can fall through this sieve. And it's Satan's purpose to get permission to throw believers into this and shake them. Over those wires.

And rip them and tear them and hurt them like he did Job. Until they let go of their faith and through they go. Right into his arms.

I think that's the picture here. I'm going to get their faith loose and sift them through into my horde and away from Jesus. Faith can't fall through that sieve.

It's the wrong shape. It's the wrong shape. And as long as the disciples hold to their faith.

And trust the goodness and power of God. They will not fall through that sieve into Satan's power. Even if they are hurt badly.

Therefore, the sifting of Simon Peter is Satan's effort to destroy their faith. And that's what Satan's effort has been and always will be to the end of the age. Isn't it? He is after our faith and that's all he's after.

It's a matter of relative unimportance to Satan. Whether we are sick or healthy. Whether we are rich or poor.

If he can get us through sickness, he'll use that. If he can get us through faith, he'll use that. And Peter learned a tremendous lesson that night.

Didn't he? Because you remember 30 years later when he wrote his letter. First Peter in chapter 5. He says Satan goes around like a roaring lion. Seeking whom he may devour.

Resist him firm in your what? Faith. Resist him firm in your faith. That's what he's after.

If you hold your faith, he can't get you. There are two different pictures. Jesus pictures Satan as a farmer with a big ugly sieve.

Shaking and shaking, trying to get the faith out of those Christians. Peter pictures Satan as a lion. One thing can't fit through the sieve.

And there's one thing that lion can't fit in his mouth. Faith. And so if we hold to our faith, the lion is stopped and we cannot fall through Satan's sieve.

This is the victory that overcomes the world. And overcomes Satan's sieve and overcomes Satan's mouth. Our faith.

First John 5.4. If we hold fast to our faith, Satan cannot destroy us. And that's why we have this picture in Revelation chapter 2 verse 10. Jesus says to the church at Smyrna.

Do not fear what you are about to suffer. Behold, the devil is going to throw some of you into prison. We could say into his sieve.

That you may be tested. And for 10 days you will have tribulation. But be faithful to the end.

And he will give you a crown of life and will not let you fall through the sieve. It's a great encouragement to me that God is always stronger than Satan. And that by faith we can avoid Satan's destructive efforts and gain the crown of life.

But the text is not yet done. There's another word of consolation and hope here, even beyond the supremacy of God over Satan. And I think we need it for our day.

We need this kind of encouragement. Namely, the encouragement and the reassurance that we will never abandon our faith. That we will not stop believing.

We need some reassurance that in the ups and downs and ups and downs of our faith. That our faith won't end in a permanent down and wipe out. We need some help to believe that that's going to be the case.

And Jesus gives it to us here in verse 32. Simon, behold, Satan demanded to have you that he might sift you like wheat. But I have prayed for you that your faith may not fail.

And when you have turned again, strengthen your brethren. It's encouraging that God is infinitely stronger than Satan. And that all those who trust him will endure to the end and be saved.

But it's doubly encouraging and doubly hopeful. That God and his son Jesus do not just stand back and watch and wonder. Are they going to endure in faith? Or are they going to give up the faith and fall through the sin? God is not a watching God, is he? If the Holy Trinity were not actively engaged in my own life day and night.

Strengthening my faith, I think it would probably evaporate in a moment. So notice what Jesus does. Jesus prays to his father and what does he ask for? Now the word is singular, by the way.

Simon, I prayed for you, singular. He asked God to do whatever needs to be done to keep Simon's faith from failing. Right.

And Jesus is completely confident that God's going to answer his prayer because he says. And when you turn, strengthen your brethren. Jesus knows that Simon in just a few hours is going to deny him.

He says so in verse 34. You're going to deny me three times. But evidently, Jesus does not consider this brief denial the failure that Satan is after.

Satan is after something utter, something ultimate, something final and decisive. That is not what Peter committed. Satan couldn't get Peter.

Peter's was only a temporary weakness, a brief faltering of confidence followed quickly by what bitter tears of repentance. Jesus knew that he would turn because he had prayed to his father that he would cause him not to fail utterly in his faith. And the father granted to Satan his request that Simon be sifted.

But he granted to Jesus his request that Simon not fall through the sieve. And he won't ever let any of his children fall through the sieve. That's the promise here that's so encouraging.

So here we have a double weapon against Satan. First, we have the encouragement that God is willing and supremely able to keep all those who trust him and to give them the crown of life. But not only will he do that, he will also work to keep us trusting.

That's what this prayer is all about. God and the sun conspire to keep us in the faith. We are not left without a shield of faith, nor are we left without a hand to help us hold up that shield, strengthening our faith.

God will always see to it that faith is the victory, and he will always see to it that his children have faith. That's the meaning of this beautiful text in 1 Peter 1, 3-5. We have been born anew unto a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, to an inheritance incorruptible, undefiled, unfading, that will not pass away, kept in heaven for you who are guarded through faith by God's power for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time.

The almighty power of God guards us by working enough faith in us to keep us from falling away. I love to think about the Father and the Son collaborating in our salvation. It's pictured in John 10, 27-30.

You all know this text. My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me, and I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish, and no one can take them out of my hand. My Father who has given them to me is greater than all, and no one can take them out of my Father's hand.

No one can take them out of my hand. No one can take them out of the Father's hand, because we are one hand, and we are greater than all. Simon, I've prayed for you, and my Father and I have conspired to hold you tight, and we will not let you fall through the sieve of Satan's testing.

That's the promise for us this morning. Lay hold on it and encourage yourself by it whenever you're inclined to doubt that your faith will endure to the end. One last thing that I can't help but mention, and this is not for a burden, but to double our joy.

The joy that we have in the promises of God is always increased when those promises bubble up over the brim of our lives and fall onto other people. You've all experienced that. If you just keep them for yourself and delight in God and never let it bubble over onto others, it's going to go stagnant.

So you can double your joy if you bubble over onto others. Now, what about the other ten? Jesus only prayed for Simon, it says, you singular, or did he? I say the other ten because I think Judas was probably gone by this time. I think Jesus did pray for the other ten, but he did not ask God to do for the other ten the same thing that he asked God to do for Peter.

God broke the back of Peter's pride and self-reliance that night in the sieve of Satan. And he turned him, restored him, strengthened his faith, and then commissioned him. And the word is right here.

When you turn, strengthen your brothers. Jesus provided for the ten by providing for Peter. The strengthened becomes the strengthener.

And there's a great lesson for us, isn't it? Most of the time, God doesn't come to us privately, but sometimes he does. Sometimes he strengthens you, strengthens your faith in the wee hours of the morning. All alone, nobody else around.

He meets you and brings joy into your life and faith. Most often, we might say ten-elevenths of the time, he comes to you through another person. He sends you a Simon Peter, whom he has worked on and given a word of grace.

And that grace comes to you as the perfectly chosen word. A word of testimony that weeping may tarry for the night, but joy comes with the morning. And that word strengthens your faith and enables you to go on for the rest of the day.

Eternal security is a community project. Whenever God encourages your heart, therefore, by this promise that he will never let your faith fail, you turn around and double your joy by strengthening your brothers and your sisters. Let's do that together, okay?

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